

ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

in

PREMODERN EURASIAN and MEDITERRANEAN NARRATIVES

Themed Section



guest-edited by

Chiara FONTANA and Ines PETA

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This special issue was conceived and brought to completion during a time of profound environmental challenges and humanitarian catastrophes. With our families and the families in Gaza in our thoughts, we envision this scholarly work as an opportunity for reflection beyond academia—a reminder that the only weapons truly worth wielding on this earth are love for knowledge and nature, kindness, and compassion.

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Acknowledgments

Introduction

This special issue gathers the papers presented at the international conference ‘Environmental Challenges in Premodern Eurasian and Mediterranean Narratives’, held at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna, Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures (LILEC), on 14 and 15 January 2025. The conference was convened under the EU-funded project ‘NextGenerationEU—PRIN 2022: Environmental Anomalies & Political Legitimacy in Global Eurasia, 12th–14th Century’, a research initiative resulting from an inter-university collaboration between the Università degli Studi di Napoli L’Orientale (National PI: Antonella Guida), the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna (Local PI: Ines Peta), and the Università della Calabria (Local PI: Luca Parisoli).

The conference explored how attitudes towards environmental challenges, natural disasters and calamities were affected by contextual factors related to the socio-political scenario, ideological trajectories or religious beliefs, and, in turn, how the tragic occurrence of such events influenced ideological orientations, theological interpretations and political legitimacies. By addressing these dynamics, it sought to shed light on the complex interplay between environmental perception and authority, both divine and temporal, across pre-modern Eurasia and the Mediterranean world, with particular reference to the Persian and Arab regions.

Historical, religious and literary sources from these regions often portray environmental phenomena as omens of divine election or punishment, apocalyptic signs, moral trials or political instruments through which legitimacy could be reaffirmed, negotiated or contested. Within the Arabic and Persian sources, such reflections appear particularly in *ḥadīth* compendia, historical chronicles and ethical treatises, but also in epic works and poetry, from which it is possible to discern the moral, theological and political meanings attributed to disasters. Droughts, famines, floods, earthquakes, epidemics and other catastrophes, as well as specific astronomical phenomena or anomalous climatic changes, are depicted in these texts as signs of divine favour or wrath, omens of military victories or defeats, and occasions calling for reform, repentance or renewal.

Despite the fact that natural disasters have attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years, prompted both by contemporary climate change and the global experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, many questions remain unanswered, and several aspects still await systematic investigation. Certain types of catastrophes—such as earthquakes and epidemics—have been the focus of much research (DOLS 1977; CONRAD 1982; STEARNS 2011; AKASOY 2007 and 2009; DUCÈNE 2024), while others have received comparatively little attention. Likewise, specific regions and historical periods, particularly Egypt and Syria at the time of the Black Death (WIET 1962; DOLS 1977; BORSCH 2005), have been more

thoroughly studied than others. Moreover, most existing studies have adopted a primarily historical approach, aiming to reconstruct the plague's origin and spread and to assess its economic or demographic consequences (DOLS 1977 and 1981, BENEDICTOW 2021). Less attention, however, has been paid to the ways in which disasters were interpreted, especially to the interplay between religious understandings, political imperatives and the broader social context—how these perspectives shaped each other, how they were mobilised to support or contest authority, how they were influenced by other religious or political traditions, and how they could foster inclusion and solidarity within an interconfessional *umma*, or, conversely, reinforce exclusion and otherness.

Building on these considerations, this special issue investigates the interpretation of natural disasters from an explicitly interdisciplinary perspective, combining historical, religious, literary and philological approaches to illuminate the complex ways in which pre-modern societies perceived, understood and responded to environmental anomalies. While its chronological focus is on the pre-modern period, the ultimate goal is to provide a comparative and interdisciplinary platform to explore how environmental phenomena were conceptualised and narrated across different temporal and cultural horizons, fostering a dialogue between classical and modern hermeneutical systems and reconsidering their endurance, transformation and limitations.

Overview of the Contributions

The issue opens with two contributions that frame the *longue durée* of environmental imaginaries in the Persian cultural sphere. Andrea Piras examines how ancient Iranian traditions, particularly Zoroastrian religious writings, interpreted environmental anomalies as expressions of cosmic and moral imbalance, thus laying the mythological and religious groundwork for later political readings of natural disorder. These events were understood within the context of a dualistic struggle between Ahura Mazdā, the supreme god, and Ahriman, the destructive spirit, and were therefore interpreted as omens or signs, reflecting the ongoing cosmic struggle between life and death, good and evil, shaping both religious and societal responses to ecological and historical crises.

Nahid Norozi continues this Iranian focus by exploring medieval Persian epics dating to between the fifth/eleventh and eighth/fourteenth centuries, showing how the killing of the dragon by a king or a king's champion symbolises the restoration of the cosmic and social order which has been disrupted by calamity and famine. Dragons are depicted as obstructing vital resources such as rivers, fertility or treasure, and their defeat by the ruler or his champion serves to legitimise kingship, linking good governance with the prosperity of the land and the flourishing of the people. These narratives, rooted in Indo-Iranian myth and Zoroastrian symbolism, thus frame the king's moral and political authority as inseparable from his ability to protect both natural and societal life.

The following cluster of studies turns to the Islamic and Arabic sources of the Abbasid and post-Abbasid periods. Abdessamad Belhaj opens this section with a survey of *ḥadīths* on drought and famine, showing how early Islamic traditions framed such phenomena in moral and eschatological terms. Drawing primarily on Sunni *ḥadīth* compilations, Belhaj demonstrates that drought was interpreted as the consequence of greed, injustice and the

denial of religious truth. The responses to natural disaster found in these texts emphasise the efficacy of prayer, repentance, humility, charity and the intercession of charismatic religious figures, particularly the Prophet and his lineage, and underscore the limits of political power while linking legitimate governance to moral and spiritual virtue.

Ines Peta continues along this line by analysing how Abbasid historiography—and al-Ṭabarī's (d. 311/923) *Tārīkh al-rusūl wa-l-mulūk* in particular—frames drought and epidemic as moral trials that test the righteousness of both the community and its rulers. Drawing on a wide range of accounts reported by al-Ṭabarī, Peta shows that such catastrophes are depicted not merely as divine punishments but as complex moral and political instruments, occasions to exercise piety, wisdom and ethical judgement, and as mechanisms through which authority could be legitimised, contested or reshaped in accordance with divine will. In this way, she demonstrates how al-Ṭabarī offers a precise model of ethical and responsible leadership within a broader moral, theological and political framework, one with which subsequent Islamic authors continued to engage when interpreting calamity.

Marco Demichelis stays on the theme of drought but shifts the focus to Egypt and the Nile, exploring Arabic sources from the fourth/tenth to the eighth/fourteenth centuries. He demonstrates how periods in which the River Nile experienced low flood levels during the annual inundation were deeply entangled with political, social and mythological narratives. Drawing on chronicles, geographical treatises and literary sources, he illustrates how low inundation levels were read both as a reflection of local mismanagement and as a signal of the potential influence of distant powers, particularly the rulers of Ethiopia, over the river. He traces the emergence of narratives linking fluctuations in the Nile floods to Egyptian famines under the Ikshīdīd and Fatimid dynasties, highlighting how chroniclers like al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1441) framed environmental crises within political and dynastic instability. At the same time, Demichelis considers the transmission of older mythological and apocalyptic traditions, showing how control over the Nile's waters operated simultaneously as a practical, political and symbolic marker of authority, divine favour and legitimacy.

Massimiliano Borroni turns to Iraq to analyse a rare episode of extreme cold recorded in Mosul in 259/873–4, showing how climate perceptions intersected with narratives of social unrest and rebellion. Drawing especially on al-Azḍī's (d. 334/945–6) local perspective, Borroni shows that the exceptional frost destroying trees, fruits, wheat and barley was directly linked to the fiscal injustice of the Abbasid administration, whose officials demanded tax payments on lost crops. In this way, Borroni reveals how environmental stress could act as a political catalyst, transforming climatic hardship into collective resistance and, ultimately, institutional reform, exemplified by al-Mu'taḍid's (r. 279–89/892–902) later decision to realign the fiscal calendar with the agricultural cycle.

The contribution by Emmanuel Pisani shifts from the socio-political and historiographical dimensions of disaster to its theological and spiritual interpretation. Focusing on al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) ethical thought, Pisani examines how calamities such as plague, drought and famine are integrated into a broader theology of divine justice and moral purification, where these events are considered components of a divinely ordered cosmos—the best of all possible worlds—through which God educates and tests humanity. While such catastrophes occupy only a limited space in the *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, Pisani shows that they are spiritually

assimilated within an eschatological vision of time and a moral pedagogy grounded in ascetic practice, characterised by renunciation, self-discipline and spiritual sobriety.

With Chiara Fontana, the focus shifts to astrology and its multifaceted role in late Abbasid literature, highlighting a perspective that combines rhetorical, aesthetic and intellectual dimensions. Fontana shows how poets and thinkers appropriated astrological imagery not merely as a predictive science but as a medium for negotiating power, human agency and poetic craft. In the wake of illustrious predecessors like al-Buḥturī (d. 284/897) and Ibn al-Muʿtazz (d. 296/908), later poets like al-Arrajānī (d. 544/1139) and al-ʿAntarī (d. 570/1175) employed celestial motifs to critique political authority, explore human limitation or ornament love and satire, while philosophers and theologians—including Ibn Sīnā (d. 427/1037) and al-Bīrūnī (d. 440/1048)—mediated astrology’s symbolic potential within doctrinal constraints. Across the *longue durée* of Abbasid poetry and prose, astrology was thus transformed into a language of irony, aesthetic refinement, and rhetorical sophistication: a literary instrument through which cosmic order, fragility and desire were imaginatively articulated.

Remaining on a literary and intellectual plane, Omar and Fancy analyse the *maqāmāt* genre to explore the representation of epidemics and other disasters. They demonstrate how authors such as Ibn al-Wardī (d. 749/1349), al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363), and Ibn Nubāta (d. 768/1366) employ narrative, allegory and rhetorical elaboration to depict the social, moral and theological dimensions of calamity. Through detailed descriptions of human suffering, societal disruption and divine justice, these writers transform disasters into occasions for ethical reflection and spiritual contemplation, while highlighting the imaginative and stylistic potential of the *maqāma*. Omar and Fancy further trace how later Mamluk chroniclers, including al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1441) and Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 874/1470), appropriated these literary depictions to construct historiographical accounts of epidemics such as the Black Death, revealing the intersections between literature, theology and historical memory.

Turning to a broader methodological reflection, Ilaria Cicola focuses on how to construct and analyse a corpus of disaster narratives contained in pre-modern Arabic sources, bridging philological precision and digital tools. More precisely, she describes the challenges connected to the Disasters Corpus in Classical Arabic Sources (DiCCAS), the digital corpus she is developing within the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna as part of the PRIN 2022 project, using the TEI (Text Encoding Initiative) markup language. The corpus includes the Qurʾan, the canonical *ḥadīth* collections *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, al-Ṭabarī’s *Tārīkh* and *Tafsīr*, Ibn Taghrībirdī’s *Kitāb al-Nujūm al-zāhira*, al-Maqrīzī’s *al-Sulūk*, al-Dhahabī’s (d. 748/1348) *Tārīkh al-Islām al-kabīr*, the *Rasāʾil* of al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868) and *al-Mudhish* of Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201). Cicola reflects on the methodological decisions involved in selecting, encoding and analysing passages, highlighting how digital tools can complement traditional philological approaches to facilitate comparative analysis of disasters across textual genres.

Finally, Javier Albarrán offers a rich exploration of the relationships between natural disasters and socio-political events in the Andalusī and Maghribī worlds, situating them within a wider Mediterranean pattern that includes Eastern Islamic and Christian traditions, thus closing the issue with a cross-cultural dialogue on the politics of environmental meaning. In particular, his study shows how processes of territorial loss are represented in historical sources through references to natural disasters, whether real or imagined. The analysis

highlights two interrelated narrative landscapes: a *landscape of fear*, populated by images of devastation, trembling earth and divine wrath, and a *landscape of consolation*, in which the memory of al-Andalus is reimagined through paradisiacal gardens, flowing waters, past victories and cultural excellence. These landscapes function as mechanisms for articulating trauma, asserting communal identity, and offering moral and emotional guidance, while also establishing connections across Mediterranean Islamic and Christian traditions. Through this approach, Albarrán reveals how the medieval imagination processed disaster, encoding collective memory and moral reflection into emotionally charged narratives that spatially and rhetorically map fear, loss and consolation.

In conclusion, the contributions gathered in this special issue collectively demonstrate the richness and complexity of pre-modern societies' engagement with environmental anomalies. They show that disasters were deeply intertwined with moral, theological, political and literary frameworks, shaping communal identities, ethical norms and collective memory. By combining philological, historical, literary and religious approaches, the issue highlights both the methodological challenges and the innovative opportunities offered by interdisciplinary research, revealing how classical sources can be reinterpreted and compared in light of contemporary analytical tools. Moreover, the cross-cultural and transregional perspectives presented here underscore the importance of situating local experiences of calamity within broader Mediterranean and Eurasian patterns contexts, showing how interpretations of environmental events were shaped and exchanged across different times, places and religious traditions. Ultimately, this special issue invites further reflection on how narratives of disaster function as instruments of moral, social and political discourse, offering a lens through which to understand both the past and its enduring influence on the interpretation of natural and human-induced crises.

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Environmental Ghosts and Omens in Ancient Iran: Between Care for Life and Apocalyptic Terrors

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Abstract

The perception of the environment expressed in Ancient Iranian culture and texts, here primarily Zoroastrian religious writings, demonstrates a symbolic interpretation of nature in geographical and ecological terms, in which the natural world is considered to be under the regency of a divine custodian. From the heavenly zone to the earth, and in the in-between levels (of air and atmosphere), everything is understood as being mastered by spiritual energies and gods, most notably the supreme god Ahura Mazdā and other associated divinities. This network of divine protection aims to support life against the devilish Ahriman and his demons of corruption and death, who are the emblems of 'anti-life'. The world, then, is a place of supernatural communication, and the various natural environmental phenomena, such as earthquakes, tempests, comets and eclipses, are understood to be *omina*, portents or signs of the future that provide specific information about the destiny of world, historical events and the health of society.

Keywords: Cosmology, apocalypticism, environmental phenomena, *omina*, meaning of history

Introduction

The scientific approaches of antiquity with their sectorial ethnosciences—arising from empirical experiences, technological inventions and cognitive elaborations—are frequently blended with an interpretation of the natural world by means of narrations and imageries, so as to realise the symbolic appropriation of the biosphere in various aspects.¹ Familiarity with a particular culture's technical skills and tools, alongside their cultural representations (i.e. texts, symbols, rituals, iconographies and arts) allows us to assess the degree of understanding and domination of the environment they have achieved. The 'filter' of imagery, and its reshaping of environmental reality by means of language and metaphor, describes a cosmography that entails intimate relationships with the gods, thereby establishing a symbolic link

¹ The spelling conventions employed here diverge from the *EI*³ transliteration scheme when dealing with Pahlavi (*ā*, *ē*, *ī*, *ū*, *ō*) and Avestan languages (for *ə* and *θ*) in Zoroastrian texts.

between religion (i.e. myth and ritual) and ecology. Culture (i.e. language and texts) and technology are also means by which humans understand and exert domination over nature. The outcome of this balance between technology and imagery in a given socio-cultural context reveals fundamental aspects of its cultural and religious mentality, ranging from knowledge to a sense of caution about the unknown that requires the creation of a symbolic framework of understanding, such as religion and/or magic. According to this mentality, nature is thus a place for supernatural presences, and their manifestations in hierophanies and numinous signs (*omina*) have to be interpreted.

The Mythico-Religious Foundations of the Environment in Zoroastrianism

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In the present contribution, which addresses the ancient Iranian empires (Achaemenid, Parthian and Sassanid) and Zoroastrian culture, the imagery of the ecosystem will emerge from a very useful series of data and references. The understanding of the environment expressed in Ancient Iranian culture and texts, here chiefly focusing on Zoroastrian (or Mazdean) religious writings, entails a symbolic interpretation of nature when it comes to any aspect of geography or ecology, as these are considered as dimensions under the sway of the divine. From the heavenly zone to the earth, as well as in the atmospheric levels between them, everything appears to be mastered by spiritual energies and gods, most notably the supreme god Ahura Mazdā and his divine team of Bounteous Immortals (Aməša Spənta/Amahraspand), together with the *yazatas*, another group of divinities—in the proper mythological sense—that are also worthy of worship. This heavenly network is charged with the task of watching over the universe, from the firmament to the ground, in order to protect the world from the attack (*ēbgat*) of a devilish presence, the anti-god Angra Mainyu/Ahriman. The ‘attack’ is a condition of permanent hostility between evil and good, between the assailant Angra Mainyu and Ahura Mazdā, in a state of dualistic antagonism between two opposite forces and two possibilities: in other words, of life against death. If good is life and evil is death, then Ahriman’s attack contaminates existence and necessitates a divine reaction to preserve its creation (i.e. Ahura Mazdā’s): it is remarkable that among the many Avestan epithets for Ahura Mazdā we find the expression *ahūm.biš*, i.e. ‘the healer of existence’ (*Yasna* 44, 16).²

Because of this vitalistic mentality, the religion of Ancient Iran is particularly concerned with care for life (not just human life, but also animal and vegetal life) and for the environment together with its basic elements (such as earth, water, fire and air) which must be preserved from pollution. Thus, this rivalry between good and evil, expressed in terms of life against non-life (i.e. death), is a contest between the integrity of life and the contamination of death. In accordance with the conceptualisation of a dualistic religion, it also entails a strong opposition between the gods and the demons who threaten human lives with sickness, famine, pollution, decay and death. The environment is conceptualised as a

² This compound and its textual occurrences have been highlighted by KELLENS 1974, 53–54.

natural cradle for human life, in terms not only of childbirth, but also agriculture, in terms of both plant and livestock farming. It is even possible to say that the Zoroastrian concept of 'the sacred' is understood in terms of the notion of 'growth and increase' (Avestan *spānta-*, Pahlavi *abzōn/abzōnig*), which denotes the conception of life as 'expansion' and 'development' as opposed to the 'diminution' of non-life. For this reason Iranian culture was very reactive against any physical threat to life, and likewise any metaphysical dangers of devilish origin: this explains the religious imagery found in texts of a battle against demons to preserve the environment, and also their tendency to consider any natural phenomena as signs of supernatural revelation and communication. Earthquakes, famines, tempests, comets and eclipses are thus envisaged as 'signs' that reveal specific information about the destiny of both individuals and socio-political groups and institutions, although it is important to note that they are not warnings of divine punishments for the sins of mankind.

This supernatural semiology can thus reveal the omens of ghosts which can be seen as expressions of human fears of death and threats to life, and of the fears about the possible destruction of history and society through natural catastrophes and inimical events such as war and invasion. Due to a culturally specific set of psychological apprehensions, societal fears and yearning for salvation, the cultural outcomes of this situation of crisis are peculiarly represented by Zoroastrian religious apocalyptic texts. We can then engage two levels of analysis to understand the role of the environment in the Zoroastrian mentality and worldview: the first being cosmology, which can be applied to creation, and the second being apocalypticism and eschatology, which can be applied to the end of creation.

Cosmology: The Beginning of the Environment

To the Zoroastrian authors of these texts, the environment is the result of divine acts of creation, in our case by Ahura Mazdā, whose epithet *dātar-* in the Avestan language is a word denoting an act of disposition and arrangement in a threefold dimension: the firmament (that is, the sky, sun, moon and stars), the atmosphere (clouds, wind and rain) and the earth. A passage from an Old Avestan text (*Yasna* 44, 4) perfectly voices this arrangement of the universe:

This I ask Thee, tell me plainly, O Ahura: Who holds the earth down below, and the heavens (above) (to prevent them) from falling, who (holds) the waters and plants? Who yokes the swift teams to the wind and the clouds? Who (is) the creator of good thought, O Wise One? (HUMBACH, EFFENBEIN and SKJÆRVØ 1991, 157)

We can better understand this threefold cosmic subdivision with reference to our taxonomy of astronomy (sky), climatology and meteorology (atmosphere), and geography (and the related earth sciences of geology and mineralogy, orography, hydrography and ecology). The creation of the world is not only an act of divine agency and shaping of the universe from cosmic matter, from the sky to the environmental ecology of the earth: the predominance of the supreme god Ahura Mazdā notwithstanding, we have to detect a multifarious team of heavenly powers and gods, in a blending of monotheism and mythologies, in which a supreme deity is flanked by an ancillary team of supernatural beings that are in certain respects similar to 'angels' (PIRAS 2015). It is interesting to note that this team plays a role

in the protection and preservation of the world under the guidance of such heavenly powers as the Bounteous Immortals and the gods in the proper sense, the *yazatas* that form the Avestan pantheon of Zoroastrian divinities such as Mithra, Anāhitā, Tištrya, the Fravaši and Vərəθraϥna, as well as many other gods with their individual mythologies.

The divine framework of Zoroastrian religion is, then, strongly concerned with the protection and guidance of the cosmos and its basic elements. For instance, the above-mentioned group of the Bounteous Immortals is structured as follows: Vohu Manah is the patron of livestock, Aša of fire, Ārmaiti of earth, Xšaθra of metals, Amərətāt of plants, Haurvatāt of waters and Spənta Mainyu of mankind. Aside from these heavenly powers, the more individualised gods (the *yazatas*) are enrolled in patrolling Ahura Mazdā's creation, in order to protect life against the evil powers that seek to destroy it in all its forms. Even today the Zoroastrian sacrifice (*yasna*) performed by priests centres around single items of creation (water, fire, fruits, milk and animals) employed in a cultic celebration and holy renovation of the world, in a symbolic anticipation of eschatology and its final transfiguration.³

Many passages of the Avesta and other Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts include the trope of cosmic wrestling between opposing powers, for example in the case of the god-star Sirius (Tištrya) who, in the shape of a stallion, fights against the demon of drought, Apaoša, to ensure the periodic return of the rainy season and to avoid the danger of famine (PANAINO 1995, 15–45). Tištrya's action is a good example of a divine power ensuring the mobility of the waters by smashing any demonic obstruction of their flow. The god Mithra, as a protector of the cow, bears the Avestan epithet of 'having, providing wide cattle-pastures' (*vouru.gaoyaoiti*): his benefits are very concrete in terms of dispensing fat (for libations) and herds, granting power and sons, and bestowing long life and a comfortable existence (*Yašt* 10.65; GERSCHEVITCH 1959, 103–5). The goddess Anāhitā, custodian of the water and associated things (from rivers and springs to milk and lymph) is praised to ensure her protection and secure abundant corn, herds and possessions, as well as to purify the waters, male sperm and female wombs, and the milk of human and animal mothers. In another case, which involves not just one individual god but a divine army, the Fravašis constitute a massive and collective force supporting Ahura Mazdā in his battle against evil.⁴

Zoroastrian cosmological texts such as the *Bundahišn*, the 'Book of Primordial Creation', provide a description of the environment that originates in a 'single drop of water' and from an ethereal condition, and consequently evolves into progressive condensations: from sky to water, earth, plant, cow and the First Man (Gayōmard). The Earth is 'round, with wide open spaces, neither basin nor range: uniform, its length equal to its width and its width to its depth', and afterwards Ahura Mazdā:

[...] fashioned the first third of the Earth hard as stone, the second third with dust and the final third of soft clay [...] In the Earth, he created the essence of the mountains that would later grow from it. To aid the Earth he created iron, copper, sulfur, borax, and lime; all the species of hard earth, apart from fossils, which belong to a different

³ For a detailed presentation of this ritual, see KOTWAL and BOYD 1991, 3–25.

⁴ A dated but reliable description of Anāhitā and Fravašis can be found in GRAY 1929, 55–62, 75–79. Cf. BOYCE 1975, 71–79.

family. He fashioned the Earth hard, like a man who wraps many layers of clothes tightly around his body. (*Bundahišn* 1a, 9–11; AGOSTINI and THROPE 2020, 13)

From an empirical point of view, the Earth's surface ground and terrain should thus be considered the basis for any configuration of landscapes, and also for any anthropic activities of exploitation, such as mining and agriculture, as well as human organization of the space by means of architecture and craftsmanship to provide man-made structures such as houses, villages and cities. This perception of the earth, under the protection of the goddess Spendarmad, suggests an underlying attitude of care towards the environment on the part of mankind. This is especially true of the Persian kings, whose recorded prayers provide remarkable testimony of a sense of royal piety, respect for the gods, and devotion to the safekeeping of the king's subjects, who are under his protection. Accordingly, in an inscription found at Persepolis (DPd 15–18) the Achaemenid king Darius I says:

May Ahura Mazdā protect this country from the (enemy) army, from crop failure (and), from Falsehood. (SCHMITT 2000, 58)

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In this formulaic saying are represented the three primary afflictions of the Zoroastrian mentality in Achaemenid times: an enemy force (*hainā-*), falsehood (*drauga-*) as a demonic entity of disorder, and 'crop failure', i.e. 'famine', a translation of the Old Persian *dušiyara-* 'the bad year/harvest' that denotes the environmental dangers that bad weather (e.g. cold or hot winds, or storms) posed to agriculture, harvests, and grasslands and pastures. The Ancient Persian kings often had a discernibly protective attitude towards the environment as well as their people, as in the case when Xerxes appointed a guardian to watch over a plane tree that the king had presented with golden ornaments on account of its beauty (HERODOTUS VII:31, in VANNICELLI 2017, 65), a behaviour that clearly points to a kingly care for life and agriculture, an aspect of the ancient Assyrian conception of the 'royal gardener' who is often represented facing the Tree of Life in Assyrian mural engravings.⁵ Moreover, the royal custodianship of creation is a trait of the first man and the first king in the Zoroastrian origin myth (in the *Widēwdād* II), when Yima ruled over a world without cold or hot wind, without disease or death, a habitat protected by an 'enclosure' (*Vara*) that secured and preserved all aspects of life (including the elements, seeds, vegetation and animals).

Apocalypticism and Eschatology: The End of the Environment

The scenery of the end of the world is vividly described in Zoroastrian texts dealing with apocalypticism and eschatology, two mythico-religious situations that are centred on the concept of the end of history heralded by miraculous events, catastrophes and revelations (apocalypses) followed by afterlife narrations concerning mankind (eschatology). In both situations the environment plays a central role as a natural setting within which extreme phenomena occur, until a final implosion in which the universe, from heaven to earth, is absorbed in God's perfection, and creation has thus lost its function. Pahlavi Zoroastrian texts

⁵ For this aspect of the royal gardener and the account on Xerxes and the plant-tree, cf. BRIANT 1995, 244–48.

tend to focus quite heavily on this final scenario, because of the importance they lay on the ideas of human salvation (at both the individual and collective levels) and retribution after divine judgement. The *Bundahišn* contains two chapters, chapters thirty-three and thirty-four, that describe in close detail the textual sequence of the apocalyptic and eschatological events that will occur according to the Zoroastrian time conceptions of different millennia (*hazarāg*). Time (*zaman*) refers to a period that comprises the primordial and mythical periods and incorporates Achaemenid, Arsacid and Sasanian dynasties, including the empires of traditional enemies of Iranian culture such as Alexander (Eskandar), the Romans (Hrōmayīg), the Arabs and the Central Asian nomads (i.e. the Turks, Huns and Khazars). From the origins of the universe to the end of the world, the histories of the Iranian people record the wondrous enterprises of kings and heroes, which are frequently associated with environmental features and natural phenomena such as rain or drought, or provoked by them: one example of this can be seen in the account of the mythical battle between Frāsyāb and Manuščihr in *Bundahišn*:

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When Manuščihr was killed, Frāsyāb came again and terribly destroyed and desolated Iran. He held back the rain from Iran until Uzaw, son of Tahmāsp, came. He drove out Frāsyāb and caused the rain that they call ‘new rain’. (*Bundahišn* 33, 6; AGOSTINI and THROPE 2020, 172)

References to hostile invaders or nomads ravaging Iranian lands, bringing violence and razing the land, and attempting to demolish the empire form a recurrent motif in these texts, denoting a particular perception of historical events and giving expression to collective feelings of fear and devastation. In this context, it is notable that the new era of manifestation of the saviour Ušēdar, who, it is predicted, will come at the beginning of the fifth millennium, will be launched by the holy power of a figure who will restore the true religion (*dēn*) and the environment:

He will reduce famine and drought, and generosity, peace, and freedom from vengeance will increase all over the world. For three years he will give golden freshness to the plants. The Wātaēni River will flow as deep as the height of a horse, and the springs of the Kayānsē Sea will flow again. For ten days and nights the sun will stand still at its exaltation in the sky, and all the species of wolves will perish. (*Bundahišn* 33, 35; AGOSTINI and THROPE 2020, 175)

Other noxious environmental phenomena will then be produced by evil figures such as Malkōs:

With the *dēn* of sorcery and witchy will, he will cause terrible rain, which they call ‘Malkōsyan’. For three years the cold in winter and the heat in summer, along with untold snow and hail, will be so destructive that all people will perish save a small number and few fires. Then people and animals will again adorn the earth, emerging from the shelter built by Jam that was hidden for this purpose. At the same time, remedies will be created from one thousand species of plants to counter one thousand species of disease. (*Bundahišn*, 33 36–37; AGOSTINI and THROPE 2020, 175)

The passing of different millennia and the manifestation of various saviours will thus be accompanied by astronomical events such as the sun remaining in the sky (for twenty days and nights) which will result in the destruction of fiends such as snakes and vermin.

The eschatological chapter thirty-four of *Bundahišn*, which recounts the Renovation (*fašgird*), the Resurrection of the Dead (*ristāxēz*) and the Final Body (*tan ī pāsēn*) during the Final Judgement, furnishes evidence of the destruction and transfiguration of the entire universe, from the heavenly firmament to the world below. At this time, creation ceases to perform its function to increase life and act as a ‘trap’ to snare the ultimate evil, Ahriman, within the environment established by Ahura Mazdā (Ohrmazd) and within a specific duration of time. The last battle between the gods and the demons will rage and a cosmic catastrophe will ensue: the demon of eclipse, Gōzihr, will fall through the firmament from the tip of the moon to the earth ‘and the earth will feel as much pain as a sheep whose fleece is torn off by a wolf [...] then fire and divine Ērman will melt the metal of the mountain and the hills which will lay on the earth like a river. Every person will pass through that molten metal and will be pure’ and ‘for Ohrmazd at that time the creation will be completed’ (*Bundahišn* 34, 17, 18, 22; AGOSTINI and THROPE 2020, 181).

The cleansing effect of the molten metal also produces a lustration of Hell, because:

The snake Gōzihr will burn in the molten metal. The metal will pour into hell, and the stench and filth of the earth where hell is located will burn off in that metal and will become pure. The hole through which the Evil Spirit burrowed will be sealed by the metal. The earth where the hell had been will be returned to the expanse of the world. The Restoration shall be in both existences forever and ever by the will of the immortal deities. It also says this: this earth will be uncrowned, without depression, flat; there will be no mountains, peaks, hollows, ascent or descent. (*Bundahišn* 34, 31–33; AGOSTINI and THROPE 2020, 182)

This process follows a diametrically opposite dynamic to the original manifestation of the universe ‘from a drop of water’, as it is now recollected to a ‘drop’ after an implosion wherein the environment is compressed, and any corrugation of the earth into mountains, hills or valleys is erased, because the fortress (*drubušt*) of creation, which was originally put in place under the sky to withstand the Evil Spirit, has achieved its function and completed its task.

Another important apocalyptic text, the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* (= *ZWY*), is very relevant to the discussion here in terms of the attention it pays to societal hardships such as invasions or man-made destruction, but also to environmental *omina* (*daxšag*), especially those related to the Earth-goddess Spandarmad:

Zarathustra asks Ohrmazd: ‘Creator of the world of material beings, bountiful spirit, what will be the sign (*daxšag*) of the tenth century?’ Ohrmazd said: ‘The sign of the end of millennium will be the myriad demons of the seed of Demon-Fury, with raised banners and black armour, through sorcery they will creep forth to these Iranian lands, with burning, destruction, social and religious upheavals, with ill will, tyranny and evil rule [...] and the Earth (Spandarmad) will be more restricted and the path shorter, the fruit will not give seed and the fruit of grains will decrease, and vegetables, plants and trees will decrease, and men will be born smaller [...] And the mighty cloud and the righteous wind will not be able to produce rain at the proper time and clouds of

haze will darken the whole sky and the hot wind and the cold wind will arrive and take away the fruit and seed of grains and the rain will not pour in its proper time and the waters of the rivers and of the springs will decrease and there will be no increase ... [and the same will occur for horses, cows, oxen and sheep] [...] And the Earth Spandarmad will open her mouth and all gems and metals, like gold, silver, copper, tin and lead will be revealed [...] and the Earth Spandarmad will quake, and danger, death and poverty will be harsher in the world. (ZWY 4:1–60; CERETI 1995, 154–57)

Earthquakes and other heavenly (i.e. solar) and atmospheric (i.e. wind-related) signs surround salient moments of eschatology, for example the manifestation of the saviour is heralded by a star:

When the enemies will come, their signs will be: the sun will be veiled and will change colour, on earth there will be haze, darkness and obscurity, in the sky sign of different kinds will be manifest, there will be many earthquakes, the wind will blow stronger and need. Distress and misfortune will be more and more manifest [...] When the future king will be born, in the religion is revealed that the night when the Prince will be born, a sign will reach the world, a star will fall from the sky, a star will reveal the sign. (ZWY 6:4, 7:6; CERETI 1995, 160, 162)

The Environment Between Science and Mythology

From an epistemological point of view it is important to discern that there is a certain ambiguity in the interpretation of natural phenomena: in astronomy, for instance, the eclipse as a sign of the demon Gōzihr is obviously viewed as negative, and falling stars can also be envisaged as having negative associations as well (in contrast to fixed stars, which are viewed positively) according to Zoroastrian uranography.⁶ Other atmospheric events such as thunder and rainbows can also reveal devilish aspects or ambiguities, because of acoustic perceptions or optical effects between reality and appearance.⁷

After focusing on cosmological and apocalyptic/eschatological topics in Zoroastrian texts, as we have done so far, it is now possible to sketch out a schema of scientific ideas that relate to an understanding of environmental phenomena dealing with geology, meteorology and climate.⁸ These reflect the cultural influence of Greece on Iran and the transmission of Aristotelian concepts as part of a long-term diffusion of Greek notions into Iranian culture and Zoroastrian Pahlavi literature. A very interesting study by Samra Azarnouche (AZARNOUCHE 2024) on the Zoroastrian tradition of encyclopaedical works (such as *Dēnkard*, *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* and *Bundahišn*) has identified a scientific approach that is partly dependant on mytho-religious conceptions and partly an attempt to find a rational explication

⁶ The ambiguity of astral phenomena has been underscored by PANAINO 2018.

⁷ Thunder is interpreted as the voice of the demon Spanjagr, while the rainbow is associated with both divine and demonic colours: see WILLIAMS 1990, 62–63, 189–91, for a translation and commentary of this in the Pahlavi *Rivāyat* of the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, 35.

⁸ For research on climatology in the ancient Iranian world, see MATLOUBKARI and BAIKLOO ISLAM 2022.

of natural phenomena, and thus falls in between what we would nowadays call ‘science’ and ‘mythology’. Aristoteles’ *Meteorology* (Μετεωρολογικά) is posited as having been a likely source of inspiration on earthquakes (*būm-čandag* or *wizandag*) and their aetiology, which is understood as a natural phenomena provoked by two exhalations: a humid steam and a dry and flammable smoke. On this basis, then, earthquakes are caused by a wind inside the earth rushing through cavities and crashing against obstructions. This tentative venture into seismology can be related to the existence of a scientific network in Late Antiquity of a Indo-Mediterranean area that comprised a wide range of important hubs of culture (from India to Central Asia, Iran, Mesopotamia and the Near East) wherein the natural sciences and the study of epistemological issues (into subjects such as medicine, botanics, mineralogy, chemistry, physics, astronomy and mathematics)⁹ largely coexisted with mythical and religious languages and symbolic interpretations of natural facts by means of texts, metaphors and imageries. The response of the vivid Zoroastrian imagination, enhanced by its conception of the dualistic opposition between gods and demons, was to postulate a religious explanation for earthquakes—but alongside the more scientific elucidation of a third/ninth century Zoroastrian priest, Manuščihr, who rejected a mythological interpretation (AZARNOUCHE 2024, 118). Earthquakes are a sign of the Ahrimanic intrusion (of the ‘obstruction’) into the world: after the cosmological beginnings, Ahriman launched a wicked attack (*ēbgat*) that put creation into a mixed state (*gumēzišn*) of pollution (both good and evil), and penetrated the earth provoking the first quake of Iranian geological history, namely the current movement of the Arabian plate against the Eurasian plate.¹⁰

Social Reactions to Environmental Crisis in Mazdakism

One final point that must be taken into account in any discussion of this issue relates to the social and economic history of Late Antique Iran in the final centuries of the Sasanian dynasty (fifth to seventh centuries CE), when a recognisably critical environmental situation occurred due to various climatic and epidemiological factors. Studies on soil samples and related proxy-data on the Aeolian Input during the middle of the Sasanian period testify to famine and drought during the rule of King Pērōz (459–84 CE), which was exacerbated by the loss of trade on the Silk Road due to Hephtalite control of the route in Central Asia. Once again the book of *Bundahišn* (33, 22) provides valuable information about this time:

During the reign of Pērōz there was no rain (*wārān nē bud*) for six years and evil and heavy burdens befell the people.¹¹

⁹ PIRAS 2024 provides an essay on Iranian mineralogy, between science and imageries; for optical conceptions between physics and visual symbolism, see PIRAS 2019. Zoroastrian medical doctrines have been treated in detail by DELAINI 2013 and DELAINI 2016.

¹⁰ Earthquake, drought and thunder are three phenomena provoked by three demons: Čišmag, Apōš and Spanjagr (AZARNOUCHE 2024: 105).

¹¹ The connections between meteorological adversities and political events (Pērōz’s defeats against Hephtalites) have been rightly pointed out by AGOSTINI 2017, 27–29, in considering these historical

To make things even worse, a few decades later, in 540 CE, the terrifying Justinianic Plague, described by Procopius in his *Persian Wars* (II, 23.21), devastated the Mediterranean world and the Middle East, a calamity that also reached Iran: ‘and it (the plague) also attacked Persian territory and all other barbarians’ (GREATREX 2022, 588).

In this case, the historical records and the apocalyptic imagery that features in the literature of the time reflect the collective ghosts of fear of sickness, destruction and death that are announced by astral and environmental *omina*, and paint a picture of societal and political distress mixed with religious tenets. The appearance of the Mazdakite religious movement in fifth- and sixth-century Sasanian Iran was a remarkable outcome of these adverse climatic conditions with their accompanying environmental effects of drought and famine. These affected the lower social classes in particular and provoked protests and riots against the high-ranking landowners and nobility of the empire.¹² This social uprising was led by Mazdak, a prophet and leader, who insightfully found a religious justification for the revolt, arguing the need for a moral reassessment of society: the evil demon Greed (*Āz*), the Zoroastrian personification of avarice, gluttony and lust, was the metaphysical side of this disorder, and was employed to denounce hardships faced by the Iranian populace. Mazdak’s proposed solution was the adoption of a kind of ‘communism’ that involved sharing property (as opposed to promoting avarice) and women (as antidote to lust) to balance the injustice that was being done to mankind and the environment, because, according to Mazdak’s words: ‘God has established daily sustenance in the earth for his servants to divide out among themselves with equal share, but men have oppressed each other regarding it’ (al-Ṭabarī, para. 886, in BOSWORTH 1999, 132). Needless to say, Mazdak’s revolt was included in the generic list of apocalyptic calamities listed in *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* (e.g. ZWY 2.1, in CERETI 1995, 150) that led to the societal ruination of the Sasanian Empire, an echo of which was recorded even during Seljukid times in Nizām al-Mulk’s *Siyāsatnāma* (chs XLIII–XLIV, in PISTOSO 1999, 277–90) and by the Khurramiyya ‘Nativist Prophets’ movements.¹³

In Late Antique Iran the dire social conditions caused by environmental disasters coupled with the injustice of economic disparity led to heightened levels of starvation and poverty and inspired a twofold response in Zoroastrian writings and heretical Mazdakism: the ghosts of danger, fear and death that are reflected in the apocalyptic imageries of Zoroastrian texts, were also incorporated by the religious disorder of Mazdak into various internal doctrinal conflicts and external struggles against a variety of enemies, both the incursions of nomad peoples and political competition from rival empires. Mazdak’s protest against the avaricious exploitation of natural resources was an attempt to solve an economic and social problem that issued from the climatic and environmental crisis that afflicted the fifth century. Food, fertility and sexuality were God’s gifts to his believers, and their loss was an effect of Ahriman’s attack that must be counteracted, despite the social and political implications of this.

troubles at the base of further developments of apocalyptic narrative and its textual structure.

¹² See DARYAEE 2022, 43–44, for an updated survey on Mazdakism.

¹³ On this, see the masterly study by Patricia Crone, CRONE 2012.

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Drought, Famine and Prosperity: The Slaying of the Dragon and the Legitimation of Iranian Kingship in Persian Epics (Fifth/Eleventh to Eighth/Fourteenth Centuries)

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Abstract

In Persian epic poetry, the killing of the dragon by a king or the king's champion is usually implicitly, but sometimes explicitly, linked to the legitimisation of kingship, since the malevolent beast obstructs the flow of vital water resources such as rivers, causing drought and famine. In fact, one of the most important aspects of the political art of Persian rulers, whether legendary or historical, in both the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods has always been to ensure a prosperous reign, and in this sense Persian authors systematically associate good governance with prosperity and the flourishing of the fields, and thus ultimately with the abundance of water. The figure of the dragon, an imaginary animal, is one that holds symbolic value, and hence the field of investigation in this article is primarily mythological and symbolic rather than historical per se. To this end, the mythological-religious background of the demonic figure of the dragon (*azhdahā*) in pre-Islamic Persia will be examined first, and then its role in the medieval Persian epics of the fifth/eleventh to eighth/fourteenth centuries.

Keywords: Dragon, *azhdahā*, famine, kingship, Persian epics, *Shāh-nāma*, *Sām-nāma*, *Gul u Nawrūz*, *Bahman-nāma*

Foreword

Kingship in Persian culture is a key concept embedded in at least 2,600 years of monarchical tradition. The figure of the righteous sovereign emerges, especially in the pre-Islamic phase, as a sort of representative of God on earth, who becomes the assistant of Ahura Mazdā, the God of Good in the relentless struggle against the Prince of Evil, who is represented by Ahrīman.¹ The religious character of the sovereign is confirmed through the actions of a

¹ According to WIESEHÖFER 2014, 32: 'The idea of the divine right of kings also convinces the subjects ideologically, because they are pious people, but at the same time see themselves as members of a community which their God has made part of his good creation. Thanks to the actions and qualities of the divine appointed and inspired ruler, it has become a community of fate for the benefit of the king and the subjects alike.'

supernatural entity, the ‘Royal Glory’ (*Khʿarəna* in ancient Persian, *Farr(ah)* in Neo-Persian; see GNOLI 1999), which, in the form of a wild animal or a luminous nimbus, pursues the legitimate heir to the throne in order to rest on him, thereby conferring on him the royal rank that he deserves. A famous example of this can be found in accounts of King Ardashīr, founder of the Sassanid dynasty (third to sixth century CE), whose legitimisation by means of the Royal Glory is recorded in various sources, especially literary ones, that were also in circulation in Islamic Persia (See HĀSHIMĪNIZHĀD 1369/1990, 41–42; FIRDAWSI 2012, 5:154, vv. 298–301). In contrast, an illegitimate or usurper sovereign is devoid of Royal Glory and his reign may be characterised by a series of nefarious and catastrophic events that directly involve his subjects.

In addition to the attainment of Royal Glory as a sign of the legitimacy of kingship, we find in Iranian epic culture another relevant symbolic sign that determines royal valour, namely the slaying of the dragon, on which this article will focus. The figure of the dragon will be examined on the one hand in relation to famine and other catastrophes, and on the other hand in relation to the legitimisation of royal power, primarily in terms of its symbolic valences. First we will examine the mythological-religious background of the figure of the dragon (in Persian; *azhdahā*) and its demonic connections in pre-Islamic Persia, and then explore the development of the motif in the medieval Persian epics of the fifth/eleventh to eighth/fourteenth centuries.

1. The Mythological Legacy

In Indo-Iranian mythology we find various deities associated with water, especially rain. The warrior god Indra, who occupies a prominent place among the Vedic deities, defeats the cosmic dragon/serpent Vṛtra, who holds back the waters and causes droughts. Indra then kills Vṛtra and releases water and cows from his belly, the latter symbolising rain-laden clouds. Vṛtra, who also has some counterparts in the *Avestā*, is described in the *Rigveda* as a creature of monstrous power. As the Iranist Skjaervø tells us:

[The dragon] Vṛtra is described in the *Rigveda* as keeping the (heavenly) waters imprisoned in caves in the mountains. With the *vajra* (in the *Avesta* *vazra* is the chief weapon of Miθra), Indra smites him on the neck, [and] splits his head thus freeing the waters, which immediately rush out like cows and run to the sea. (SKJAERVØ 2011)

It is assumed that the figure of this snake or dragon, which obstructs the flow of water and causes famine, was later transformed in the Iranian environment into the figure of the evil demon Apaosha. Apaosha, the demon of famine, works with other demons, snakes, dragons and other vermin in the ranks of the Prince of Evil, Ahrīman, who opposes all life and prosperity on earth. As is well known, Ahrīman, the Satan of the Zoroastrian tradition, is the arch-enemy of Ahura Mazdā, the God of Goodness, who together with his associates promotes life and the joys of living. Although the demon Apaosha is not a true dragon, he has some similarities with the attributes of the Vedic dragon Vṛtra. In fact, the Avestic Apaosha fights Tishtar, depicted in the Mazdean pantheon as the angel or rain-bearing deity. Apaosha, in the form of a black horse with a terrifying and demonic appearance, initially succeeds in defeating Tishtar, who has the appearance of a beautiful white horse, but later,

following the prayers of the faithful, Tishtar succeeds in defeating the demonic Apaosha, who represents drought and famine, and successfully releases rain to fall and fertilise the earth (See SKJAERVØ 2011 and CHRISTENSEN 1941, 13–14).

In addition to the mythological-religious aspects we have just seen concerning the dragon as symbolising an evil being that causes famine by blocking the sources of life, it also, as mentioned above, carries implications in Iranian culture relating to the legitimisation of royal power. This is already evident in the ancient inscriptions of King Darius in Persepolis, where the Achaemenid king asks Ahura Mazdā and the gods of his pantheon to protect him from three things: enemies, lies and famine.² In other words, Darius implicitly declares in these inscriptions that his royal prerogatives are to guarantee peace and political tranquility; to represent Ahura Mazdā on earth in his fight against the lie; and to combat drought and hence guarantee the kingdom's prosperity, the latter of which is of particular interest to us. Indeed, a number of Persian writers of the Islamic period systematically linked good governance with agricultural prosperity, and ultimately with the abundance of water as a sign of divine approval of their rule. According to Mujtabā'i, for the ancient Iranians the religiosity and justice of a legitimate king was measured by the abundance of rain (Pahl. *vārān kartār*) and the prosperity of the fields and cities during his reign.³ It is no coincidence that the Persian adjective for 'prosperous' is *ābād*, a word containing the component *āb*, 'water'; moreover, the derivative noun *ābādī* (village or populated centre/oasis) has in its etymology an obvious and direct link with the presence of water, and is historically associated with human settlements near rivers or water sources.

It is also useful to recall that the Iranian scholar Khaleghi-Motlagh, speaking of the Pahlavi redaction of Pseudo Callisthenes's Alexander Romance, considers the killing of the dragon, along with his royal lineage, as a fundamental aspect/motif of the Greek king's legitimacy:

Later, when this [Alexander] romance was translated into Pahlavi, the translator saw fit to add two further themes, not present in the original [Greek text], but of great importance for Alexander's legitimation in Iran: Alexander's Iranian descent and his killing of a dragon. (KHALEGHI-MOTLAGH 2011)

But how does the link between the legitimacy of the ruler and the figure of the dragon emerge in Neo-Persian literature, i.e. from the fourth/tenth century onwards?

2. The Slaying of the Dragon in Neo-Persian Literature and the Legitimisation of Royal Power

In Neo-Persian epics we sometimes find an explicit link between the dragon and drought (a few examples of which will be explored here), but more often the dragon threatens another

² For inscriptions by Darius in Persepolis, see SCHMITT 2009, 116.

³ The Iranian scholar goes on to report a number of accounts from the pre-Islamic and Islamic literature of Persia, for which see MUJTABĀ'I 1352/1973, 107–11.

crucial aspect of the kingdom's prosperity. Since the vitality and survival of the human species is guaranteed by the fertility of young women, in Persian poetry the motif of water imprisoned by the dragon is very often replaced by that of the imprisonment of a beautiful maiden: the water of the river is thus replaced by the water of childbirth, which is no less symbolically linked to the prosperity of the kingdom.⁴ It is no coincidence that from the fifth/eleventh century onwards, Persian epic poetry figures heroes who set out to liberate a beautiful young woman from the clutches of a dragon, or to avenge her if the evil beast has already devoured her. There is a shift from the trope of the fertility of the earth to the fertility of the royal line, but the underlying danger remains the same: a threat to 'prosperity' of the kingdom and the legitimacy of the ruler who must guarantee it. In fact, the king who kills the dragon (either directly or through one of his champions) also proves that he deserves his royal status by acquiring full political-religious legitimacy. Let us now turn to some examples from Neo-Persian literature.

2.1. Examples of Dragonslayers in Firdawsī's *Shāh-nāma*

The first and perhaps most famous of the 'superhuman' dragon slaying Iranian heroes in Neo-Persian literature is King Fereydūn, who appears in Firdawsī's fifth/eleventh-century *Shāh-nāma* ('Book of Kings'), but of whom we find traces as early as the *Avestā*.⁵ Here his name appears as Thraētaona, and the dragon he faces is a three-headed demonic monster called Azhi Dahāka, which the text says was created 'to destroy our settlements and slaughter the followers of Asha (the name of an entity who, in the Mazdean world, personifies Truth or Justice) (*Avestā* 2008, *Yasna* 9.7 and 9.8). Note here the stark contrast between King Fereydūn and his followers of Asha, on the one hand, and the dragon Azhi Dahāka, a creature of the evil prince Angra Mainyu which is identified with a Druj (i.e. lie), on the other. It is from this demonic dragon Azhi Dahāka that the Neo-Persian term *Žahhāk* is probably derived. *Žahhāk* is the name of a strange dragon-king figure who usurps the kingdom of Iran; he has two snakes growing from his shoulders which feed on the brains of young boys, thus killing the most vital and fertile members of society. However, this dragon-king is not content with just young boys. According to the *Shāh-nāma*, two sisters of the legitimate Iranian king Jamshīd, the princesses Arnavāz and Shahrnāz, are also magically abducted and subjugated by *Žahhāk*. Later, after the death of King Jamshīd, the Iranian hero Fereydūn takes charge of defeating the diabolical dragon-king, rescues the two princesses, marries them and attains the Iranian throne (see FIRDAWSI 1391/2012, 1:55–92). The pattern is clear: kidnapping of the royal princesses by the dragon-king → their liberation by the hero Fereydūn → his legitimation as the new king of kings of Iran.

⁴ It is extremely interesting to note that in Persian a pregnant woman is called *ābistan*, which again contains the element *āb*, here indicating the water of pregnancy, a word naturally associated with female fertility.

⁵ On dragonslayers in Persian literature from ancient times to medieval epics, see SARKĀRĀTĪ 1357/1978. On Ferdowsi and his work see KHALEGHI-MOTLAGH 1999.

The demonic aspect of the dragon, which acts against vital resources and life itself, is clearly visible both in the *Avestā*, where it figures as an adjutant of Angra Mainyu or Ahrīman, and in the tyrannical figure of the dragon-king Žaḥḥāk of the *Shāh-nāma*.⁶ Indeed, the dragon in Firdawsi's epic also represents a rupture or subversion of the natural order, a return to chaos and primordial darkness, hence the inescapable need for human society to fight and eliminate it. Consequently, we find in Persian epic literature, as well as in popular fairy tales, the mobilisation of heroes who, often at the behest of a ruler who wishes to protect his harassed subjects from the evil of the dragon, set themselves the task of overthrowing this form of threat to life, creation and the unfolding cycles of nature. Firdawsi's *Shāh-nāma* does also feature an episode in which the positive figure of King Fereydūn unexpectedly transforms into a fearsome fire-breathing dragon one day, but, it emerges, this is only to test his three sons, to see which of them is best suited and entitled to be his heir (FIRDAWSI 1391/2012, 1:103–4).



Fig. 1 *Shāh-nāma* of Shāh Tahmāsp Fereydūn in the Guise of a Dragon Testing His Sons

⁶ For the general demonic dimension of the dragon, see RASTIGĀR FASĀ'Ī 1370/2000, 128-44.

Let us now look at another example of a dragonslayer, this time one who is overtly connected with the control of a river. This is again drawn from Firdawsī's *Shāh-nāma*, in the book dedicated to the Iranian king Manūchihr and his paladin Sām. In a letter that Sām writes to King Manūchihr, he describes a dragon that lives in a river, the Kashaf-rūd (literally: Turtle River), which he then, of course, kills (FIRDAWSI 1391/2012, 1:232, vv. 998–1004):

چنان ازدها کو ز رود کشف برون آمد و کرد گیتی چو کف
 زمین شهر تا شهر بالای او همان کوه تا کوه پهنای او
 جهان را ازو بود دل پر هراس همی داشتندی شب و روز پاس
 هوا پاک دیدم ز پرندگان همان روی گیتی ز درندگان
 زتقش همی پر کرکس بسوخت زمین زیر زهرش همی برفروخت
 زمین گشت بی مردم و چارپای جهانی مر او را سپردند جای

Such a dragon, coming out of the Kashaf-rūd, made the world as [deserted] as the palm of his hand.

The distance from one city to another was its height | [the distance] from one mountain to another was its width,

The whole world had its heart in terror because of him | everyone was on alert day and night.

I saw the air emptied of birds | as well as the surface of the world emptied of predators,
 By his fire the wings of the vultures were set ablaze | and the earth burned up under his poison.

The earth became emptied of [both] man and beast | a whole world made room for him.

In this description we learn that this dragon is a fire-breathing and poisonous beast, a devourer of men and animals, and is seen as a bringer of death and famine, indeed as a general catastrophe, as—according to Firdawsī—‘the whole earth became emptied of [both] men and animals’. He seems to live in and control the Kashaf-rūd River, preventing access to it, with all the consequences this entails. In short, he is presented as a demonic creature who destroys the ‘prosperity’ of the place, not only by killing every living thing with his fire, but also by depriving everyone of the vital resource he controls: water.

2.2. The Association of the Dragon with Vital Resources

In the *Sām-nāma*, which is traditionally attributed to Khwājū Kirmānī (d. 750/1349) although its true author is unknown, we find some other interesting aspects related to the dragon-slaying theme.⁷ For example, the association of the dragon/serpent with treasure, especially

7 On the complex issue of *Sām-nāma*'s authorship see NOROZI 2023, 1–10. On Khwājū Kirmānī and his work, see NOROZI 2019. A monograph on Khwājū's Romantic poetry in a Western language is also in

in the guise of the owner or guardian of treasure, which is usually located in ruins, is ubiquitous in Persian literature, and not only in the epic genre, as it is a topos that is well integrated into the entire classical literary repertoire. Here is just one example (from KHWĀJŪ KIRMĀNĪ 1370/1991b, 363, vv. 2150–51):

بود رسم این چرخ بد مهر پیر که گه چون کمان است و گاهی چو تیر
خمارست و مستی و تخت است و دار نشاط است و اندوه گنج است و مار

Such is the custom of this old malevolent Wheel (= the world) | which sometimes is like a bow and sometimes like an arrow:

It is languid and drunken, now throne and now gallows; | it is joy and sorrow, now *treasure* and now *serpent*.

The dragon always takes possession of precious things or resources, be it treasure, a spring of water or a beautiful maiden, the appropriation of which can cause intolerable disorder to the human community: infertility, drought and poverty, and/or the destruction of nature. Consequently, the slaying of the dragon is often seen, not only in the Iranian context, as a necessary remedy, indeed as a ‘righting’ of the natural order, as is illustrated by the following example from the *Sām-nāma*.

One day, a fearsome dragon/serpent appears in the path of the brave Sām, advancing menacingly. Sām—as he always does when faced with danger—piously asks God for help, and suddenly a beautiful fairy appears and gives him a bow with three apparently magical arrows, one of which, the fairy explains, would serve to kill the serpent, while the other two would serve him well later. Having said this, the fairy—who, according to the text, was created by spells cast by mubads (Mazdean priests)—disappears into thin air. Sām kills the dragon/serpent with a poisoned arrow, and after its death a lofty golden palace with a portal of precious stones and golden bricks suddenly appears to him. He immediately enters the palace and discovers a magnificent turquoise throne upon which sits what appears to be the statue of a beautiful king. Next to it hangs a tablet inscribed with a series of wise and edifying messages of advice from the legendary Tahmūrath, a king of the earliest times, all of them addressed directly to Sām (see *Sām-nāma* 1392/2013, 419–22).⁸

In other texts (see below) the dragon or demon kidnaps a maiden or princess, another recurring topos that is perhaps reminiscent of the kidnapping of King Jamshīd’s sisters by the serpent king Žahhāk mentioned above. In the *Shāh-nāma*, Prince Isfandiyār also, in the third of his seven labours (*haft khwān*), kills a dragon in order to save his sisters from Arjāsp’s prison (see FIRDAWSĪ 1391/2012, 5:221–72 and 232–35).

preparation (NOROZI 2025). In addition, the first full translation of a verse novel (*mathnavī*), *Humāy u Humāyūn*, by Khwājū Kirmānī, with an extensive introductory essay, has been published in Italian, for which see KHWĀJŪ DI KERMĀN 2016.

⁸ This episode recalls a similar one in Nezāmi’s *Iqbāl-nāma* (‘Book of Fortune’), in which Iskandar (the Alexander of the Islamic tradition) enters a golden palace during his travels and reads a similar message on a slab (see NIZĀMĪ 1317/1938, 182–85; NEZĀMĪ 1997, 207–10).

Returning to the *Sām-nāma*: although this is a work of predominantly epic-heroic content, the force that guides and directs the hero is his love for the Chinese princess Parīdukht.⁹ In order to be reunited with her, he has to defeat numerous monsters, demons and even dragons. In the course of his long and endless journey, Sām also frees Parīnūsh, the cousin of his beloved Parīdukht. This girl has been kidnapped, not by a dragon exactly, but by a demoness (*māda dīv*) called Zhand Jādū ('Zhand the Witch'), who kidnaps beautiful young people and keeps them locked up in an enchanted fortress (note the connection with magic) known as (again significantly for us) Ganjīna Dizh ('The Fortress of Treasure'). Zhand Jādū is described in terms that are reminiscent of certain external features of the dragon, such as her fangs and the smoke and lightning she produces, but another relevant detail is that she holds a snake in her hand as a whip, consolidating her connection with the draconic dimension (*Sām-nāma* 1392/2013, 73, vv. 6-12):

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پدید آمد از دامن کوهسار	یکی زشت پتیاره مانند قار
ازو هر زمان برق جستن گرفت	دل سام ازو کی شکستن گرفت
یکی پیر جادو دراز و سیاه	رخش چون دل مردم پر گناه
چو شبهای دیجور بالا دراز	دو دندان برون کرده همچون گراز
همه موی و ابرو چو یال ستور	ز دودش شده تیره رخسار هور
دو پستان چو خیکی درآویخته	ز هولش دل دیو بگریخته
چو پیلی شده بر پلنگی سوار	به دستش چو تازانه بگرفته مار

From the slopes of the mountain appeared | a terrible demoness [black] as pitch.
 Lightning flashed from her at every moment | but when would Sām's heart break?
 A tall, black old witch | her face was like the heart of sinners,
 Like the dark nights was her tall figure | two tusks protruded from her like those of
 boars.
 Her hair and eyebrows were like the manes of four-legged animals | by her smoke the
 face of the sun was blackened,
 Her two breasts were like two hanging wineskins | for fear of her [even] the devil lost
 his heart.
 She was like an elephant riding on a panther | she held a snake in her hand like a whip.

It is interesting to note that once Sām has defeated the witch-demoness who held the maiden captive and freed her, he immediately finds his reward in the form of an immense royal

9 The *Sām-nāma* is a composite poem, the result of a collage of at least two works: one heroic in nature, dating back to the fifth/eleventh to sixth/twelfth centuries, and the other more purely amorous, dating back to the eighth/fourteenth century. For more information on this complex issue, see the first chapter of NOROZI 2024, particularly pp. 30–51.

treasure, which is explicitly said to belong to the legendary Iranian king Kay Khusraw. With the hero's reward (the treasure) we find another element that integrates into the scheme of the dragon controller/guardian of natural resources (water, rivers) or human resources (maidens, princesses), completed by the possession of financial resources (the treasure). It is clear that the dragon is interchangeable in the scheme with the witch-demoness, who exercises the same narrative function.

It is also possible to find variants on the dragon motif in Persian literature, which are likewise linked to the conquest of women and, ultimately, the conquest of the royal throne. In particular, killing a dragon is sometimes a condition of the hero's marriage to his beloved. One such example is found in Khwājū Kirmānī's epic-romantic poem *Gul u Nawrūz*,¹⁰ in which the Iranian prince Nawrūz falls in love with the Roman princess Gul. Caesar (*qayṣar*), father of the beautiful Gul, makes it a condition of marriage that his daughter's suitor slay an invincible dragon (KHWĀJŪ KIRMĀNĪ, 1370/1991a, 499, vv. 628–29, 634–35):

که در این کوه سرکش تیره جاییست در آنجا آتش افشان ازدهایی ست
 به دم در می کشد کوه گران را همی سوزد به دود دم جهان را ...
 به ایوانم کسی سر بر فرزند که آن مار سیه را صید سازد
 به دامادی من آنکس را پسندم جزو دل در کسی دیگر نبندم

In this towering mountain there is a dark place | where a fire-breathing dragon hides.
 With his breath he can melt a heavy mountain, | he can burn the whole world with the
 smoke of his breath [...].

In my palace he will proudly raise his head | [he] who will be able to capture this black
 dragon

Only this one will I want for my son-in-law. | Except for him I, will not bind my heart
 to anyone else.

Prince Nawrūz succeeds in slaying the hideous dragon and, after further protracted vicissitudes, finally marries Gul and ascends the throne, demonstrating once again the close relationship between slaying the dragon and conquest of royal power.

However, is it always the case that the ruler or one of his paladins successfully defeats and kills the dragon? Not really. In fact, the following example provides the case of an Iranian king who confronts the dragon but succumbs; it is the story of King Bahman, the grandfather of King Darius III, who was defeated by Alexander the Great.

2.3. A Confirmation e *contrario* of the Paradigm: the Dragon Devours the King

In the sixth/twelfth-century *Bahman-nāma* ('Book of Bahman') by Īrānshāh, King Bahman learns that the city of Awbār is suffering from an unprecedented famine because a dragon is

¹⁰ For a study on this work, which includes a summary interspersed with translation of the most significant verses into Italian, see NOROZI 2020.

systematically burning the locals' crops with its fire. But let us see exactly what Īrānshāh, the author of this poem, tells us through the words of the persecuted farmers as they address King Bahman (ĪRĀNSHĀH 1370/1991, 596, vv. 10311–13):

بکاریم هر سال تخمی ز نو نبینیم شاخی به گاه درو
به گاه درودن یکی اژدها بیاید کند دشت ما بی بها
بسوزد همه دشت زان سان به دم که نه سبزه ماند زمین را نه نم

Every year we sow again | [but] at harvest time we see not even a stalk,
Because at harvest time a dragon | comes and renders our fields barren.
It burns all the fields with one breath, | so that there is no grass or moisture left.

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Here again we see the dragon associated with drought and famine. King Bahman asks one of his generals to venture out and kill it, but he refuses, for reasons we cannot go into here. At this point, King Bahman is forced to face the dragon in combat himself. However, he not only fails to defeat it, but also actually succumbs to it, and the dragon devours him. More precisely, it sucks him up in a single breath (ĪRĀNSHĀH 1370/1991, 600–1, vv. 10380, 10389, 10394, 10398):

ز اسب اندر افتاد خاور خدای فرو بردش آن اژدها هر دو پای ...
بزد اژدهای دژم باز دم فرو برد مر شاه را تا شکم ...
فرو بردش آن اژدها تا به بر ز بیرون نماندش بجز دست و سر ...
دگر باره آن اژدهای دمان فرو برد دستش هم اندر زمان

From the horse fell the King of the East. | The dragon sucked his legs [...],
The wrathful dragon still inhaled, | swallowing the king down to his belly [...].
[Then it swallowed him up to his chest, | nothing was left but his head and arms [...].
And again, the roaring dragon, | in a moment, swallowed even his hands [...]

We observe the author almost providing live reportage of the devouring of Bahman, and with almost sadistic satisfaction, describing inch by inch the king's disappearance into the dragon's jaws in full view of the spectators, who were probably not displeased at all, for reasons we shall see in a moment.

In another work, this time in prose, the sixth/twelfth-century *Dārāb-nāma* ('The Book of Dārāb') by Ṭarsūsī, we find the same episode recounting King Bahman's inglorious end,¹¹

¹¹ In historical and literary sources there are actually three distinct versions of King Bahman's death, including variants: by natural death, at the hands of Rustam's descendants and, finally, in the belly of the dragon. See GHAFŪRĪ and AMĪNĪ 1391/2012: 119–21.

with the difference that here the author is much hastier, as the dragon swallows Bahman and his horse in one gulp (TARSŪSĪ 1396/2017, 8–9).

This is the only case in which a king fails to defeat the dragon, and one has to wonder why. However, we should remember that Bahman's father had been the hero Isfandiyār, who was killed in a duel by Rustam.¹² Rustam was the quintessential paladin of several legendary



Fig. 2: King Bahman is Devoured by the Dragon

¹² Isfandiyār is in fact killed in a duel by the hero Rustam, who shoots him in the eye with a double-edged arrow made from the Gaz plant and the feathers of the mythical Sīmurgh bird (which was the protector of Zāl, Rustam's father), because Isfandiyār's eyes were his only vulnerable spot. Isfandiyār's invulnerability, about which there is a legend that is worth summarising, has its own legendary origins: When Zarathustra explained his faith to King Gushtāsp, he told him that he would only accept the new faith on three conditions: that the Prophet show him Paradise in this world, that he give him enough knowledge to know the future, and that he suddenly become invulnerable. Zarathustra replied that wishes can be granted, but not for the benefit of one, only for the benefit of three. Gushtāsp chose Paradise for himself, knowledge of the future for his brother Jāmāsp, and invulnerability for his son Isfandiyār. For the latter, they brought a basin of milk from Paradise and immersed the infant Isfandiyār in it, but he had his eyes closed, and they therefore remained the only vulnerable part of his body. See DABĪR SĪYĀQĪ 2011, 262, n. 1.

Iranian kings, as well as a dragonslayer and a descendant of other dragon-slayer heroes who also appear in Zoroastrian religious texts. In order to avenge his father's death, King Bahman had fought an all-out war against Rustam's descendants over many years. But, to engage in battle with Rustam's descendants, in a kind of pan-Iranic feud, was to offer an unforgivable insult to all the legitimate kings that Rustam had served so well, and thus call into question his own legitimacy. It should also be noted that Persia had lost its independence in the war against Alexander the Great during the reign of Bahman's nephew, King Darius III, and so it is plausible that the author of Bahman's story purposely wished to emphasise, via the king's inglorious death in the belly of a dragon, his lack of legitimacy to reign, as was later confirmed by the end of the Achaemenid empire under his nephew's rule. This story contains all the necessary elements: a dragon causing catastrophe by destroying fields and crops, and a king who must confront and kill it to reassert his legitimacy. Although in this case the outcome for the ruler is inauspicious, the centrality of the motif of killing the dragon in Persian literature as proof of royal legitimacy is once again reaffirmed.

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Discussions of Drought in Premodern *Ḥadīth* Collections: Islamic Ethics and Attitudes to the Causes of and Responses to Natural Disasters

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Abstract

The subject of drought, or *qaḥṭ*, is extensively discussed in *ḥadīth* compilations, however very little research has been undertaken on their treatment of the subject. This paper thus proposes to investigate the treatment of drought in the *ḥadīth* literature in a systematic way. Our methodology consists in analysing the explanations offered by medieval Islamic ethics for drought, their discussions of the responses of political and religious authorities, the Prophet's guidance on the subject, and the actions or behaviours they advocate to overcome the dangers and hardships drought presents. Drawing on sources from major Sunni *ḥadīth* compilations, this article aims to offer a comprehensive description and discussion of the treatment of drought in Islamic ethics discourse as found in these texts. It is argued here that this discourse links drought to political, social, and religious corruption, especially denial of religious truth, greed, and injustice.

Keywords: Drought in Islamic ethics, *ḥadīths* on drought, crisis, critique, *qaḥṭ*

Introduction

During the past five years, there has been a significant surge in published research on disasters in Muslim history and tradition, in which pandemics and earthquakes have received the most attention (AYALON 2015; SENIGUER and BELHAJ 2023; DUCÈNE 2024).¹ The subject of drought, however, has hardly received any scholarly interest, even though drought affects Middle Eastern societies more frequently than pandemics. Source such as Islamic law compendia, historiographies and hagiographies offer a wealth of information on beliefs and attitudes to the causes of drought in medieval Muslim societies and cultures, as well as responses to them. Our focus, however, will be on Sunni *ḥadīth* compilations. This article aims to close this gap by exploring *ḥadīths* as a source of ethics (al-KHATIB 2023). These compilations offer traditionalists' accounts on early Muslim communities as they experienced drought, and recount their reactions, mindsets and beliefs during these periods. We will discuss these traditions in terms of the moral cautions, guidelines and critiques the

¹ I am grateful to Helen Blatherwick, whose editorial comments improved this article.

traditionalists provide within them of their own audiences and times. Thus, we approach traditions on drought from the perspective of *ḥadīth* as both critique and testimony of crisis.

Let us begin with terminology: *qaḥṭ*, a non-Qur'anic term, is the most common word used in the *ḥadīth* literature² to refer to drought, and appears in more than twenty traditions, sometimes as *quḥūṭ*. The second most commonly used term, which occurs only a few times, is *jadb*, which is essentially a synonym of *qaḥṭ*, although it has a slightly different connotative range in that *jadb* is often associated with land (dry land = *arḍ jadba*) while *qaḥṭ* is a generic term for the phenomenon of drought. The phrase *isti'khār al-maṭar*, 'delay of rain', is also occasionally used in the *ḥadīth* compilations to refer to drought, as are the terms *naqṣ al-amṭār* (lack of rain) and *iḥtibās al-maṭar* (inhibition of rain) with the same intended meaning (IBN al-ATHĪR 1963, 4:17). In total, I have found twenty-five drought-related traditions that use these various terms, many of which are documented in al-Bukhārī's (third/ninth century) compilation, although some are referenced in later sources such as al-'Ajlūnī's *Kaṣḥf al-khaḥfā'*, which was written in Syria, under Ottoman rule, in the late eleventh/seventeenth or early twelfth/eighteenth century.

Drought has significantly affected Islamic societies and cultures throughout history. As illustrated by the *Sīra nabawiyya*, poetry and historical writings, the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula were vulnerable to droughts during the late ancient and early Islamic periods. The harsh climate, in which there was little rain in either summer or winter, contributed to the frequent occurrence of drought and famine, and pushed many tribes to migrate or adapt to survive in extreme conditions. This was especially true of Mecca during the early years of Muḥammad's prophetic mission (al-'ĪDĀNĪ 2021). Some of the most detailed historical research on drought has been conducted on North Africa. For example, medieval Moroccan society has been shown to have endured several periods of drought and famine throughout its history, leading to the development of a variety of extreme eating practices that Moroccans have used to satiate their hunger and survive. At times Moroccans have been compelled, due to a lack of food, to search for substitutes that included a variety of plants and grasses, the fruits of wild trees, dead animals and insects, even going so far as to scavenge from corpses, in rare cases, to stay alive (BÜ HUSAYN 2021). Drought and famine also had disastrous effects on economic activity in premodern Morocco: people died of starvation, and the agricultural, trade and manufacturing sectors lost working hands, which made matters even worse for the poor, particularly as prices increased when food became even more scarce (al-HILĀLĪ 2002). Similarly, during the Aghlabid dynasty (184–296/800–909), Sfax in Tunisia sporadically experienced long periods of drought which seriously impacted not only people but animals and vegetation, and despite the fact that various strategies for dealing with drought were endorsed, fear of this natural phenomenon has become part of the city's culture (IBN AḤMAD 2021).

2 I use the following *ḥadīth* sources: *al-Jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ* by al-Bukhārī, *al-Mu'jam al-awsaṭ* by al-Tabarānī, *Majma' al-zawā'id wa-manba' al-fawā'id* by al-Haythamī, *Mizān al-i'tidāl fī naqd al-rijāl* by al-Dhahabī, *Lisān al-mizān* by Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalānī, *Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-ḍa'īfa wa-l-mawḍū'a wa-l-atharuhā al-sayyī' fī l-umma and Irwā' al-ghalīl fī takhrīj aḥādīth Manār al-sabīl* by al-Albānī, *al-Tanwīr sharḥ al-Jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ* by al-Amīr al-Ṣan'ānī and *Kaṣḥf al-khaḥfā' wa-muzīl al-ilbās 'ammā ishtahara min al-aḥādīth 'alā alsinat al-nās* by al-'Ajlūnī.

To the best of my knowledge, however, Western academia has not produced a single study on the reception of and response to drought in the Islamic tradition. Perhaps this is an example of how culture and history influence research practices, as individual pandemic events are part of the shared history of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, while drought is not. Even when it comes to studies on *istisqā'*, the rogatory prayer practiced in supplication for rain during periods of drought, we are surprised by the paucity of studies on this ritual. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*'s article on *istisqā'* focuses on the magical and pre-Islamic nature of the ritual (FAHD 1997). However, the rite itself, besides being one of many responses in the Muslim tradition to drought, was extensively elaborated on and developed in Islamic law and conveys ethical meanings of key significance to Muslim cultures and societies. In this regard, Abel's article on *istisqā'* in colonial Algeria, published in 1905, remains a good study to date in terms of investigating its cultural significance in Islamic law and popular culture, as well as its role in the history of Islam in general (ABEL 1905). Let us now turn to the discussion of drought in the *ḥadīth* literature, beginning with its believed causes.

1. The Causes of Drought: Denial of Religious Truth, Greed and Injustice

Al-Bukhārī reports that when the Quraysh tribe refused to obey the Prophet Muḥammad while he was still in Mecca (i.e. before the Hijra), he asked God to afflict them with years of drought similar to those that afflicted Egypt during Joseph's time, and so they were stricken with drought and famine, so much so that they ate even bones (al-BUKHĀRĪ 2002, 1216). Al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) reports a Prophetic tradition from 'Abdallāh Ibn 'Abbās which asserts that if five things spread in this community (the *umma*), there will be five consequences: in the event of usury, there will be earthquakes and landslides; if the ruler is unjust, there will be a drought; if the covenant with *dhimmī* people is violated, the state will be theirs; if *zakāt* is neglected, livestock will die; if fornication increases, pandemics will spread (al-DHAHABĪ n.d., 4:165). Additionally, al-Amīr al-Ṣan'ānī reports the Prophet as saying that God does not inflict drought on a people except in the case of their rebellion against Him (al-AMĪR al-ṢAN'ĀNĪ 2014, 9:402). Finally, al-Albānī mentions a Prophetic tradition transmitted from 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib according to which if Muslims hate their scholars, boast about their prosperous trade, and concentrate wealth through intermarriage, God will afflict them with four things: drought from nature, injustice from their ruler, treachery from their governors, and defeat by their enemy (al-ALBĀNĪ n.d., 4:36).

Thus, the *ḥadīth* literature attributes drought to human culpability, the idea being that humans cause drought if they act improperly, and the list of potential transgressions includes disobeying the Prophet (i.e. denying religious truth), rebelling against God, disdainful religious scholars, being greedy and being unfair. The *ḥadīth* literature also makes use of the Biblical-Qur'anic world, as attested by the reference to the story of Joseph in Egypt, to highlight the denial of religious truth as the most serious of all these potential causes. Drought is thus a punishment inflicted on a community that rejects the religious truth as taught by the Prophet, mandated by God, and passed down by religious scholars. Traditionalists report that

drought is also caused by greed, which leads to excessive consumerism and ostentation in a given community as well as by rulers' failure to act justly towards community members. Therefore, a given community's responsibility for drought has a direct correlation to the extent that they disregard truth, modesty and justice.

There are two additional elements to this ethical orientation in the *ḥadīth* literature on drought. On the one hand, there are a few traditions that acknowledge that Muslims in Medina were also affected by drought despite the fact none of the three main posited reasons for drought (denial of religious truth, greed and injustice) are supposed to have been present (al-BUKHĀRĪ 2002, 882–83). This suggests that the possibility of drought occurring for reasons other than religious or moral causes is implicitly admitted. On the other hand, since the majority of drought-related traditions emphasise human responsibility, we might argue that the Prophetic traditions serve as an ethical critique of the moral status of Muslims in the third/ninth century and beyond when the material was being compiled. Thus, the traditions on drought illustrate, in a clear manner, the critical nature and function of early Islamic ethics. From this vantage point, perhaps *ḥadīth* scholars saw a connection between injustice, avarice and the denial of religious truth. Conceivably, piety is the only way to assure that one is modest and just, and the only way to be pious is to adhere to religious truth, which the scholars themselves were striving to share and teach in their day, not without considerable opposition. The connection between drought and a lack of piety may reflect a correlation bias in the traditionalists' ethical reasoning, which was used to denounce the public's lack of religiosity; by correlating the disaster of drought with immorality, the traditionalists warn people to take religious teachings seriously.

As we have seen, the traditionalists believed that injustice and drought were causally linked. However, we cannot understand how these traditions connect drought and governmental injustice unless we read the tradition against the background of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries, when Muslims were living under empire. We can only hypothesise that, for traditionalists, the ultimate calamity that could afflict anyone living in a town or city was to be subject to rule by unjust governors, as this could make it impossible to earn a livelihood. Land and water were the foundations of the economy, and just as drought withers away people's livelihoods, the unjust ruler takes away people's property, leaving them poor. Al-Ḥākim reports a later tradition that offers an intriguing connection between drought and ethics that may be useful for our purpose here. In this *ḥadīth*, the Prophet advises Muslims to seek help from merciful people, so as to benefit from their charity, and to refrain from asking for help from people with hard hearts, as they are cursed. Just as God brought water to the dry land so that its inhabitants may survive, He also created kind people so that needy people might turn to them for assistance (al-ALBĀNĪ n.d., 4:81). Those with hard hearts (unjust rulers?) provide no rain for dry fields as they keep the good out of the community. Thus, this tradition references, in a broader sense, another theme of the Biblical-Qur'anic worldview, according to which all prophets' guidance and wisdom are as helpful to humanity as rain is to the earth (ROBERTSON 2010).

It is interesting to note that the ideas of injustice as a cause of drought and justice as a cause of rain persisted in Islamic societies and cultures until the turn of the twentieth century. They are documented, for example, by Armand Abel in a folktale he heard in Mزاب, South Algeria (ABEL 1905, 55). According to this story, in the eighth/fourteenth century, the Egyptian Mālikī jurist Khalīl b. Ishāq al-Jundī (d. c. 776/1365), the author of the authoritative

Mukhtaṣar, a key work in the Mālikī curriculum, demanded that Muslims correct injustices before making the rogatory prayer and pleading with God for rain (ABEL 1905, 55). This allows us to claim that these beliefs not only serve as structuring rituals of an astral or magical nature but above all, communicate and highlight certain ethical rules. One of the primary, if not the most important, virtues in early Islamic ethics was justice. Accordingly, an association between justice and rain makes sense, since together they form the foundations of life in human societies and cultures.

2. Responses to Drought: Prayer and the Quest for Charismatic Authority

In the traditions discussed above it is implied that Muslims should overcome drought by accepting religious truth, abandoning greed and redressing injustice. However, the main remedy for drought, according to the *ḥadīth* literature, is invocation, or *duʿāʾ*, and this can, we are told, take many forms: the most effective way to induce rain is to rally around religious authorities, particularly the Prophet, and make invocations to God in the form of a collective prayer. According to al-Bukhārī, on one occasion the people of Medina urged Muḥammad to pray for rain, and after he did, it rained for a week without interruption. When the rain started to pose a danger to property, he asked God to spare Medina, and the downpour ceased (al-BUKHĀRĪ 2002, 247). Al-Bukhārī also includes an account of how, in Mecca, the Prophet was asked to pray for rain for the Muḍar tribe since the Quraysh (a branch of the Muḍar) were suffering greatly from drought, and rain began to fall once he performed the prayer (al-BUKHĀRĪ 2002, 1216). It is also reported that the Prophet occasionally advised people who sought his mediation on rain to kneel and utter the words, ‘O Lord, O Lord’ and pray to God for rain (IBN ḤAJAR 2002, 4:377). The idea that seems to be emphasised here is that earnest prayer and repentance, symbolised by kneeling, can be a way to remove drought and bring about divine mercy. Thus, humility and acknowledgement of one’s moral responsibility in crisis can be equally effective as the charismatic authority of the Prophet, which grants him a privilege in appealing to God and ensuring divine responsiveness. This does not take away from the cult of the Prophet in the Islamic tradition, but highlights once again the importance of moral responsibility in Islamic ethics. Indeed, traditionalists appear to balance the popular belief in the Prophet’s unique status as a miraculous figure, saviour and mediator in times of disasters against the moral virtues of humility and moral responsibility. The act of kneeling and invoking God is one that implies remorse for moral transgressions and an emphasis on humility; disasters should teach people humility in admitting their personal wrongdoings and weaknesses.

In addition to the Prophet, Muslims turned to other religious leaders (religious scholars, preachers, jurists, judges and Sufi masters) as mediators who would pray for rain whenever they suffered from drought. This is a widespread practice, legitimised in Islamic law in the form of *ṣalāt al-istisqāʾ*, which has existed throughout Islamic history and continues to this day. Some Muslims would visit the Prophet’s tomb in times of need and pray for rain, as was the case during ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb’s reign in a story narrated by Mālik al-Dār, the minister for food supplies in ‘Umar’s administration. In this account, a man visited the Prophet’s grave

to ask him to assist his community by supplicating God to induce rain. The man then informed 'Umar of his invocation, and 'Umar admitted that as caliph he was unable to resolve the issue of drought (al-ALBĀNĪ 2001, 118). Even though 'Umar was also a religious leader, this tradition demonstrates the perceptions surrounding the limitations of political power in resolving issues such as droughts, and the necessity of consulting religious authorities to remedy them. The Prophet's authority is clearly understood to be greater than 'Umar's and, as a result, his interventions are more likely to be heard by God. At the same time, 'Umar's influence as a religious leader is diminished by the fact that drought occurred during his rule.

'Umar figures in another drought-related story, which is recounted by al-Bukhārī as follows:

When Muslims went through a drought, 'Umar would invoke al-'Abbās b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's aid to seek rain, saying: 'O God, we used to seek intercession through our Prophet, and You would send us rain. Please provide us rain as we now ask You for intercession through our Prophet's uncle.' And rain would fall on them. (al-BUKHĀRĪ 2002, 914)

This tradition established a hierarchy of religious authority that is unfavourable to 'Umar and those involved in state affairs. Perhaps the most contentious feature of 'Umar's persona was the fact of his being a head of state, since his piety was unquestionable in Sunni sources. Al-'Abbās, on the other hand, shared family ties with the Prophet, which lent him a type of charismatic authority that was seen as being close to God and to grace, at least in Muslim popular belief. We cannot overlook the fact the Abbasid caliphate consciously derived its legitimacy from its association with al-'Abbās, and that this may have had an impact on the way he is portrayed in *ḥadīth* works produced in the third/ninth century. In historical terms, al-'Abbās was known neither for his piety nor for his asceticism. He was a late convert to Islam and was largely absent from major events in the Islamic community following the Prophet's death. However, he symbolises a rival family lineage to the Prophet that competes with that of 'Alī, which is asserted by Shiis, and this may be the reason the Sunni traditionalists recognise his charismatic authority. Finally, the reference to al-'Abbās's intercessional authority in this tradition might be a reference to the account of how 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, prior to the advent of Islam, used Muḥammad, then a child, as a mediator through whom to ask God for rain during a severe drought in Mecca, an endeavour that resulted in an abundant downpour (al-ṬABARĀNĪ 1987, 1793). That 'Umar figures in two stories in which he had to concede to the authority of the Prophet and his uncle signifies that for the Sunni traditionalists, political power should take second place to religious authority in times of crisis.

Another anecdote, transmitted on the authority of the Prophet's wife, 'Ā'isha, corroborates the Prophet's intercessional authority in times of drought. After a petition from the people of Medina, who were suffering from a terrible drought, she advised them to go to the Prophet's grave and create small windows in it facing upwards towards the sky. As the story goes, once they had followed her instructions rain fell upon the people of Medina until the grass grew and the camels were so well fed that they burst from the fat (al-ALBĀNĪ 2001, 126). This story again illustrates the popular belief in the Prophet's unique ability to save his community due to his religious authority, a status that allowed him to intercede with God and end the drought, and which continued after his death. The cult of the Prophet, which is

exemplified here by the notion that creating tiny windows in the Prophet's tomb would create a conduit for his spiritual communication with God, was contested in Sunni orthodox milieus. That is perhaps the reason the traditionalists needed to attribute the tradition to 'Ā'isha, one of the most esteemed Sunni authorities. However, it is notable that, as with 'Umar in the tradition discussed above, 'Ā'isha's status is diminished here, as she does not intercede directly herself but, like 'Umar, merely advises her people to invoke the higher authority of the Prophet. This possibly reflects the fact that she tarnished her religious authority through her involvement with politics, or that she lacked a legitimate link to the lineage of the Banū Hāshim. She was the Prophet's wife, a mother to the believers, and an esteemed transmitter of religious knowledge, but she was not elevated to the point where she could take the Prophet's place or be given special authority.

There is thus a clear rivalry between religious and political authority in the various traditions about responses to drought. This idea is significantly more evident in the following story about Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān than in the other traditions discussed above. During Mu'āwiya's reign a drought struck, and the Umayyad caliph led the community to the prayer place, the *muṣallā*, where they would pray for God's assistance in ending the drought. He did not, however, offer the prayer himself; he instead requested that the ascetic Abū Muslim al-Khulānī (d. 62/682), a first-generation Successor, perform the prayer in his stead, asserting that Abū Muslim was more knowledgeable about the hardships caused by drought. As the highest representative of political authority, Mu'āwiya might have felt embarrassed about praying himself (what if the drought was caused by his unjust acts?), or afraid to take the risk (what if God were to reject this prayer?). In his prayer, Abū Muslim confessed his sins and expressed his regret before God, supplicating Him for rain. God then let the rain fall abundantly, but the story did not end there. Abū Muslim reportedly felt uncomfortable and embarrassed, since Mu'āwiya's request that he perform the prayer in public had had an adverse effect on his reputation (a matter of fear of being associated with rulers). As a pious figure, he felt guilty about his lack of humility toward God and his fellow Muslims, and asked God to end his life if He saw any good in this act, following which he died only a few days later (al-ALBĀNĪ 1979, 3:140). This might be seen as a recommendation by the traditionalists to be humble, and to even disappear after having helped the community. If not, religious figures could become as arrogant as rulers, and those with political power might become envious of them or attempt to use them again. Thus, in the pious world of traditionalists, the ability to facilitate rain might cast doubts about one's piety and humility.

Mu'āwiya is mentioned in another story about drought in the *ḥadīth* sources. This time, he asked Yazīd b. al-Aswad to undertake the intercession during a drought; Mu'āwiya petitioned God for rain, saying: "O God, we ask for rain through the best and most outstanding of us. We pray for rain through the intercession of Yazīd b. al-Aswad, O God. O Yazīd, raise your hands to God, the Most High." When Yazīd raised his hands, everyone else did the same, and so much rain fell that it was nearly impossible for people to return to their homes' (al-ALBĀNĪ 2001, 41). Yazīd b. al-Aswad al-Jarshī was a well-known Syrian ascetic who lived in the vicinity of Damascus. Thus, it appears that in addition to having a connection to the Prophet's lineage, asceticism was a factor in the required charismatic authority of those who could successfully petition God for rain, as Yazīd b. al-Aswad and Abū Muslim al-Khulānī, for example, were both famously ascetics.

Through the stories of Mu'āwiya and 'Umar they transmitted, the traditionalists clearly wished to warn about the boundaries of authority and power: political power is worthless during drought (and this could be said about other natural disasters as well), when religious authority is necessary to allow humans to communicate with God in order to relieve hardship. In these circumstances, rulers are ashamed to stand before God, devalued and condemned by the ongoing crisis, and perhaps also because they are symbols of worldly arrogance and ostentation. The practice of praying to God to ask for rain is, thus, an implicit critique of the limits of political power and its responsibility for disasters. Religious authority, however, likewise has its limits. Religious authority figures should not feel at any moment that they became powerful because they helped the community when nobody else could, as such feelings violate the principle of humility that brings about divine grace. Thus, the main lesson conveyed in these traditions is the idea that people cannot overcome natural disasters without humility and God's favour.

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As Mehdi Ghouirgate points out in regard to the Almohad dynasty (494–667/1120–1269), religious literature in later Islamic history has continued to emphasise the trope of humiliation of political power in front of religious authorities during times of crisis and drought. The hagiographic corpus, in particular, foregrounded holy figures to whom rain-related miracles were attributed—generally a Sufi who either makes it rain or helps those in need by bringing food or water at a crucial moment during droughts—and brought attention to the indifference, or even corruption, of the Almohad authorities. In one particular period of extreme drought, the Almohads, despite claiming to be both caliphs and religious leaders, were unable to provide food for their own troops (GHOIRGATE 2011). Their credit, in times of drought, was no better than that of 'Umar or the Umayyad caliphate.

3. Attitudes to Drought: A Sense of Reality, Solidarity and Confusion

Some of the attitudes towards drought we see described in these traditions are commended, while others are criticised. Overall, resilience is a mindset that is viewed positively. According to a tradition reported by al-'Ajlūnī, 'the destruction of towns is unavoidable, and every town will be struck by some sort of calamity, either floods, earthquakes, droughts or plagues' (al-'AJLŪNĪ 2000, 2:563). This attitude reflects ideas of resilience, fatalism and belief in the power of nature all at once. It considers disasters such as drought as obeying a natural law of destruction that does not depend on human will, and that strikes all countries, each with a different kind of disaster. However, once a community comes to terms with the existence of natural disasters, there is no need to be panicked about them: life should go on as normal until they strike. However, this particular stance runs counter to the majority of the traditions addressed in this chapter, which follow a Qur'anic-Biblical standpoint and hold humanity culpable for drought while looking to God's divine grace for its resolution, which usually materialises after fervent prayers and the intercession of religious figures. The 'natural law' tradition stands apart perhaps because it originated in a more recent *ḥadīth* source, *Kashf al-khafā*, compiled by al-'Ajlūnī in the late eleventh/seventeenth and early twelfth/eighteenth centuries, and may have represented a different paradigm in Islamic thought and practice about disaster relief, one that is more grounded in reality than in ethics.

As illustrated by two further traditions, community solidarity in the face of drought is highly recommended. Ibn Ḥajar quotes a story in which the Prophet was hungry during a drought and his daughter Fāṭima brought him two loaves of bread and a piece of meat as a present (IBN ḤAJAR 1997, 46). At the same time as illustrating Fāṭima's personal generosity, this tradition shows how family unity is crucial during emergencies and has the potential to save lives. In contrast to most traditions that support the cult of the Prophet, this one emphasises Muḥammad's vulnerability, presenting him as a normal man who, like everyone else, needs the support provided by human solidarity. In the second story, recorded by al-Haythamī, the Prophet advises people to bring alms to offer to the poor (*ṣadaqāt*) before they participate in group prayer to supplicate for rain (al-HAYTHAMĪ 1985, 2:215). Solidarity is therefore a sacrifice offered to God that may help people to obtain divine favour. Furthermore, charity is central to Islamic doctrine (*zakāt*, *ṣadaqa*), historical institutions (*waqf*) and ethics (*ʿamal al-khayr*). Feeding the poor is rooted in the wider Islamic tradition, and is particularly important in Sufism, as a nexus between givers, receivers and God in which givers pay their debt towards God and society (MITTERMAIER 2019). A community that gives charity is more likely to overcome the deadly sin of greed, which the traditionalists denounced as a cause of drought.

However, some people would demonstrate a lack of religious conviction or constancy during drought. For example, al-Suyūṭī reports that a particular group of Arab Bedouins were warm to the Prophet when they visited him in Medina, but when they returned to their homes, they would say, 'This religion of ours is good,' and stick to it if their year was blessed with rain, bountiful crops or healthy babies. However, if they suffered a year marked by starvation, terrible births or drought they would say, 'There is no good in this religion of ours' (al-SUYŪṬĪ 1982, 10:413). Such a mindset of self-deception and uncertain faith is an example of a bad attitude in times of crisis, as it undermines trust in God which, from an Islamic ethics point of view, is the only route to salvation. The Bedouin protagonists of this story were unable to fathom the deeper reality beyond their immediate tangible and financial benefits, rejecting religious truth and thereby engaging in one of the fundamental sins that cause drought, as well as embracing greed, another sin associated with this particular natural disaster.

4. Crisis and Authority

The preceding discussion on the causes of and responses and attitudes to drought in the *ḥadīth* corpus has revealed a number of significant factors about the perception of authority in times of crisis, in terms of Islamic ethics. There appears to have been a general belief that denial of religious truth, greed, and unfairness are the three major causes of societal dysfunction and crisis, and such crises expose the failure of political authority, as rulers commit injustice and cause existing social imbalance to worsen. Denial of religious truth might refer to a crisis of epistemic authority or uncertainty, especially when religious truth is falsified or true religious knowledge is no longer taught. According to the Qur'anic-Biblical worldview adhered to by the majority of the traditionalists, particular cities are condemned to divine punishment and suffering because their inhabitants have either forgotten or denied religious truth (the example of Noah's flood comes to mind here, although the stories of the prophets can generally be interpreted as an effort to restore human societies to truth, alleviate their suffering and renew divine favour until humanity forgets about truth again (WINTER 2025,

3). Humans not only fall away from truth, but they are also greedy and unfair, monopolising riches instead of re-distributing them to the poor.

Crisis also exacerbates and exposes the conflict between different types of authority as the community seeks solutions to counter drought. In this power struggle, political officials are the ones who lose: the ruler must be humble, take part in the ritual prayer for rain, concede leadership to a mediator, and beg God for his aid. Caliphal authority is seriously challenged as the ruler is essentially held primarily accountable and is required to repent his sins. When it comes to religious authority, there is competition for status: ascetic religious authority and religious authority derived from a Prophetic lineage are the most privileged. The existence of conflict between religious authorities makes it clear that the traditionalists (and Sunni Muslims in general) were undecided about the hierarchy of religious authority in the third/ninth century, and, at the same time, other groups, such as Shiis and Sufis, were likewise making claims to various types of religious authority. The legitimacies of ascetic life and Prophetic lineage would be consolidated in later Sunnism by popular beliefs, and Sunni traditionalists and jurists would try to limit the scope of these legitimacies and subjugate them to the rules of *sharīʿa*.

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Thus, we can speak of natural disasters as moments of crisis of authority. As reflected in their doubts about 'Umar and Mu'āwīya's performances, the traditionalists of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries no longer regarded the caliphs as ideal leaders who could rule justly or reliably in accordance with the Prophet's legacy. The traditionalists felt a sense of uncertainty and crisis in the way religion and politics were lived in their time, which culminated in periods of natural disaster. Not only were those who ruled during these periods of drought seen as incompetent, but the traditionalists perceived rulers in general as unjust and flawed. They emphasised that there was a wide gap between the unjust governance of the day and the Prophet's truthful and just polity. As for religious authority, this was credited as better than political power, although it was not as stable and homogeneous as one might imagine. For example, the traditionalists did not invite jurists and judges into the privileged circle of authorities, simply excluding them. Furthermore, they invoked the concept of Prophetic lineage so as to exclude any Shii claims to legitimate religious authority. Ascetic authority was also regarded as risky, and a gate to Sufism, and so the traditionalists had to appropriate it while remaining cautious about the entire concept of humility, perhaps to avoid a cult of saints that would get out of control.

Rethinking authority during a crisis involves determining who is a legitimate authority figure and where particular leaders stand in the chain of command. Such a hierarchy of authorities also reflects a hierarchy of values and ethics. In the context addressed here, religious truth, humility and justice are emphasised as the highest values, and thus the figures of authority that were believed to represent these values were the most venerated. Any disaster was envisaged as a moment in which the community ought to reset itself and return to its foundations, looking inwards, before standing in front of God to pray and ask for aid. The traditionalists, thus, wished religion to be the community's primary reference for moral guidance in the face of drought. There is also a clear sense of communitarian solidarity in this literature, as the collective *istisqā'* prayer and implementation of recommended charity during drought reaffirmed community ties.

Conclusion

The Sunni compilations of *ḥadīth* literature attribute drought to the denial of religious truth, greed and injustice. Thus, they adopt a Biblical-Qur'anic ethical position about disasters, according to which immoral human behaviour leads to divine punishment and destruction. As a response, this literature advocates for prayer, invocations, repentance, humility before God and the intercession of charismatic leadership as mediators between the community and God when asking for rain. In this regard, many traditions on drought support the cult of the Prophet and popular beliefs about his powers after his death. The *ḥadīth* sources convey various attitudes held by early Muslims in the face of drought, including confusion, solidarity and resilience. This article's primary finding is that, as a crisis, drought was seen by the authors of these texts as a moment in which to rethink religious and temporal authority. In particular, the traditionalists insisted on devaluing the status of political power, even that of notable caliphs such as 'Umar and Mu'āwīya. Distrusting political power and placing it at the bottom of the hierarchy of competing authorities does not, however, mean that it is excluded from the community; rather, it means that its capacity to safeguard the community against crises is being called into question. On the other hand, the traditionalists elevated the status of religious leaders, particularly those who were ascetic or descended from the Prophet, in this context. Their position on authority notably converges with or reflects popular medieval Islamic beliefs, which maintained the cult of charismatic authority.

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Divine Trials and Political Authority: Droughts and Plagues in al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh*

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of natural catastrophes in al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, focusing on droughts and plagues as central motifs through which divine will, moral order and political authority are articulated. By analysing selected episodes ranging from the prophetic narratives of 'Ād and David to his account of the caliphate of 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, as well as his reports on the Umayyad period, and the Abbasid rise and consolidation of power, this study highlights the multiplicity of interpretive functions ascribed to calamities — generally viewed as forms of divine punishment, moral trial, or ominous signs — and draws out the political implications that emerge from these readings, particularly their role as instruments of dynastic legitimisation or delegitimisation and as mechanisms for restructuring authority. The article emphasises al-Ṭabarī's methodological strategy of embedding natural disasters within a broader, coherent ethical, theological and political framework. By situating al-Ṭabarī's historiography within the wider context of Islamic intellectual traditions on catastrophe, the study sheds light on the enduring interplay between providence, governance and communal responsibility in early Islamic historical consciousness, highlighting the foundational framework on which later historians will base their own (re)interpretations of natural catastrophes.

Keywords: al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, natural catastrophes, drought, epidemics, plague

1. Introduction

In recent years, the study of natural catastrophes has attracted renewed scholarly attention across multiple disciplines. This growing interest is shaped not only by the accelerating pace of climate change and the devastating environmental disruptions it entails, but also by the global experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has reinvigorated debates on how past societies understood, narrated and responded to epidemics. From the perspectives of environmental history, religious studies and political history, as well as linguistic and literary studies, natural disasters—whether these be droughts, famines, floods or plagues—have raised a wide range of critical questions, particularly concerning the complex interplay between ecological events, cultural interpretations and socio-political responses. Throughout history, catastrophes have never been perceived as merely natural phenomena; rather, they have also been embedded in discourses of divine punishment and mercy, seen as tests of communal resilience, mobilised as instruments of political legitimacy or critique, and interpreted as catalysts of broader social and cultural transformations.

Against this backdrop of renewed attention to the meanings and functions ascribed to natural catastrophes, the PRIN 2022 project ‘Environmental Anomalies & Political Legitimacy in Global Eurasia, 12th–14th Century’ situates these phenomena within a broad comparative framework. By tracing the ways in which environmental and astronomical disruptions were linked to questions of dynastic authority and political stability across different cultural and linguistic contexts, the project aims to illuminate the shared and divergent strategies through which pre-modern societies conceptualised calamities as challenges not only to the natural but also to the political order. Within this broader Eurasian perspective, the present article focuses on the Arab-Islamic world, examining how pre-modern chroniclers situated natural catastrophes within periods marked by significant historical events and dynastic transitions. Rather than functioning as mere records of events, these historiographical narratives construct interpretive frameworks that convey religious understandings of human and communal destinies, often intersecting with political concerns.

The focus here is on the early period of the Islamic empire, prior to the period between the sixth/twelfth and eighth/fourteenth centuries that forms the chronological scope of the PRIN project, so as to analyse the formative base upon which later Muslim authors, historians and intellectuals would build. In particular, this study explores al-Ṭabarī’s (d. 310/923) *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*. The choice of this work is motivated by its central place in the Arabic historiographical tradition and by its enduring influence on later historians, many of whom relied on it directly or produced continuations of it (BOSWORTH 2012). As a universal history, al-Ṭabarī’s *Tārīkh* begins with the Creation and the stories of the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets, proceeds through the rulers of ancient Israel and Persia, and culminates in the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, before turning to an annalistic account of Islamic history from the conquests through the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, up to the year 302/915. For these reasons, al-Ṭabarī’s *Tārīkh* represents not only a foundational source for the political and religious history of early Islam but also an exceptional site for examining how inherited materials were organised, framed and endowed with meaning. The richness and diversity of his sources allow us to observe the mechanisms through which earlier traditions were selected, recontextualised and woven into a coherent narrative structure, shedding light on the intellectual strategies and interpretive choices that shaped pre-modern Muslim understandings of political crisis and divine causality.

2. The State of the Art and New Research Directions

As several studies on natural catastrophes have shown, particularly in relation to earthquakes and epidemics,¹ the Qur’an and the Prophetic traditions provided the earliest framework for understanding such phenomena within the Islamic intellectual heritage. According to these analyses, disasters serve three main functions in the formative sources: they are punishments

¹ See in particular DOLS 1974; DOLS 1977; CONRAD 1981; CONRAD 1982; CONRAD 1992; CONRAD 1998; AKASOY 2007; AKASOY 2009; STEARNS 2011; STEARNS 2018; SENIGUER and BELHAJ 2023; DUCÈNE 2024. For a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of the evolution of historical scholarship on epidemic diseases in the Mediterranean and Islamic world, particularly with regard to plague, see VARLIK 2023.

for specific peoples in the past, warnings addressed to the Prophet Muḥammad's contemporaries, and omens of the Day of Judgement. A number of traditions further clarify that, while these calamities serve as chastisements for unbelievers, they are blessings for believers. Building upon these scriptural premises, later Muslim scholars developed a variety of interpretive approaches across a wide range of genres, including Qur'anic commentaries (*tafsīrs*), historical chronicles, theological and legal writings and, in later centuries, treatises on epidemics. Each of these literary forms accentuated different dimensions of the relationship between divine agency, human responsibility and natural phenomena, depending on their specific aims and the historical and intellectual milieu in which they were produced.

In very general terms, Qur'anic exegetes sought to reaffirm God's omnipotence and justice, emphasising the moral and eschatological lessons inherent in natural disasters. Historians, by contrast, embedded such events within broader political and social narratives, and theologians and jurists grappled with reconciling divine predestination with human moral accountability, while the authors of theological-ethical treatises on epidemics in the aftermath of the Black Death endeavoured to provide spiritual guidance and consolation in times of crisis. It should be noted, however, that these distinctions are more analytical than real: many scholars combined multiple intellectual functions, acting simultaneously as exegetes, theologians, jurists, historians and—more broadly—*adab* writers. As a result, reflections on natural disasters often intertwine theological, moral, historical and political concerns, even when each genre maintained its own conventions and methodological norms. Moreover, within the broader *adab* tradition—understood in its classical sense as encompassing ethical reflection, moral conduct and its refined literary articulation (HÄMEEN-ANTTILA 2014)—authors integrated calamities into moral exempla, social critiques, and meditations on the fragility of human existence and worldly order.

Within this vast and intellectually diverse corpus, certain themes have attracted more scholarly attention than others. Among the various forms of natural disasters, epidemics (and the plague in particular) have emerged as the most thoroughly examined, owing both to their recurrent and often devastating impact on Muslim societies and to the exceptional richness of the documentary record they generated, especially with regard to the period of the Black Death (BENEDICTOW 2021) and the region of Egypt and Syria (GASTON 1962; DOLS 1977, 143; BORSCH 2005; STEARNS 2018). Moreover, historical evidence indicates that the recurrent outbreaks of the so-called Plague of Justinian (beginning in 541 CE) coincided with the early Islamic incursions into Byzantine territories, contributing (alongside political and economic factors) to the weakening of Byzantine authority, and facilitating the rise of Islam in those areas. Similarly, subsequent waves of the plague struck the Umayyad domains in Greater Syria, creating conditions that paved the way for the Abbasid revolution in 132/750 (DOLS 1974; IBN HAJAR al-ASQALANI 2023, 9).

Beyond the historical reconstruction of the origins, spread and consequences of the plague (particularly its demographic and economic impact), scholars have also sought to trace the evolution of Islamic discourses on contagion and divine causality across centuries and genres. In this regard, the contributions of Lawrence I. Conrad have been particularly influential. Conrad sought to trace the intellectual processes that generated the traditions related to epidemics, arranging them in a plausible chronological order and showing how early, relatively simple discussions gradually developed into more sophisticated reflections, starting from about 80/700 to 235–6/850. The earliest stage he identifies corresponds to pre-

Islamic Arabia, when explanations of disease were straightforward: epidemics were believed to be caused by jinn or other spirit beings and to spread through direct transmission from one victim to another. With the emergence of Islam as a more articulated spiritual system centered on an all-powerful and all-ordaining God, new sayings appeared that denied the role of jinn in causing epidemics, reinterpreted them as manifestations of divine punishment, and rejected the notion of contagion. In a subsequent phase, traditions began to emphasise acceptance of divine decree, for instance forbidding believers from fleeing plague-stricken areas so as not to escape God's will. Finally, in order to account for the many deaths of pious Muslims, later reports framed the plague as both a punishment for unbelievers and a blessing for believers, elevating those who died to the rank of martyrs (CONRAD 1992)².

It should be stressed, however, that this chronological sequence proposed by Conrad does not imply a linear or exclusive development, nor did later formulations erase earlier conceptions. Apart from rationalist theologians of the Mu'tazili school, such as al-Nazzām (d. 230/845), who tended to reject *ḥadīths* they considered contradictory or unsupported by rational evidence,³ most scholars sought to reconcile them, interpreting the relevant issues in often very different ways. The question of contagion, for example, was far from straightforward, as has been shown by Justin Stearns (STEARNS 2011 and 2018). First, 'contagion' (*'adwā*) was not understood in the modern sense but rather within a humoral framework, according to which physicians attributed epidemic diseases to corrupted air. Moreover, the supposed opposition between physicians and religious scholars as proponents and opponents of contagion respectively is overly simplistic. Adherents of *ṭibb nabawī* (Prophetic medicine), for instance, could accommodate the notion of disease transmission within an occasionalist framework, arguing that God habitually creates specific events in conjunction with one another in a consistent manner. More broadly, across the disparate regions and periods of Islamic world, positions on contagion varied considerably. Stearns points out that Andalusian authors such as Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 776/1375) and Ibn Khātima (d. 770/1369) emphasised the contagious nature of plague and the importance of flight, whereas their eastern contemporaries Ibn al-Wardī (d. 749/1349) and al-Manbijī (d. 785/1383) denied contagion and instead underscored the notion of plague-death as martyrdom. These examples illustrate how the diverse and layered traditions that had developed over time nourished a wide spectrum of opinions among Muslim scholars on fundamental questions concerning divine agency, causality and human responsibility (STEARNS 2018).

This overview also confirms Conrad's contention that the later Arabic plague treatises composed in response to the Black Death should not be dismissed as derivative or lacking in originality merely because they drew on long-established ideas. As he observed, such

2 On the concept of martyrdom in Islam and the inclusion within it of the victims of various catastrophes, including those who die in epidemics, see COOK 2007 and ASFARUDDIN 2013.

3 As AKASOY 2007, 396, points out, al-Nazzām said of scholars of Prophetic traditions: 'How can it be [said] that they commit no errors, tell no lies, display no ignorance, and do not contradict one another, when those of them who relate from the Prophet-may the blessing and peace of God be upon him-that he said: "No contagion and no omens from birds in Islam," and that he also said: "And who infected the first one," are the [same] ones who relate that he said: "Flee from the leper as you would flee from a lion"; and that a leper came to him to pledge his loyalty as a Muslim to him, but [the Prophet] sent him someone to take his pledge and did not allow him to come close to him, out of fear of being infected by him.'

continuity was not indicative of intellectual impoverishment but rather of the enduring authority and perceived validity of those ideas (CONRAD 1992, 98). To this observation one may add that the ways in which authors selected, arranged and reinterpreted earlier materials introduced significant differences among their works. Each writer subjected the inherited traditions to processes of reorganisation and reinterpretation, adapting them to the intellectual, social and spiritual sensibilities of their own time and embedding them within narrative frameworks that served their particular purposes. This holds true not only for the treatises produced in the wake of the Black Death but also for those preceding it.

Among the many promising directions for further research, one particularly fruitful path would be a detailed analysis of how authors of different genres and periods organised and interpreted inherited materials on catastrophe, especially in relation to times of crisis marked by natural disasters or dynastic transitions. Such an inquiry could shed light on the complex interplay between religious norms and political realities, exploring how interpretations of calamity were shaped by, and in turn served to shape, the dynamics of power. In particular, it remains to be examined how discourses on disaster were mobilised to support or challenge political authority, or to construct narratives of legitimacy and collective responsibility in moments of profound upheaval.

3. The Ethical and Political Functions of Natural Catastrophes in al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh*

As previously noted, this study examines al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh* in order to shed light on how a set of conceptual tools and explanatory models for understanding disasters and their relation to power took shape and circulated in the Abbasid period. By tracing the emergence of these frameworks in such an influential text, this analysis lays the groundwork for a broader reflection on the continuities and ruptures in subsequent religious interpretations of natural disasters as disruptions of the socio-political order. In order to do so, I focus on two types of catastrophe that I have found particularly revealing of the conceptual frameworks through which al-Ṭabarī represents natural disasters: drought (*jadūb*, *qaḥṭ/qahūṭ*)⁴ and plague (*ṭā'ūn*) or, more generally, pestilence (*wabā'*).⁵

My analysis proceeds on two complementary levels. On the one hand, I consider the content of the reports themselves, i.e. the events, phenomena and sequences presented by al-Ṭabarī. On the other hand, I privilege those reports to which al-Ṭabarī appears to give particular credibility or emphasis within his narrative structure. I do not aim here to reconstruct the chains of transmission (*isnāds*), to distinguish earlier from later reports, or to engage in source criticism; rather, my goal is to highlight the interpretive and explanatory framework that emerges from his presentation of catastrophes, the implications he emphasises, and the ways in which he mobilises these events.

⁴ On these terms and the semantic nuances that distinguish them, see the contribution by Abdessamad Belhaj in this issue.

⁵ On the distinction between these two terms, see CONRAD 1982, who has shown that *wabā'* refers to a general notion of pestilence, whereas *ṭā'ūn* denotes a specific disease, namely the bubonic plague.

3.1. References to Drought

In al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh* drought appears to serve various narrative functions. A first and significant instance is found in the account of the people of 'Ād and the prophet Hūd. This story belongs to the broader cycle of stories about the prophets in which a messenger calls his people to monotheism and righteousness, but they refuse to abandon idolatry and are therefore punished through a divine catastrophe. In this context, drought functions as a manifestation of divine retribution, culminating in a destructive wind that annihilates the disbelieving community. Among the several variants of such narratives recorded by al-Ṭabarī, one particularly elaborate version introduces a political and moral dimension through the episode of the delegation (*wafā*) of 'Ād. After a severe drought had afflicted them for three years, the people of 'Ād sent a delegation to Mecca to invoke rain. Al-Ṭabarī transmits this episode through several variants with distinct *isnāds*, which all converge on a similar core narrative: their envoys stopped in Mecca at the house of Mu'āwiya b. Bakr, who received them with wine, music and the company of his two singing slave girls. Their prolonged stay prompted Bakr to rebuke them indirectly through a poem sung by the two women which shamed them for neglecting their people's suffering. One member of the delegation, Marthid b. Sa'd, had secretly embraced Hūd's message and warned that their prayers would be useless unless they obeyed their prophet—a warning they scorned. Eventually, the chief envoy Qayl prayed for rain.

فأنشأ الله سحائب ثلاثاً: بيضاء وحمراء، وسوداء، ثم ناداه مناد من السحاب:
يا قيل، اختر لنفسك وقومك من هذا السحاب فقال: قد اخترت السحابة
السوداء، فإنها أكثر السحاب ماء، فناده مناد: اخترت رمادا رمدا، لا تبقي
من عاد أحد. (al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 1:221)

So God brought forth three clouds: one white, one red, and one black. A caller cried out to Qayl from within the clouds: 'O Qayl, choose for yourself and your people from among these clouds.' He said: 'I choose the black cloud, for it is the cloud richest in water.' Then a voice called out to him: 'You have chosen ashes, dense and dark, that will leave not a single one of the 'Ād alive.'⁶

By embedding the drought narrative within this diplomatic and moralistic framework, this report moves beyond the simple theme of divine punishment for disbelief. The motif of the delegation introduces questions of leadership, moral corruption and political responsibility: the emissaries' negligence, indulgence and refusal to heed prophetic guidance symbolise the collapse of both spiritual integrity and collective governance. The natural calamity thus becomes not only a theological warning but also a political allegory about the failure of a ruling elite whose moral decay hastens communal ruin. The chief envoy's fatal choice of the

⁶ This and all following translations from al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh* are my own.

black cloud further reinforces this theme: it may be read as a metaphor for failed discernment and misguided leadership, an error that seals the people's fate.

A contrasting use of the drought trope appears in al-Ṭabarī's account of the *ʿĀm al-Ramāda* ('Year of the Ashes') that took place during the caliphate of 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 13–23/634–44). Here, drought again functions as a sign of divine punishment, but in contrast to the previous narrative it does not entail any critique of political leadership. On the contrary, it becomes an occasion to exalt the figure of the caliph. The chapter opens with the statement that in the year 18/639 'a severe famine (*muǧāʿa*) struck the people, accompanied by dearth (*lazba*), drought (*jadūb*) and extreme aridity (*qaḥūṭ*)' (al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 4:96). Immediately afterwards, al-Ṭabarī reports a series of episodes concerning several people who had transgressed by drinking wine. 'Umar reacts with firmness yet also with mercy: he orders their punishment while sending them letters of consolation that recall God's forgiveness and compassion. One of these reports contains a key passage:

وحد القوم، وندموا على لجاجتهم، وقال: ليحدثن فيكم يا أهل الشام حادث،

فحدثت الرمادة. (al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 4:96–97)

The people were humbled and repented of their obstinacy. Then 'Umar said: 'O people of Syria, a calamity shall befall you!' Thereupon the calamity of ash (*al-ramāda*) occurred.

The subsequent narrative focuses on 'Umar's exemplary response to the calamity. Faced with his people's suffering, he swore that he would not taste butter, milk or meat until the earth was once again verdant after the first rains. When relief finally came:

فقدمت السوق عكة من سمن ووطب من لبن، فاشترأها غلام لعمر بأربعين، ثم

أتى عمر، فقال: يا أمير المؤمنين، قد أبر الله يمينك، وعظم أجرك، قدم السوق

وطب من لبن وعكة من سمن، فابتعتها بأربعين، فقال عمر: أغليت بهما،

فتصدق بهما، فإني أكره أن أكل إسرافا وقال عمر: كيف يعنيني شأن الرعية إذا

لم يمسسني ما مسهم! (al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 4:98)

A skinful of butter and a skinful of milk were brought to the market, and a servant of 'Umar bought them for forty dirhams. He then came to 'Umar and said, 'Commander of the Faithful, may God honour your oath and increase your reward. A skinful of butter and a skinful of milk were brought to the market, and I bought them for forty [dirhams].' 'Umar replied, 'You overpaid; give them in alms, for I dislike extravagance in my food.' He added, 'How can I care for the affairs of the people if what afflicts them does not touch me?'

In this account, therefore, drought is not portrayed as a punishment sealing the community's eschatological fate, but rather as a moral trial and an occasion for redemption. It provides the

narrative setting in which ‘Umar emerges as the embodiment of the *imām ‘ādil*, the ‘just ruler’ whose virtue, compassion and solidarity with his subjects reaffirm both the moral and political legitimacy of his authority.

A very different connotation of drought appears in al-Ṭabarī’s account of the events in Khurāsān under the Umayyad governor al-Junayd b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, during the years 115–16/733–35. Al-Ṭabarī reports that ‘the people of Khurāsān were afflicted by a severe drought (*qaḥṭ shadīd*) and famine (*mujā‘a*)’ (al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 7:92). Al-Junayd addressed the crisis in a letter to the rural districts, lamenting that

إِنْ مَرَوْ كَانَتْ أَمْنَةٌ مُطْمَئِنَّةٌ يَأْتِيهَا رِزْقُهَا رَغَدًا مِنْ كُلِّ مَكَانٍ، فَكَفَرْتُ بِأَنْعَمِ
اللَّهِ، فَاحْمِلُوا إِلَيْهَا الطَّعَامَ. (al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 7:92)

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Marw was once secure and at peace, its sustenance arriving abundantly from every direction, but it became ungrateful for God’s blessings; therefore, bring food to it!

Al-Ṭabarī further notes the following report:

أَعْطَى الْجَنِيدُ فِي هَذِهِ السَّنَةِ رَجُلًا دِرْهَمًا، فَاشْتَرَى بِهِ رَغِيفًا، فَقَالَ لَهُمْ: تَشْكُونُ
الْجُوعَ وَرَغِيفٌ بِدِرْهَمٍ! لَقَدْ رَأَيْتَنِي بِالْهِنْدِ وَإِنَّ الْحَبَّةَ مِنَ الْحَبُوبِ لَتَبَاعُ عِدْدًا
بِالدِّرْهَمِ، وَقَالَ: إِنْ مَرَوْ كَمَا قَالَ اللَّهُ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ: "وَضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا قَرْيَةً كَانَتْ
أَمْنَةً مُطْمَئِنَّةً". (al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 7:92)

In this year, al-Junayd gave a man a dirham, with which he purchased a loaf of bread. He remarked to them: ‘You complain of hunger, yet a single loaf costs only a dirham! When I was in India, a single grain of cereal would be sold by the piece for a dirham!’ He continued: ‘Marw is as God has described: “And God sets forth the parable of a city that was secure and at peace [Q 16:112].”’

This episode portrays al-Junayd as a governor interpreting the calamity through a moral and theological lens. His invocation of the Qur’anic verse frames drought as a manifestation of divine justice, reading the crisis as a sign of the community’s ingratitude and moral decline. Immediately following the account of the famine, al-Ṭabarī reports that al-Junayd fell ill and died—a transition from collective calamity to individual affliction that foreshadows the wider collapse of order.

The juxtaposition of al-Junayd’s death with the turbulent succession of ‘Āṣim b. ‘Abdallāh al-Hilālī also invites a broader reflection on the instability of Umayyad authority in Khurāsān: ‘Āṣim imprisons and tortures al-Junayd’s officials, while the rebellion of al-Ḥārith b. Surayj erupts almost simultaneously. Here, one also observes a narrative movement of amplification: the account expands into an extended war narrative, in which ‘Āṣim and al-Ḥārith embody opposing poles: weakened state authority and social contestation rising up against it. Through this progression, al-Ṭabarī constructs a subtle continuum, according to

which moral decay and social unrest evolve seamlessly from natural disaster into political rebellion (see al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 7:93–98). The drought and subsequent famine thus mark the beginning of a process of divine retribution that culminates in the disintegration of Umayyad legitimacy—a dramatic contrast to the *‘Ām al-Ramāda* narrative, in which the same natural calamity instead confirmed the moral perfection of the ruler.

A final and explicitly political reworking of the drought motif appears in al-Ṭabarī's account of the events of the year 145/762–3, at a time when the Abbasid state, barely a decade after overthrowing the Umayyads, was still striving to consolidate its authority against rival branches of the Prophet's family. That year witnessed, significantly, the revolt of the ‘Alid Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ḥasan, known as *al-naḥs al-zakiyya*, in Medina, and, shortly after, that of his brother Ibrāhīm in Basra.

The reference to drought occurs in the correspondence between the Abbasid caliph Abū Ja‘far al-Manṣūr (r. 136–58/754–75) and Muḥammad. In a long letter to the ‘Alid claimant, al-Manṣūr denies the legitimacy of Muḥammad's call to the imamate and argues that divine favour had already been manifested toward the line of al-‘Abbās. To substantiate his claim, he recalls the well-known episode of *istiṣqā’ al-‘Abbās* (‘the prayer for rain through al-‘Abbās’):

لقد قحط أهل المدينة فلم يتوسل عمر إلى ربه ولم يتقرب إليه إلا بأبينا، حتى
نعشهم الله وسقاهم الغيث، وأبوك حاضر لم يتوسل به، ولقد علمت أنه لم يبق
أحد من بني عبد المطلب بعد النبي صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ غيره، فكان وراثته من
عمومته، ثم طلب هذا الأمر غير واحد من بني هاشم فلم ينله إلا ولده، فالسقاية
سقايته وميراث النبي له، والخلافة في ولده، فلم يبق شرف ولا فضل في جاهلية
ولا إسلام في دنيا ولا آخرة إلا والعباس وراثته ومورثه. (al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 7:571)

When the people of Medina were afflicted by drought (*qaḥṭ*), ‘Umar did not seek nearness to his Lord or intercede with Him through anyone but our forefather. God then revived the people and sent them rain. Yet your father was present, and he did not make intercession through him. You know well that no one from among the sons of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib remained after the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) except al-‘Abbās. Thus, among the Prophet's uncles, he was his heir. Thereafter, several of the Banū Hāshim sought this position, but none attained it except his offspring. The the office of water supplier [to Meccan pilgrims] (*siqāya*) is his, as is the Prophet's inheritance, and the caliphate resides in his descendants. No honour or distinction, whether in the Jāhiliyya or in Islam, in this world or the next, remains but that al-‘Abbās is both its heir (*wārith*) and its bequeather (*mūrith*).

This recollection of a communal calamity becomes, in al-Manṣūr's rhetoric, a proof of divine election: the ability to mediate between Heaven and Earth is presented as a hereditary sign

of God's approval, transferred from the Prophet to his uncle al-'Abbās and, by extension, to his descendants. Within this framework, drought no longer functions as a punishment or a test but as a political metaphor, its cessation serving as tangible evidence of rightful rule. The episode thus exemplifies the new political theology of the early Abbasid age, in which divine favour and worldly authority were rhetorically intertwined to affirm the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty.

3.2. References to Plague and Pestilence

Just as with drought, plagues and pestilences in al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh* serve multiple functions, ranging from divine punishment for sin to tests of communal virtue, instruments of political legitimation, or triggers for ritual and ethical reform. In what follows, I examine selected examples among the many occurrences of *ta'ūn* and *wabā'*, beginning with the account of David, which illustrates both the moral and the providential dimensions of epidemic misfortune.

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In al-Ṭabarī's narrative, which is based mostly on Jewish traditions,⁷ during the reign of David, a violent plague strikes the people. This calamity emerges as the culmination of a chain of divine trials that is set in motion by the king's own plea to be tested like the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The sequence unfolds in two tightly connected stages. First comes David's personal transgression in the episode of Uriah's wife, in which he succumbs to desire and abuses his authority, ultimately orchestrating Uriah's death in battle so that he can marry her himself. Subsequently, David experiences a period of intense penitence. Understanding that he was being tested, he falls to the ground in prostration and weeps, remaining in this state for forty days, until God forgives him. The second stage concerns the rebellion of David's son Absalom. While David was occupied with atoning for his sin, and was disdained by the Israelites, Absalom called upon them to acknowledge him as ruler instead. David sent one of his captains with explicit orders to capture Absalom alive and treat him with care. Absalom fled, and during his flight his luxuriant hair became entangled in the branches of a tree, leaving him immobilised and enabling the captain to overtake and kill him, in direct contravention of David's instructions. David was greatly saddened by his son's death and felt deep resentment toward the captain responsible. At this point, al-Ṭabarī states that:

وَأَصَابَ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ فِي زَمَانِهِ طَاعُونٌ جَارِفٌ، فَخَرَجَ بِهِمْ إِلَى مَوْضِعِ بَيْتِ الْمَقْدِسِ
يَدْعُونَ اللَّهَ وَيَسْأَلُونَهُ كَشْفَ ذَلِكَ الْبَلَاءِ عَنْهُمْ، فَاسْتَجِيبَ لَهُمْ، فَأَخَذُوا ذَلِكَ
الْمَوْضِعَ مَسْجِدًا.

(al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 1:484)

During the time of Dāwūd (David), a devastating plague (*tā'ūn jārif*) afflicted the Children of Israel. He led them to the site of *Bayt al-Maqdis* (the Holy House), where they supplicated God and implored Him to lift that affliction

⁷ See the insightful analyses of al-Ṭabarī's sources, particularly regarding the episode of David and Bathsheba, in JOHNS 1989 and POORTHIUS 2018.

(*balāʾ*) from them. Their prayer was granted, and they consecrated that site as a place of worship (*masjid*).

Here, the plague functions as a collective and morally edifying trial. While tragic, it allows David to exercise his role as intercessor and spiritual guide, reinforcing communal cohesion and devotion. In this sense, the epidemic is not simply a punishment but a mechanism through which divine providence educates both the ruler and his people, teaching lessons about prayer, repentance and moral responsibility. Al-Ṭabarī further explains that (according to the *ahl al-kitāb*) the episode of David's prayer at the site of the future Temple of Jerusalem occurred 'after Dāwūd had reigned for eleven years, yet he died before completing its construction. He bequeathed to Sulaymān (Solomon) the task of finishing it, as well as that of executing the commander who had slain his brother' (al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 1:484–85).

However, he also reports another account with a different explanation for why David did not build the Temple. According to this version, David committed a second transgression: undertaking a census of the Israelites. Seeking to know their number, he sent appraisers and chiefs to conduct a count. God is angered by this action, and reminds David of the promise made to Abraham that his descendants would be uncountable. He offers three possible punishments: famine for three years, conquest by enemies for three months, or (collective) death for three days. The Israelites opt for the latter, resulting in heavy loss of life. Again, David intercedes and prays on behalf of the people, taking responsibility for the calamity, and God relents. However, God forbids David from building the Temple, declaring that his hands were stained with blood and that this sacred task would instead be fulfilled by his son Solomon. This second calamity reinforces the connection between divine authority, moral order and political responsibility. While confirming David's role as intercessor, the narrative stresses that the establishment of sacred institutions relies on the ruler's adherence to divine principles, making the wellbeing of the community inseparable from the ethical conduct of its leader.

This is a theme that will later reappear in al-Ṭabarī's portrayal of 'Umar's exemplary conduct during the plague of 'Amwās. In this account, as in the episode of the *ʿĀm al-Ramāda* discussed above, al-Ṭabarī highlights a different dimension of leadership, focusing on the moral integrity and wisdom of Caliph 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. This famous episode provides a paradigmatic example of how al-Ṭabarī integrates ethical reflection and political ideology within his historiographical narrative. Calamity functions here as a testing ground for leadership. When 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb travels to Syria and learns that the region is afflicted by plague, his response is a model of prudence grounded in both rational deliberation and religious awareness.

Al-Ṭabarī emphasises 'Umar's consultative method: the caliph gathers the early *muhājirūn*, the *anṣār*, and the Qurashī veterans of the conquest (*muhājirat al-fath*), asking each group's opinion before reaching a decision, a process that highlights his political wisdom and sense of collective responsibility. The key turning point comes when, after hearing divergent opinions, 'Umar decides to return to Medina. Confronted by Abū 'Ubayda's objection—'Are you fleeing from God's decree (*qadar Allāh*)?'—'Umar replies: 'Yes, I am fleeing from God's decree to God's decree (*min qadar Allāh ilā qadar Allāh*)' (al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 4:57), explaining that his prudent action itself falls within the scope of divine order. This statement encapsulates a crucial theological principle: reliance on God (*tawakkul*) does not

exclude the human responsibility to choose (*ikhtiyār*) correctly. The arrival on the scene of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Awf, who recalls the Prophet’s saying, ‘When you hear of a pestilence in a land, do not go there; and if it breaks out where you are, do not flee from it’ (al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 4:58), confirms ‘Umar’s judgment and transforms his political prudence into conformity with divine will, and, remarkably, the primacy of God’s decree appears closely tied to eminently practical purposes. Despite the presumed theological denial of contagion, these include the prudent avoidance of danger (by not entering the infected area) and the containment of the epidemic (by not leaving the area, or at least by preventing large-scale migrations that might have led to the sudden depopulation of entire productive districts), as Simon Pierre suggests (PIERRE 2023, 255). Thus, a Prophetic *ḥadīth* retrospectively validates ‘Umar decision. The caliph, on the strength of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s tradition, decided to return to Medina. The narration thereby aligns the caliph’s reasoned governance with Prophetic precedent and consolidates his portrayal as an exemplar of the *imām ‘ādil*, as already emphasised in the account of the *‘Ām al-Ramāda*.

In stark contrast to ‘Umar’s exemplary conduct during the plague of ‘Amwās, which affirmed his legitimate leadership, al-Ṭabarī also records episodes in which epidemic misfortune exposes the hubris and moral corruption of rulers. In these narratives, the plague becomes a vehicle of divine retribution and a narrative instrument of political critique. A striking example is found in the account of Ziyād b. Abī Sufyān’s death during the plague of 53/673.

After consolidating his power over Iraq, Ziyād writes to the caliph Mu‘āwiya (r. 41–60/661–80) requesting authority over the Ḥijāz. He states:

قَدْ ضَبَطْتُ لَكَ الْعِرَاقَ بِشِمَالِي وَيَمِينِي فَارِعَّةً، فَاشْغَلْهَا بِالْحِجَازِ.
(al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 5:289)

I have secured Iraq for you with my left hand while my right hand is free, so occupy it with the Ḥijāz.

This image, both audacious and revealing, encapsulates Ziyād’s unrestrained ambition and thirst for domination. Mu‘āwiya’s acquiescence to this request provokes deep resentment among the Ḥijāzī, who fear the extension of Ziyād’s cruel rule and implore ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Umar to intercede. Ibn ‘Umar prays that God spare the Ḥijāz from Ziyād’s authority, and soon after, the governor is struck by plague.

Al-Ṭabarī’s narrative here is structured with a clear sense of moral causality. The plague is presented as a divine response to injustice and excessive ambition—an act of providential intervention protecting the people from tyranny. The detail that the infection begins in Ziyād’s hand, the very emblem of his grasping attempts to seize power, reinforces this symbolic reading: the same ‘hand’ he claimed to use to seize Iraq becomes the site of divine punishment. Furthermore, when Ziyād seeks medical treatment, the judge Shurayḥ advises him against amputation, warning that one cannot escape what God has decreed. His words articulate acceptance of the divine decree, framing the plague as an inescapable punishment rather than a curable disease. Ziyād’s subsequent refusal of medical care thus appears as the narrative fulfillment of divine will. His death confirms both the efficacy of Ibn ‘Umar’s prayer and the ineluctability of God’s judgment.

In this account, al-Ṭabarī thus repurposes the motif of plague as a mirror of political morality. Whereas in the episode of 'Amwās the epidemic tests and vindicates the just ruler, here it annihilates the unjust one. Yet not all plague accounts in the *Tārīkh* revolve around rulers or caliphs. In some cases, epidemic events intervene at a different level of the political and religious spectrum, reshaping the balance of power within dissident movements and alternative forms of leadership. A telling example of this occurs in the account of the plague that struck during the Khārijī uprisings, during which the death of Sa'īd b. Bahdal created a power vacuum that was subsequently filled by al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Qays al-Shaybānī. Here again, the epidemic operates as a catalyst of historical change, not through divine punishment of tyranny, as in the case of Ziyād b. Abī Sufyān, but rather through the providential reconfiguration of authority within a rebellious community. Al-Ṭabarī situates the episode in 127/744–5, at the height of the late Umayyad turmoil. He recounts how Sa'īd b. Bahdal, a Khārijī leader active in the Jazīra, succumbs to plague while marching toward Iraq, leaving his followers leaderless. His sudden death, followed by the immediate rise of al-Ḍaḥḥāk, creates a sequence that subtly evokes divine selection: the plague removes a secondary figure to make room for a more capable and charismatic successor. Al-Ṭabarī does not comment explicitly on this theological dimension, but the narrative progression itself suggests a form of providential intervention.

The accounts reported by al-Ṭabarī that describe the Khārijīs' regrouping after Sa'īd's death verge on the epic, emphasising the movement's rapid expansion and its remarkable power of attraction:

قال: واجتمع مع الضحاك نحو من الف ثم توجه إلى الكوفة، ومر بأرض الموصل، فاتبعه منها ومن أهل الجزيرة نحو من ثلاثة آلاف [...] وأما أبو عبيدة معمر بن المثنى، فإنه قال: حدثني أبو سعيد، قال: لما مات سعيد بن بهدل المري، وبايعت الشرا للضحاك، أقام بشهر زور وثابت إليه الصفرية من كل وجه حتى صار في أربعة آلاف، فلم يجتمع مثلهم لخارجي قط قبله.

(al-ṬABARĪ n.d., VII:317–18)

Around a thousand men joined al-Ḍaḥḥāk, and he marched toward Kufa. He passed through the territory of Mosul, and approximately three thousand men from there and from the forces of the Jazīra followed him [...] Another account, transmitted by Abū 'Ubayda Ma'mar b. al-Muthannā from Abū Sa'īd, states: 'When Sa'īd b. Bahdal al-Murrī died, and the Khārijīs pledged allegiance to al-Ḍaḥḥāk as their leader, he remained at Shahrāzūr. The Sufriyya came to him from every direction, until their number reached some four thousand. No comparable gathering had ever assembled under any Khārijī leader before him.'

Al-Ṭabarī's portrayal thus oscillates between an analytical account and an awe-inspiring depiction of the forces that destabilised the late Umayyad order. The plague functions as a

narrative hinge, simultaneously dissolving an old leadership and legitimising a new one. In this sense, the epidemic does not merely devastate, it selects: it marks the passage from chaos to consolidation, from the death of Saʿīd to the charismatic ascendancy of al-Ḍaḥḥāk. Yet the providential elevation of this figure is short-lived. Having seized Kufa and the Sawād, and even besieged ʿAbdallāh b. ʿUmar at Wāsiṭ, al-Ḍaḥḥāk is ultimately defeated and killed in the decisive battle of Ghazz by Marwān b. Muḥammad's forces, along with most of his loyal followers. His brief rule ends as abruptly as it began. Al-Ṭabarī closes the account without moral commentary, but the narrative progression—from the plague that enables al-Ḍaḥḥāk's rise to his eventual defeat—implicitly portrays the apparent restoration of a political order already on the verge of collapse.

4. Post-Umayyad References to Plague and Pestilence

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As Lawrence Conrad has noted, al-Ṭabarī records numerous epidemics of plague (*ṭaʿūn*) during the Umayyad period, but after 132/750, despite reporting several outbreaks of *wabāʾ*, there is no further mention of *ṭaʿūn* until the reign of al-Muqtadir (r. 295-320/908-32), when plague struck Baghdad in 301/913-14 (CONRAD 1981, 289-90). The Abbasid regime, it seems, came to regard this apparent absence of the devastating disease as a sign of divine election and favour. As Conrad further remarks, in a statement preserved in the later chronicle *al-Nujūm al-zāhira* by Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 815/1412), the historian al-Madāʾinī (d. 228/843) claims that the *ṭaʿūn* dissipated with the establishment of the Abbasid caliphate (CONRAD 1981, 288). Conrad adds:

This author is also one of our sources for an anecdote according to which an ʿAbbāsīd representative tells the people that they should praise God for lifting the *ṭaʿūn* from them now that the ʿAbbāsīds are in power; to this, one brave soul replies, 'God is too just to unite you and the *ṭaʿūn* in alliance against us'! (CONRAD 1981, 288)

This anecdote is particularly revealing, as it illustrates both the political instrumentalisation of catastrophe by those in power and the popular resistance to such ideological appropriation, expressed here through biting sarcasm. As Conrad points out, Ibn ʿAsākir (d. 571/1176) offers the most detailed version of the story in his *Tārīkh al-kabīr*, placing it in the very early days following the Abbasid victory and identifying the 'brave soul' whose insolence cost him his life as Manṣūr b. Jaʿwāna al-ʿĀmirī (CONRAD 1981, 54 n. 2). Conrad further observes that this irreverent anecdote does not appear in any 'source predating the sharp decline of Abbasid political power in the fourth/tenth century'. Al-Ṭabarī himself makes no mention of it; instead, he refers briefly to the death of Manṣūr b. Jaʿwāna al-ʿĀmirī, noting that in 137/754-5, while staying at al-Raqqā, the caliph al-Manṣūr had him brought before him and executed. According to Conrad:

Such a presentation may reflect an attempt to suppress a current anecdote based on a core of fact and embellished by an emerging dissatisfaction with the failure of the ʿAbbāsīd daʿwa to fulfill its messianic mission. It would not have been until later times, when the anecdote does in fact appear, that a prudent scholar could have given its public exposure. (CONRAD 1981, 54 n. 2)

Indeed, the story resurfaces in several later sources,⁸ including Mamluk-era plague treatises such as Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī's (d. 852/1449) famous *Badhl al-māʿūn fī faḍl al-ṭaʿūn* ('Offering Aid on the Merits of the Plague,' IBN HAJAR AL-ASQALANI 2023, 210).⁹

5. Conclusions

Through the selected examples discussed in this paper, al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* emerges as a privileged site for observing how natural catastrophes were embedded within a complex web of religious, moral and political meanings. Far from being neutral descriptions of natural phenomena, these accounts function as discursive spaces in which divine causality and human responsibility are continually negotiated and redefined. Each narrative, while framed within the theological premises of divine omnipotence and justice, also reflects a situated moral and political stance, revealing how calamity could be made to speak both to universal eschatological concerns and to the contingencies of historical time.

What these cases collectively demonstrate is the remarkable flexibility of the disaster motif as a narrative and hermeneutical device. In the story of the people of ʿĀd, drought operates as a divine punishment for unbelievers but also as a moral allegory of failed leadership and communal negligence. In the narrative of David, the plague functions not so much as punishment but as a collective trial and as a mechanism through which divine providence educates the king and his community. In the episodes of the *ʿĀm al-Ramāda* and the plague of ʿAmwās, drought and plague instead become a test of virtue and a stage upon which ʿUmar embodies the ideal of the *imām ʿādil*, the just ruler: he mirrors divine mercy through his compassion and self-restraint in the first episode, and wise governance reflecting Prophetic guidance in the second, where the caliph's decision not to enter Syria is portrayed as both rationally and religiously correct.

By contrast, in the story of Ziyād b. Abī Sufyān, the plague becomes an instrument of divine retribution. His arrogance and his ambition to rule both Iraq and the Ḥijāz mark him as a transgressor of divine will; his death by plague is thus read as a providential act of moral and political correction. As for the Khārijī narrative, the plague that kills Saʿīd b. Bahdal opens the way for the rise of al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Qays al-Shaybānī. Here the epidemic does not punish tyranny but reshapes authority within a rebellious movement, selecting a stronger and more charismatic leader, thus taking shape as a process of divine selection rather than destruction. Under the Umayyad governor al-Junayd, drought once more signifies divine disfavour intertwined with political decay, prefiguring social unrest and the erosion of dynastic legitimacy. In al-Manṣūr's letter to Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya, in contrast, the cessation of drought is rhetorically transformed into a sign of divine approval, grounding Abbasid power in a theology of providential election.

This multiplicity of meanings and functions ascribed to natural disasters first and foremost testifies to the richness and plurality of Islamic thought: to the wide range of

⁸ See the list in CONRAD 1981, 288 n. 72.

⁹ These later texts—particularly the Mamluk historiography that reinterprets earlier Abbasid motifs of plague, politics and divine justice—will be the focus of my final article for the PRIN project.

interpretations, sensibilities and narrative strategies that together contributed to shaping what would later be called the *turāth*. Al-Ṭabarī, who as a historian transmitted an extraordinary number of earlier reports, reflects this diversity both in the sources he reproduces and in the complex narrative constructions in which he places them. Such diversity, however, does not preclude the possibility of discerning his own intellectual and moral outlook. Even when he does not explicitly express his opinion on the many variant traditions he transmits, the way in which these are introduced, selected, organised and interwoven reveals much about his underlying vision and interpretive stance, as I have sought to demonstrate in the analysis of the passages discussed above. What emerges is a coherent moral and theological framework in which natural catastrophes are consistently inscribed within a universe governed by divine justice and providence, as well as a precise ideal of political leadership, one that integrates ethical responsibility, sound judgement and alignment with Prophetic guidance. Within this framework, the moral health of the people and the integrity of their leadership appear mutually dependent, each reflecting and reinforcing the other. In this sense, natural disasters do not merely punctuate the narrative as isolated events, they function as both mirrors and instruments of history: mirrors, in that they reflect the moral and political state of the community; and instruments, in that their interpretation can legitimise authority, justify rebellion, or mark the turning points of dynastic change.

Indeed, such turning points were often accompanied—or even precipitated—by natural catastrophes. As we have seen, these disasters played a crucial role in moments of political transition, from the delegitimisation of Umayyad power and the rise of the Abbasids to the later crises that reshaped the Islamic world. The fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in 656/1258 and the establishment of the Mamluk dynasty in 647/1250, followed by the tragedy of the Black Death in 749/1348, likewise attest to the continuing use of disaster as a moral and political idiom. These later examples, which will be addressed in my final contribution to the PRIN project, will offer a broader understanding of how the interpretation of calamity evolved across different epochs while preserving its foundational role as a privileged site of negotiation between divine providence and human history, as exemplified by al-Ṭabarī's historical vision. In this sense, al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh* not only reflects a mature synthesis of theology, morality and historiography, but also provides a paradigmatic framework with which subsequent Islamic authors engaged in order to continue making sense of natural catastrophes.

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The Mythological Control of the River Nile: A Study on the Islamic Sources

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Abstract

‘Hail to thee, O Nile, who came out of the earth, who came to make Egypt live!’ Thus reads the preamble of an ancient hymn dedicated to the god Hapi, the embodiment of the fertility of the flooding of the River Nile (to be distinguished from a personification of the river itself), probably recited by a member of the ancient Egyptian priesthood. From the earliest times, the Nile’s annual floods were of great importance to the wealth of this land. Following the Arab conquests and the advent of Islamic rule, Egypt and the Nile again found themselves inseparably linked, now in terms of their economic and military strategic importance to the confrontation with the Christian world in the era of the Crusades.

This study aims to identify and explore Islamic sources dating from between the fourth/tenth and eighth/fourteenth centuries that related to periods of drought and created or favoured the avowal of the idea that Ethiopia, geographically and/or politically, was involved in this process. What tradition, or set of traditions, lies at the basis of this belief in Ethiopia’s singular power? Can Ethiopia give life or death to Egypt by either causing excessive floods or prolonged periods of drought?

However, despite the fact that this narrative continued to circulate in Europe until the end of the tenth/sixteenth century, for obvious military and strategic reasons, the situation seems to have been different in the Islamic sources. For example, by the eighth/fourteenth-century al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) no longer seemed to pay attention to such ideas.

Keywords: Nile, drought, Islamic Egypt, Nubia-Ethiopia, Prester John

Introduction: The Nile and Its Geography

When Leo Africanus (d. 961/1554, originally called al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Wazzān al-Fāṣī) completed his *Cosmographia et Geographia de Affrica* in 1526 (for a translation, see LEO AFRICANUS 2023), which was later published in 1550 by G. Battista Ramusio as *Descrittione dell’Africa*, his descriptions of Egypt, the River Nile and Nubia reports nothing about fears relating to control of the waters of the great river by any Christian ruler. Leo Africanus, who spent much of his life as a diplomat, was born in Granada, but moved to Fez with his family, where he trained at Qarawiyyīn University, after which he travelled to the Songhai Empire, Constantinople and Cairo, and then, following a kidnapping by Spanish pirates, resided in Rome and other parts of Italy for over ten years, between 1518 and 1527.

Although Leo Africanus does mention Prester John in his description of Nubia (LEO AFRICANUS 2023, 388),¹ as well as Egypt and its great river (LEO AFRICANUS 2023, 441–43), he says nothing about the narrative of the power of the rulers of Ethiopia to control the Nile's waters, although he must certainly have been aware of such stories. The 'Great Nile' is described on the basis of information that Leo Africanus derives from older sources. He mentions al-Mas'ūdī (d. 956/1550), as well as the idea that:

Every year, the Nile floods Egypt beginning from 17 June, rising continually for forty days, before receding for another forty days. For they say that in Upper Ethiopia there are astonishing downpours at the beginning of May, but the currents of the river coming into Egypt slow down through May and into June. (LEO AFRICANUS 2023, 442)

This clearly attests a distinction between the rainy and dry seasons that affected Ethiopia, and describes them as mainly responsible for Egypt's annual inundation. Here, the scientific assumption that the rise and fall of the Nile river during the solar year was related to the rainy season that affected Ethiopia, seems evident. The answer to the question, however, of where the Nile originates remains more complex.

Throughout the early Islamic era, Ptolemy's *Geōgraphikē hyphēgēsis* ('Guide to Geography') had remained the undisputed palimpsest for geographical treatises such as al-Khawārizmī's (d. 217/833) *Kitāb Šūrat al-arḍ*, al-Mas'ūdī's (d. c. 345/956) *Kitāb al-Tanbīh wa-l-ishrāf*, and Iṣṭakhrī's (d. 346/957) and al-Bakrī's (d. 487/1094) *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-mamālik*, as well as al-Idrīsī's (d. 560/1165) famous *Kitāb Nuzhat al-mushtāq fī ikhtirāq al-āfāq*, best known as the *Tabula Rogeriana* (DUCENE 2021, 74–90; PINTO 2016, 105ff.). In these and other works, the *jabal al-qamar*, the Mountains of the Moon, is identified as the source of the Nile and is located in the southern board of the African continent. The anonymous fifth/eleventh century *Kitāb Gharā'ib al-funūn wa-mulāḥ al-ʿuyūn* ('The Book of Curiosities of the Sciences and Marvels of the Eyes') explains that from each of its two sides flowed five streams which 'then empties into two marshes, and from the two marshes into one large marsh at the equator' (RAPOPORT and SAVAGE-SMITH 2013, 494–95).²

More clearly, al-Idrīsī located the large lake from which he says the Nile originates close to the town of Tarfī, and says that from there the Nile al-Sūdān flows to the west all the way to the Atlantic Ocean, and the Egyptian Nile to the Mediterranean (*al-Baḥr al-Mutawassit*; IDRĪSĪ 1896, 27ff.).³ The latter, pouring into the Nubian country from the Saharan region (*bilād al-Nūba min al-Sūdān*) encounters a tributary from the right (*nahr hārūd yamin al-Nīl*) that flows from the Abyssinian land of the Sudan (*arḍ al-Ḥabasha min al-Sūdān*) into the Nile at the Island of Ilāq and under the town of Rasūla (MILLER 1928, fols 18b–19a, 22b–23a Bodleian Library MS Pococke 375).⁴ Al-Idrīsī, along with many other Arab geographers,

¹ 'The Tribe, near the borders of Suakin, speaks a mixed tongue which the author judges to be Chaldean, for it sounds similar to the language of Suakin and Upper Ethiopia, the land of Prester John.'

² The relevant map can be found in Fol. 42a of the Bodleian Library MS. Arab c. 90.

³ The relevant maps are: fols 18 b–19 a (for which see fig. 1), 22b–23 a, 10b–11a, 12b–13a, and 15b–16a of the Bodleian Library MS. Arab c. 90.

⁴ The Arabic term *al-Sūdān* referred indiscriminately to Saharan Africa.

concerned himself with the Nile but did not appear to have gone beyond a general correlation between the river, in particular its right hand tributary, and Ḥabasha, the traditional Arabic identification of the Kingdom of Aksum.

The idea that there were more Niles, in addition to that of Egypt, that of Sūdān (or Ghana) and that of Mogadishū (the Webi Shebelle) is confirmed by different authors, and this reflects the fact that these geographers were working with the limited information of their time (LEVITZION 2000, 71–76).



Fig. 1: Map of the Nile from al-Idrīsī's *Kitāb Nuzhat al-mushtāq fī iktirāq al-āfāq*, Bodleian Library MS. Arab c. 90, Fol. 18 b-19 a.

Even Leo Africanus, writing in the tenth/sixteenth century, cannot be of much help to us:

There are many opinions on where the Nile begins: some say in the Mountains of the Moon, others from many large springs, each far from the others, in the desert plains at the foot of these mountains. [...] However, Ethiopian merchants doing business in Dongola say that towards the south the river opens into a lake, making it difficult to know where it comes from. (LEO AFRICANUS 2023, 442)

It is difficult to know whether Leo, in mentioning these Ethiopian merchants, was referring to Lake Tana where the Blue Nile originates or other lakes.

Although the 'Blue' Nile, as an important geographical identifier of the Ethiopian civilisation, has been recognised since antiquity, the actual name the river was known by remained confused: the 'Takkaze' has been identified as the 'Blue Nile' ever since the time of Emperor Ezana (the fourth-century ruler of Ḥabash who converted to Christianity), in

relation to his battles against different ethnic groups, and stories are told of his carrying out an attack against the Kasu at the point where the Takkaze converges with the *Sida* (Seda), the ancient ‘Ethiopian’ term for the White Nile, in other words at the joining of the two rivers (SMIDT 2010, 1178; PANKHURST 1967, 6). It was also known as the ‘Gihon instead, flowing around the whole of Ethiopia’, as reported in Genesis 2:13, and was considered one of the four rivers of Eden, a Biblical association that allowed Ethiopia to be identified with the land of Kush and Midian.⁵ Finally, ever since the *Historia Naturalis* of Pliny the Elder (c. 77–78 AD), Ethiopia was associated with the Nile:

The river Nigro has the same nature as the Nile: [it] produces the Calamus, the papyrus, the same animals and grows at the same time. (PLINY THE ELDER 1560, 5:VIII, 120)

It is thus clear that, in addition to being connected by concrete geographical-scientific ideas surrounding the annual inundation, the Nile and Ethiopia are connected by various myths and stories that have been in circulation since ancient times. However, although the association between the Nile and Ethiopia seems initially to be interesting, the idea that the latter had actual power to control the river’s floods is clearly not automatic.

Abyssinia in the Pre-Islamic Tradition and Post-Islamic *akhbār*

The above analysis therefore needs to be contextualised in terms of the wider historical relationship between Islam and Ethiopia, but with particular attention to Egypt, and to when during the Islamic era the correlation between the flood cycle of the River Nile and Egyptian famines would have led to a focus on the role of actors geographically settled closer to the Nile’s origin in controlling the flow of its waters. This preliminary idea must consider two types of approach: the historical, which we will deal with in depth, and the apocalyptic, to which we will give only brief attention.

The apocalyptic approach will be addressed first, as it informs the complexities of the relationship between Ethiopia/Axum and the early Islamic community, and because even if this cannot be treated in detail here, the various different narratives make this subject particularly interesting (GUILLAUME 1955, 146ff.).⁶ The first such narrative can be found in the Qur’an, in *Sūrat al-Fīl*, and reads as follows:

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy, ¹Do you [Prophet] not see how your Lord dealt with the army of the elephant? ²Did He not utterly confound

⁵ A *ḥadīth* according to which ‘Saiḥānu (Oxus), Jaiḥānu (Jaxartes), al-Furānu (Euphrates) and the Nīl, [are] all among the rivers of Paradise’, is reported by Abū Hurayra in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (2839, bk 53, no. 30) and *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* (5610, bk 74, no. 36), both sources directly related to the presentation of the eschatological *visio* of Islam.

⁶ This relationship is clearly not univocally based on an apocalyptic scenario, on the contrary, the Christian ruler of Ethiopia’s friendly reception of the first believers on their fleeing Mecca is reported in early Islamic sources such as the *Sīra nabawīyya*, the biography of the Prophet.

their plans? ³He sent ranks of birds against them, ⁴pelting them with pellets of hard-baked clay: ⁵He made them [like] cropped stubble. (ABDEL HALEEM 2004, 437)

This sura pertains to a pre-Islamic narrative about Abraha, the Abyssinian ruler of Yemen, sending an expedition to Mecca with elephants in an attempt to destroy it, only to be foiled by God's intervention on the side of the Meccans (ROBIN 2018, 1313–76).

The second narrative is a 'mixed Sibylline tradition' (COOK 1997, 62) relating the appearance of the *dajjāl* (the Beast which will appear at the end of time) and the second coming of Jesus (ʿĪsā b. Maryam) will announce the destruction of all the urban areas of the *dār al-Islām*, in a scenario in which the enemies of Islam will re-conquer their previous territories before the End:

The destruction will begin at the edges of the lands, until is destroyed. Egypt is safe until Basra is destroyed, and the destruction of Basra is from 'Iraq, the destruction of Egypt is from the drying-up of the Nile, the destruction of Mecca is from the Ethiopians, the destruction of Madina is from famine, the destruction of the Yemen is from locust [...] (COOK 1997, 61–62)

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and:

The Ka'bah will be destroyed by the Dhū l-Suwayqatayn (the one with two lean legs) of Ethiopia,

while:

Egypt will be annihilated by the ceasing and the drying-up of the Nile. (COOK 1997, 62, n. 92)

The second quotation above is narrated by Abū Hurayra and reported in the *ḥadīth* collections of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and al-Nasāʿī (d. 303/915) respectively, while the third is from the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter.⁷ Apart from the role of the Ethiopians as 'apocalyptic destroyers' and the drying up of the Nile, however, there is no direct correlation between these narratives and actors, except that they both display an apocalyptic vision of Islamic traditions. Furthermore, if the first seems more clearly associated with the pre-Islamic Abyssinian tendency to dominate the south of the Arabian Peninsula in the sixth century CE, the second emphasises the more common calamity that Egypt, now under Islamic rule, could face in direct correlation with its main source of water and supply.

The *sunna* and the *Sīra nabawiyya* are two of the main sources that offer a wide overview of the monotheistic heritage and human correlation between the believers on both side of the Red Sea in the early Islamic era. In these, the relationship between Muḥammad and the early believers with the Negus of Ethiopia are usually associated with the events of the little Hijra (c. 614 CE), when they were accorded protection guaranteed by the Negus Najashi, Aṣ-ḥama b. Abjar (r. 614–30 CE) (GUILLAUME 1955, 143ff.) and protected against the Meccan's attempts to bring them back, as well as with the faithfully 'friendly' relations between the

⁷ See al-BUKHĀRĪ, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, bk 25, ḥ. 77, no. 1591; bk 25, ḥ. 82, no. 1596; al-NASĀʿĪ, *Sunan*, bk 24, ḥ. 287, no. 2904. Both accessed at Sunnah.com, 27 February 2025, see <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:1596>.

Prophet and the Negus, as the following Prophetic *ḥadīth* seems to suggest: ‘When the Negus died, the Prophet said: “Today a pious man has died. So get up and offer the funeral prayer for your brother Aṣḥama.”’⁸

According to the above traditions, then, the plurality of narratives concerning the preliminary relationship between ‘Muḥammad’s believers’ and Abyssinia does not show a predominance of counter-opposition, on the contrary, the ruler of Ethiopia demonstrated a peaceful and protective attitude towards the early community of believers. In this vein, another *khabar*, reported by Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam and al-Ṭabarī, reports that:

After the battle of the Ditch, ‘Amr proposed to some Qurayshīs that they should go to the Negus, because Muḥammad continued to grow in strength, and life would be better under the Negus than under him [...] It occurred to ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ that it would be advantageous for the Quraysh to have him killed. So, he asked the Negus to do this, after having offered him his presents. But the Negus became angry and said: ‘You demand the extradition of the messenger of a man who is visited by the Great Namus who used to come to Moses? [...] You would do better to obey him and to follow him, for he and his followers will no doubt get the better of their adversaries, just as Moses overcame Pharaoh and his army. (IBN ‘ABD al-ḤAKAM 1922, 252–53; al-ṬABARĪ 1997, 143–45)

There are also other early Islamic narratives, without an apocalyptic spirit but which are more ‘historically’ grounded in the following decades in which Muḥammad’s prophetic mission entered its mature phase, which argue about the relations between the Abyssinia and the community of the early believers, but none of these demonstrate a bellicose attitude.

Egyptian Famines Under Ikshīdīd and Fatimid Islamic Rulers

Abandoning this analytical path, it is clear that the absence or shortage of rainfall on the Ethiopian mountains during the rainy season, as well as the consequent lower levels of water flow of the Nile in Egypt, were interpreted in the medieval period as being related to the misbehaviour of the people who suffered these droughts, as well as to the inadequacy of those in charge of political or religious authority, independently from their religious beliefs. According to the *Mashafa Senkesar* or ‘Synaxarium’ (‘The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church’), the phenomena of drought has affected both Ethiopia and Egypt since the beginning of this legendary and folkloric tradition (WALLIS BUDGE 1928, 1:xi, 185–86; 3:800–1).

In Egypt, due to the importance of the Nile to the Egyptian economy, data relating to its water levels was collected in the pre-Islamic era, however, from the first/seventh century this data collection became even more precise and the relevant chronicles contain a huge amount of information (SAID 1993, 159–60). It is, however, difficult to draw a clear correlation between the establishment of a perceived connection between Nile’s flow and the Kingdom of Ethiopia,

⁸ Reported by Jābir b. ‘Abdallāh al-Anṣārī (d. 697) a Medinese Companion of the Prophet, the above sentence is reported in different forms by al-Bukhārī (3877 etc.) and in the *Sunan* of Abū Dāwud (2523).

and when the droughts and famines that affected Lower Egypt began to be explained as the result of inter-religious conflicts between the two countries (CORTESE 2015, 21).

Al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442), for example, in the ninth/fifteenth century explained that a series of years with severely low Nile water levels had resulted in the collapse of the pro-Abbasid Ikhsīhīd dynasty (323–58/935–69) (al-MAQRIZI 1962, 12–14), but this event was not directly associated with the deterioration of Egypt's relationship with Abyssinia. This cycle of drought, and thus increased food shortages, started, according to al-Maqrīzī, in July 337/949, during the reign of the second Ikhsīhīd leader, Abū l-Qāsim Unūjur (r. 334–49/946–60); a few years later, in 340/952, an excessive population of rats consumed the grain supplies to an astonishing extent, and the low water levels of the Nile during the annual inundation decreed a sharp rise in the price of wheat. The situation worsened in 341–2/953–4, causing a revolt that resulted in damage to the interior of the al-Fustāt mosque (al-MAQRIZI 1962, 13). Environmental conditions that led to low water levels during the flood months continued to manifest themselves in the decade following 351/963, until the definitive defenestration of the Ikhsīhīds by the Fatimids. Bread disappeared from sale and 'The famine spread throughout the country and the countryside was disturbed by numerous peasant revolts, during which the harvests of the estates were pillaged' (al-MAQRIZI 1962, 13).

During the summer of 356/967, the flooding of the Nile reached its lowest level since Egypt came under Islamic rule (around twelve cubits). With the death of the vizier Abū l-Misk Kāfūr (d. 357/968), the country was plunged into anarchy and the army, already defeated by the Byzantines in northern Syria and on the sea, also faced Qarmatian incursions. The arrival of the armies of al-Mu'izz al-Dīn Allāh (the founder of Cairo) from Ifrīqiyya saw societal control re-established, despite the fact that the famine continued until 360/971, with a short but intense plague outbreak during the same year. Finally, from 361/972, the return of the Nile flood levels to normal, and the concomitant lowering of the price of grain, brought the situation back to normality (al-MAQRIZI 1962, 15).

It is here important to emphasise that despite the fact that the inconsistent flooding of the Nile greatly contributed to the end of Ikshīd rule over Egypt, there are no Islamic sources until the Fatimid period (358–566/969–1171) that attribute actual responsibility for this to Nubians or Abyssinians. Sometimes hoarding of agricultural goods caused an increase in the price of grain even if the floods had been adequate; this was usually the result of a governmental decision.

It was, in fact, Caliph al-Mu'izz (r. 341–65/953–75) whose decrees established a change in attitude of the new rulers to their river. In a clear attempt to show his authority, he prohibited any public statements about the changing water levels of the Nile until the river reached its optimal level, which according to data collected (for centuries) was sixteen cubits. This was intended to prevent speculation and false information from causing panic and hysteria among the community, and also to discourage hoarding (CORTESE 2015, 22).

The Nile provided easy access to Upper Egypt and the Fatimid caliphs realised the strategic potential of this from the very beginnings of their dynasty, and accordingly sent diplomatic and geographic missions upriver to Nubia and Ethiopia, to find out more about the origins of the river itself as well as the people who lived in these regions, although those sent to the latter are reported only after the beginning of the huge famines that affected the caliphate of al-Mustanşir bi-llāh (r. 427–87/1036–94) (TROUPEAU 1954, 278–79).

The first reference in Arabic to Ethiopia's control over the river seems to appear in al-Waharānī's (b. 1179) *Manāmāt*: in a letter to an Ayyubid *qādī* in Mosul, al-Waharānī argues that the King of Ethiopia has the power to move the course of the Nile towards the land of the Zanj.⁹ However, al-Waharānī presents the notion as folk hearsay, without giving it much credence (WEBER 2019, 216). In contrast, the Coptic scholar Jirjis b. al-ʿAmīd al-Makīn (c. 602–92/1206–93) clearly claims in his *Tārīkh al-muslimīn* that Ethiopia controls the Nile, in relation to the famine that plagued the reign of the Fatimid caliph al-Mustanṣir bi-llāh. Al-Makīn explains that in the early 482s/1090s, faced with a declining Nile flow, the caliph sent the Alexandrian Patriarch Mikhail IV to Ethiopia:

... with many gifts and ornaments, and his king [of Ethiopia] came to meet him, and when he received him reverently, he inquired for which reason he had come; the bishop exposed that he came [to Ethiopia] due to the scarcity of the water of the Nile, which was causing great damage to its land and its inhabitants. And [the king] ordered that the dam through which the water flowed to Egypt be opened as a result of the Patriarch's deputation,¹⁰ [following which] the Nile increased by three *dhirāʿ* in one night, so that the Nile flooded, and the fields of Egypt were irrigated and planted. (al-MAKĪN 1625, 289–90)¹¹

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This quotation is notably absent of any correlation with other historical events that would have fostered growing tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia towards the end of the fifth/eleventh century. It does not seem to be related to any other international event in the region, but to the fact that Patriarch Michael himself had been imprisoned by the Fāṭimid authorities for a certain period before assuming the highest office: it was during his patriarchate that the Nile started to decrease.

Van Donzel has asserted that the oldest Arab source to mention the trope of Ethiopia's power over the flow of the River Nile was the *ʿAjāʾib al-kabīr* of Ibn Waṣīf Shāh al-Miṣrī (d. c. 599/1203; VAN DONZEL 2000a, 304; VAN DONZEL 2000b, 121; also DERAT 2020). But, even in this case the circumstances that led al-Miṣrī to frame his treatment of the issue in this way are very confused. On the one hand, he reports a historical tradition relating to an attempt by Badr al-Jamālī (d. 487/1094), al-Mustanṣir's vizier, to control the selection of the Bishop of Ethiopia: a prerogative held since pre-Islamic times by the archdiocese of St Mark, the Coptic patriarchate of Alexandria. The Egyptian Fatimid government intended to favour a certain Abba Sawiros (d. c. 472/1080) who, after arriving at his post in the Horn of Africa, would promote the opening of mosques in the region, fostering an initial process of Islamisation of the territory. Inner opposition to this edict would have undoubtedly increased the conflict between Ethiopia and Egypt, but also the restrictions on Muslim coastal traders.

On the other hand, Ibn Waṣīf Shāh al-Miṣrī is identified by Michael Cook (COOK 1983, 67–103) as an Egyptian historian who tried to establish a correlation between pre-Islamic literature, legends and narratives of Biblical origin and the Islamic conquest of the region,

⁹ The term *zanj* was generally used to refer to Africans from East Africa.

¹⁰ The Latin version has a slightly different wording, and refers to a *diverticulum reclundi*, i.e. the closing of a passage.

¹¹ See also VAN DONZEL 2000b; TRIMINGHAM 1952, 63 n. 5.

thereby establishing *de facto* a correlation between the contemporary Islamic rulership and the native origins of the Egyptian nation. What Cook does not report is that well before Shāh al-Miṣrī, another historian, Ḥasan Ibn Zulāq (d. 386/996) similarly argues for a sort of continuity of pre-Islamic Egypt with the advent of the Quraysh.

On reading Ibn Zulāq's history, it is plausible that even prior to the Fatimid age, an attempt to establish a narrative reciprocity between pre-Islamic Egypt and present-day Egypt was inspired by political and, after the beginning of the Crusades, military reasons:

‘Abd ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ said: the Copts of Egypt are the maternal uncles of the Quraysh, and the same ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ said, again: the people of Egypt are the most generous among all the non-Arabs, the most clement, the best of their race and compassionate to the Arabs and to the Quraysh in specific. (IBN ZULĀQ 2000, 9)

Furthermore, referring to the Nile, Ibn Zulāq (d. 386/996) established a long narrative, based in the Biblical tradition:

Adam, when he saw Egypt [...] where a river flows, whose water came directly from Paradise, [...] Seven time Adam blessed his Nile and his Mountain: Oh mercy Mountain, your feet are a Paradise and your soil is musk in which are preserved the trees of Egypt [...] (IBN ZULĀQ 2000, 9).

[...] and when Noah divided his land among his sons made the land of Egypt and his coasts, the West and the River Nile [...], borne in Egypt, Baysar, son of Cam, son of Noah, the messenger of God, God ruled them in the land of Egypt and gave them his commandment: the Copts are the Quraysh of the non-Arabs. (IBN ZULĀQ 2000, 10)

Referring again to the Nile, van Donzel includes a report from Ibn Waṣīf Shāh al-Miṣrī according to which: ‘Miṣrā’īm, the second son of Tablīl, who is said to have been the first independent ruler of Egypt, travelled through the country until he arrived at the sources of the Nile. He built bridges, re-adjusted the bed of the river and cut through mountains which kept the water closed in’ (VAN DONZEL 2000a, 304). The same ‘story’ was reported by al-Makīn in a clearly tentative attempt to establish the existence of a long ‘tradition’ of the control of the Nile’s flow from the Egyptian side (al-MAKĪN 1625, 55).

The trope of Egyptian control of the Nile can also be found in late-medieval popular literature, in the *Sīrat Sayf b. Dhī Yazan*, an epic fantasy thought to have taken on recognisable form in probably the late eighth/fourteenth or early ninth/fifteenth century (NORRIS 1989; BLATHERWICK 2016, 17–19).¹² The *sīra* mixes events linked to the famous Himyarite king after which it is named, who lived in the sixth century CE, in pre-Islamic times, and fought to reconquer his kingdom following Aksumite domination of much of the Arabian Peninsula (which is referenced briefly in *Sūrat al-Fīl*), with a cycle describing the founding of a proto-Islamic Egypt in previously uninhabited lands, in which the trope of the control of the Nile takes on a leading role. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this narrative in the current context is that the story sees a historical figure, the Ethiopian Emperor Newaya Krestos (r. 1344–72), alias Sayf Ar‘ad (Sword of Terror), as the main enemy and opponent

¹² I must thank Helen Blatherwick for bringing this to my attention.

of the Yemeni hero Sayf b. Dhī Yazan. It is clear that the *sīra* contains different narrative themes: the story of the Ethiopian invasion of Yemen, the search for and conquest of a new homeland (which has parallels to that of the Arab-Islamic conquest of Egypt), and, even more interestingly, the idea that the control of waters of the Nile is a means of establishing the right to rule of those who govern the territories in which flows. The founding of a new Egypt is inextricably linked to its important river, and the ‘stories’ adopted to establish this are clearly mythological in nature (NORRIS 1989; BLATHERWICK 2016; 2023)

The emergence of a strong correlation between Egypt, its river, and the presence of periods of varying length of drought is emblematically reported by historical sources which, following the advent of Islamic rule in the region, documented the existence of periods of great prosperity and equally great penury. What seems to emerge in the sources analysed so far is how failure to reach a flood level of sixteen cubits had an impact that caused both the fall of dynasties and economic crises in various historical periods, and also provoked the creation of narratives associated with these lean phases.

During the Fatimid caliphate, low Nile flood levels occurred during the reigns of al-Ḥakīm (r. 385–411/996–1021) and al-Zāhir (r. 411–27/1021–36), but it was the poor floods that affected the long reign of al-Mustaṣir for over ten years, between 453/1062 and 465/1073, that provoked the huge economic crisis to which the origin of the narrative of Abyssinian powers to control the waters of the river can be attributed.¹³ This crisis, which would turn political and military, led to the deputation of Turkish mercenaries to Cairo, who, after going without pay for some time, sacked the capital and forced the caliph to intervene. The caliph gave full freedom to his Armenian vizier Badr al-Jamālī to deal with the situation, and al-Jamālī took the draconian step of replacing the army, which was largely made up of Berbers and Turks, with Armenian loyalists. With political power in his own hands, and clearly wanting to bring the Egyptian economy back to the stability of previous decades, the new vizier favoured a new process of expansion by encouraging the creation of commercial outposts, especially in the Red Sea. From here, the Fatimid attempts to control the Coptic church’s processes for electing the Bishop of Ethiopia were replaced by more overt, unprecedented diplomatic actions (DERAT 2020, 30ff.; COUQ 1981, 99–100; SEIGNOBOS 2021, 34ff.).

The coincidence of such a long period of drought, accompanied by the resulting lack of internal security, and the diplomatic crisis with Ethiopia is probably at the root of the narrative of the power of the Ethiopian emperors to control the flow of the Nile. It is therefore plausible that Jirjis al-Makīn, cited above, could be considered as the first, or one of the first, to attribute this ‘inexplicable power’ to the figure of the Negus.

¹³ The Jewish documents of the Geniza provide another important source that confirms a long period of drought during the years 453–65/1062–73. Letters written by Jewish traders operating in the eastern Mediterranean stress the difficulties they faced. For example, in the letter T-S 8J19.27, Ya’qūb b. Salmān al-Ḥarīrī of Ramla asks Nahray b. Nissim of Fustāt (c. 458/1066) about the price of wheat and bread in Fustāt, and the financial status of his father and family in these ‘hard times’; another excerpt from a letter (Moss IV, 73) written by Yosef ha-Kohen from Alexandria to the merchant Abū Zikrī Yehuda b. Yosef ha-Kohen, probably in Fustāt, asks for information about the inflation and famine that occurred there the previous year, probably to allow him to make forecasts for the current year.

The Post-Crusades Myth

The formation of the Coastal Kingdoms after the first crusade (490–92/1096–99) would, in fact, have made the myth of Abyssinian control of the Nile waters more public and impactful in terms of developments in Islamo-Christian relations at the time. From the second half of the sixth/twelfth century onwards, Christian attempts to conquer Egypt as a strategic location to help maintain their hold on the Levant probably had an impact on the circulation of the narrative about the possibility of controlling the flow of the River Nile: the discovery by the Crusaders of the existence of a powerful Christian kingdom in Nubia and Ethiopia with which their kingdoms in the Holy Land could form an alliance would have been problematic for Fatimid-Ayyūbid control of Egypt.

However, while the myth concerning an oriental Christian king, ‘a certain John, a king and priest who dwells beyond Persia and Armenia in the uttermost east [...]’ was first recorded by Otto of Freising (d. 1158), as well as in the famous *Letter of Prester John* that was dispatched to the Byzantine emperor Manuel Komnenos during his rule (r. 1143–80; SALVADORE 2017, 4–5), the association of Nubia and Ethiopia with this emblematic figure dates to later, after the end of the Crusades. Hayton of Corycus’s (c. 1240–1320) *La Flor des Estoires de la terre d’Orient* (‘The Flower of Stories of the Land of the Orient’) relates that Egypt ‘confines with the Kingdom of Nubia, [whose inhabitants] are Christians and are completely black by the heat of the sun’ and that ‘When the river rises as high as it can, people look at the mark left on a specific column and, based on this, they will know whether there will be abundance or scarcity’ (HAYTON OF CORYCUS 2014, 233 describing the Nilometer).

Along the same lines, in his pro-Crusader treatise *De Modo Sarracenos Extirpandi* (‘On the Recovery of the Holy Land’, 1317), the Dominican Guillaume Adam (d. 1341) explains that because of Egypt’s limited rainfall, Egyptians ‘would die of hunger and fail in themselves, unless the aforesaid false Christians brought into Egypt the necessities of life’ (ADAM 1906, 523). Like Hayton’s, Adam’s geography is unclear, but his ‘false Christians’ are most likely Ethiopian non-orthodox Christians, who are thereby considered in control of the Nile (ADAM 1906, 549ff.).

The success of this dual narrative (of Prester John himself, and of control of the Nile) on European soil is, however, not the main topic of this article; on the contrary, the importance of the relationship between Ethiopia and Egypt in the seventh/thirteenth and eighth/fourteenth centuries will allow us to better understand who holds the power over the Nile’s waters in the Muslim sources of the period. Between 673/1274 and 922/1516, the Mamluk administration reports that thirteen Ethiopian ambassadors visited the capital, while, from the Egyptian side, four were sent to the Horn of Africa (LOISEAU 2020, 39; KREBS 2019, 264–68).

Various Mamluk officers referred to the ‘myth’ in their writings but always dismissively. When it comes to Mamluk-era authors, the chancery official Ibn Faḍlallāh al-‘Umarī (d. 749/1349) argued in his *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār* (‘The Routes of Insight into the Civilised Realms’) that ‘the Abyssinians claim that they are the guardians of the course of the Nile as it flows down into Egypt, and that they encourage its regular flow as a tribute to the ruler of Egypt’ (al-‘UMARĪ 1927, 30). This statement implicitly positions the author’s

complex attitude towards the relationship between the Abyssinian Solomonic dynasty and the Egyptian sultans as one in which the former is a tributary to Egypt, while claiming to please those who without this tribute could not easily run their sultanate. This sentence, seems to highlight two things: Ethiopian dependence on Egyptian rulers when it came to the religious choices of the diocese of St Mark for their Bishop, which is a well-established fact, but also the concept of Ethiopian homage to the Egyptian sultans of the time, who regularly facilitate the appointment of the Bishop, in contrast to what occurred under al-Badr al-Jamālī in the Fatimid era.

Al-Nuwayrī (d. 733/1333) in his *Nihāyat al-‘arab fī funūn al-adab* ('The Aim of the Intelligent in the Art of Letters'), reports that 'They also say that [the Ethiopian emperor] had said: "The course of the Nile, which gives Egypt its means of subsistence and [brings] prosperity to its inhabitants, flows from my country and I can block it," and other things like this' (al-NUWAYRĪ 1990, 23:149). This creates an association of periods of famine with a supernatural capability to control the waters, but during an historical phase in which the real problem was Ethiopian accusations about the humiliation the Christians of Egypt were suffering, with churches being destroyed or closed and subject to excessive taxation (*jizya*). The 'diplomatic' aspect of this myth would become predominant in the following centuries: the greater the conflict between Mamluks and Ethiopians with regard to the suffering of Christian or Muslim minorities in their respective geographical areas of domination, the greater the emerging emphasis in Islamic sources of Ethiopian destructive power to the detriment of the Egyptian world. That the Mamluk sultans, as well as court officials, paid attention to these threats is, however, hard to ascertain.

Two further Egyptian historians, Aḥmad b. ‘Alī al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418) and al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) also both write about the long phases of famine during the Fatimid age, but also about the increasingly difficult relations between the Christians of Ethiopia and the Mamluks of Egypt, each demonstrating relevant scepticism about the Ethiopians' power over the Nile (al-MAQRIZĪ 1962, 15–17). For al-Qalqashandī the famines that affected Egypt were simply due to climatic changes that resulted in limited rainfall on the Ethiopian Highlands (al-QALQASHANDĪ 1913, 5:328); al-Maqrīzī instead, in his *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-ma‘rifat duwal al-mulūk* ('A History of the Mamluk Kingdoms') reports on the difficult relations between the two contenders, but without hypothesising any causal relationship between the famines and the diplomatic crisis with the Ethiopians: his position was that the water shortages were the result of domestic political choices and climatic factors (al-MAQRIZĪ 1962, 43ff.). Two passages are particularly telling of his dismissal of the idea of Ethiopian control over the Nile:

In the year 726 [1325], in the month of Moharram, Sultan Mohammed [most likely Sultān al-Nāṣir Muḥammad] received a letter from the king of Abyssinia [‘Amdä Šəyon I (r. 1324–44)], in which the prince ordered him to rebuild the churches destroyed by Muslims, and to treat Christians with more regard, threatening, in the event of refusal, to demolish all the mosques in his states, and to intercept the course of Nile. The sultan only laughed at these threats and dismissed the envoys [...]

In the year 783 [1381], news was received that an army sent by David [Emperor Dawit I (r. 1379/80–1413)], son of Seif-Arad [Emperor Säyfa Ar‘ad (r. 1344–71)], king of Abyssinia, had entered the territory of Aswan, taken over from the Arabs, and

committed terrible devastation on the lands of Islam. The great emir sent to Mathieu, patriarch of the Jacobite Christians [Patriarch Matheos I of Alexandria] [...] enjoining him to write to the king of Abyssinia, to forbid him from committing any hostility against the Muslims [...] (QUATREMERIE 1811, 2:275–76)

In the first passage, al-Maqrīzī reports an Ethiopian threat along with the sultan’s entertained reaction, seemingly approvingly. In the second, he refers to Ethiopian-Egyptian tensions due to the ongoing Islamisation of the Red Sea basin and the problem of religious minorities in the two kingdoms, but without even referring to the Nile (DEMICHELIS 2017, 225ff.). Moreover, this second quotation could also be read as demonstrating how inferences about Ethiopian power to either block or divert the course of the Nile were non-existent, given that at a time of diplomatic crisis with Cairo, the emperor himself preferred to undertake a direct military attack on Upper Egypt rather than exert any control over the river.

Along the same lines, al-Sakhāwī (r. 831–902/1428–97), reports on an Ethiopian delegation that reached Cairo in 846/1443, accusing Sultan Sayf al-Dīn Jaqmaq (841–56/1438–53) of mistreating Christians, and threatening to intervene in the Nile’s flow. However, even in this case, the author reports the claim ironically (al-SAKHĀWĪ 1896, 1:67–72). During the ninth/fifteenth century, Egyptian sultans and commentators do not seem to give any credence to the myth, but Ethiopian rulers, in contrast, make extensive references to their claimed powers in their dispatches to the Mamluk sultans, at least from the time of Emperor Amda Seyon I, if al-Maqrīzī is to be believed, and certainly to the time of Emperor Dawit I (LOISEAU 2020, 53–61).

However, even in this case, the attribution of this myth to various Ethiopian rulers who were in increasing conflict with the sultans of Egypt during their respective reigns, emerges as the claim of a ‘semi-divine’ power rather than as related to purely climatic reasons. What is certain, because al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) continues to report it at the end of the ninth/fifteenth century in reference to traditions concerning Egypt, is that this country will be ruined by the drying up of the Nile, just as Mecca will be destroyed by the Ethiopians: clear apocalyptic references that, as we have already mentioned, occur in earlier sources, but which are still quoted in later sources (LOISEAU 2020, 50).

On the Ethiopian side, evidence of the Nile myth in early modern Ethiopia is in short supply. Apparently, a handful of sources corroborate its deployment by Dawit I in his dealings with the Mamluks. One is a rare version of the *Tarikā nāgāst*, Ethiopia’s general dynastic history, known as ‘The Short Chronicle’, which narrates that Dawit I received Latin Christian embassies who pleaded with him to withhold the Nile in order to protect the Christian minorities in Mamluk Egypt, ‘because Egyptians do not sow nor harvest if not thanks to the course of the River Nile [...]’ (GUIDI 1926, 360–61). The sovereign reportedly obliged, by changing the course of the Nile in the proximity of Sinnār for a period and then restarting its regular flow to facilitate a rapprochement between Egypt’s Christian and Muslim communities. The same episode is also found in the *Māṣḥafā tēfut* (‘The Book of tēf Grains’), a rare collection of historical and religious texts first compiled in the fifteenth century CE (CAQUOT 1955, 99), and in the *Tā’amrā Maryam*, the Ethiopian version of the *Miracles of Mary*, a collection of Marian traditions that originated in twelfth-century France. *Prima facie* these sources would appear to point to an early modern, if not medieval, circulation of the myth in Ethiopia, but closer examination of these composite and repeatedly

edited and enlarged texts has shown that the episode has so far been found only in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century versions of these manuscripts (WEBER 2023).

In summary, no contemporary Ethiopian source confirms the leveraging of the Nile by Dawit I or any other Ethiopian ruler in their negotiations with their Mamluk, let alone Fatimid, counterparts (PANKHURST 2000, 20–21; PERRUCHON 1893, 56–57). In this regard, the myth is also conspicuously absent from the *Kəbrä nāgäst*, ‘The Glory of Kings,’ Ethiopia’s national epic, which dates to the eighth/fourteenth century: as has already been pointed out, had the Ethiopian sovereign habitually been used to asserting power over the Nile’s waters, the claim would have surely appeared in the Solomonic Dynasty’s foundational text (WEBER 2023, 84).

Conclusion: A Rational Explanation for the Myth

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In the post-Crusades Levant, where the conquest of Egypt remained a priority, Latin authors began to identify both the flow of the Nile and the existence of a Christian kingdom south of Egypt as elements of strategic importance. It was, however, the accounts of pilgrims returning from the Holy Land after being exposed to Jerusalem’s Ethiopian community that contributed to the myth’s circulation in Europe. The most significant source is probably Jacopo da Verona’s (b. c. 1345) *Liber Peregrinationis*, which relates that in Jerusalem Ethiopians:

[...] have great liberty in the land of the sultans and the Saracens [...] and they paid no tribute to the soldiers throughout the land and whenever the tomb of Christ is opened, they enter without money or tribute. And the reason for that is that the Presbyter Johannes [Prester John], Lord of Nubia and Ethiopia, has the power in his kingdom to take away the River Nile which is called Calizino¹⁴ by the Saracens, which passes through Kayrus [Cairo] and Babylonia¹⁵ [i.e. Coptic Cairo], the sultan’s impregnable cities. And then it divides and continues in the direction of the sea to Alexandria and in the direction of the sea to Damietta, across the land of Egypt, and whoever would withdraw this river would make the land completely uninhabitable. That would be for the whole of Egypt, and likewise Presbyter Johannes [Prester John] is more powerful than the sultan. (JACOPO DA VERONA 1950, 32)

The Augustinian was probably among the first pilgrims to report on the privileges Ethiopian clerics enjoyed in Jerusalem because of the Mamluk sultan’s deference towards the Ethiopian Emperor and his control over the Nile. More importantly, it seems likely that Jacopo was the first author to identify the Ethiopian emperor as both controlling the Nile and as Prester John, thereby joining two discourses that until then had remained distinct. The famous figure, whose letters started to appear in the twelfth century, identified this faraway Christian ruler in new, ever-changing versions of his writings which appeared across Europe, and as a result Prester John acquired a life of his own. He was first imagined in the Far East, and later in

¹⁴ This is a misidentification of the Nile with an artificial canal (*al-khalīj*) linking Alexandria with Old Cairo.

¹⁵ In this and other quotations, Babylon should not be understood as referring to the Mesopotamian city, but to Coptic or Old Cairo, which used to be known as Babylon Gabra.

various Asian locales. During the fourteenth century, the demystification of the East and the arrival of Christian Ethiopian visitors in Latin Europe contributed to the identification of Prester John with the Horn of Africa, at the time considered one of the Indies (TAYLOR 2025; SALVADORE 2017, 1–3).¹⁶ Once Ethiopianised, his figure gained, in the European imagination, control over the Nile: Jacopo thus bore witness to the merging of two distinct myths which would persist in their combined form for centuries. From this point onward, Europe's creative capacity would continue unabated until the end of the sixteenth century, when geographic evidence would finally establish the impossibility of blocking the course of the Nile River, as well as any Ethiopian power in promoting it.

The contradiction between reported Ethiopian threats in Mamluk sources and the absence of the Nile myth in Ethiopian ones, some argue, can be explained by accounting for the agency of Ethiopian representatives. In other words, while Ethiopian rulers do not appear to have threatened their interlocutors, their representatives, familiar with Islamo-Mamluk apocalyptic anxieties about the Nile, exploited them for leverage in their negotiations with Mamluk authorities (WEBER 2023, 92). While definitive evidence for this thesis is lacking, Weber emphasises that the success of the Nile myth in the Latin West is symptomatic of a logical outcome of this narrative spreading far beyond the narrow confines of the Mamluk administration. The reconciliation of certain important events in the history of Islamic Egypt with apocalyptic traditions concerning Armageddon in Islam are also at the root of the emergence of this myth in Muslim sources. In fact, without the Ikshīdīd defenestration after a long period of famine, as well as the decade-long water crisis under the Fatimid al-Mustansīr (which moreover coincided with the first real diplomatic crisis with Ethiopia) and the existence of the Islamic apocalyptic tradition, Ethiopian emissaries could hardly have ventured a theory as bold as it is fanciful.

From the Islamic side, it seems clear that if, at the beginning, the coincidence of the low flood levels of the Nile with important historical events that impacted the Egyptian dynasties had a preliminary impact, from al-Maqrīzī onward this rumour would have clashed with historical climatic evidence that tended to discredit the actual existence of Ethiopian power to control the waters. In his treaty *Ighāthat al-umma bi-khashf al-ghumma* ('Proffered Remedies to the Nation to Dispel Sorrow'), completed around 807/1405, al-Maqrīzī provides a long list of the famines that occurred since the Fatimids, including those that affected the previous century (of the Mamluk era). He clearly affirms that:

It is relevant to clarify that the essential causes of the famines that have devastated the world since the time of Creation come in most cases from atmospheric phenomena: this is what their relations in all countries, in the most remote antiquity and in modern times, testify, and what the conditions of existence and the nature of civilisation, as well as the history of humanity, confirm. These are, for example, in Egypt, weakness in the Nile's floods [...] (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1962, 43)

¹⁶ The first known reference to the Ethiopian Prester John can be found in Jordanus of Severac's *Mirabilia* (1330) and in Giovanni da Carignano's lost map of the Mediterranean basin.

Al-Maqrīzī, moreover, focused on the most recent famine of his time, which had affected Egypt from 796/1394 until 805/1403 during which he had witnessed at first hand an unprecedented crisis in the availability of cereal crops. He describes it as follows:

[...] The situation was of exceptional gravity: the peril was dramatic, the damage immense, and it was a weighty calamity for everyone. Half the population of Egypt died of hunger and cold, and the mortality rate was such in the years 806 (1403) and 807 (1404) that beasts of burden were also victims, and few animals remained alive. Their sale price was so high that we are ashamed to mention figures today, in the first days of the year 808 (1405). (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1962, 43)

He makes no reference in his treatment of this catastrophe to the Nile myth, but instead a precise analysis is provided that starts with the main perpetrators: the Egyptian administration and its internal corruption (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1962, 45). Following this, point by point, al-Maqrīzī blames the high cost of agricultural land (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1962, 45), and the legal value of copper coins (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1962, 49), both aspects that affected the country whenever there was a famine. His discussion continues by listing the reasons for the high inflation that a famine usually causes, describing people's inability to procure food, while government grain and seed reserves were preserved instead of distributed, as well as other factors.

Even though in this case the coincidence of the fluctuating diplomatic relationship between the Mamluks and the Abyssinians could continue to provide interesting correspondences with the Nile myth, this fascinating story would continue to circulate in the Latin European world, rather than the Islamic one. As reported above, Emperor Dawit I launched a military expedition that reached the city of Aswan, pillaging lower Egypt and devastating Islamic territories, but only five years afterwards, before the beginning of the famine of 796/1394, the same emperor sent a letter to the Mamluk sultan accompanied by a caravan of twenty-one camels loaded with gifts (QUATREMERE 1811, 2:276–77). Such rapid changes in political attitude make it difficult to imagine that Islamic intellectuals of the time could still believe such stories, which had little relation to actual scientific accuracy and were based on the erratic and mercurial behaviour of those who held political power.

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Climate as Catalyst: The Role of a Cold Snap in the Mosul Revolt of 259/873–4

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Abstract

This article examines a passage found in Arabic sources of the Abbasid period that explicitly links severe climatic events and political unrest—specifically, the rebellion in Mosul during the spring of 260/873 against a newly appointed governor's deputy. The event is recorded by al-Azdī (d. 334/945–6), Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233), and al-Nuwayrī (d. 733/1333), with the first two authors being native to Mosul, and their accounts coincide with other sources that reported a poor agricultural year in the region. According to the sources, the episode is notable for its mention of late and intense cold, with effects hinting at a frost, and seems to align with broader climatic anomalies recorded across Eurasia in the same period.

The Mosul rebellion occurred against a background of fiscal discontent, exacerbated by a calendar system that advanced the tax year ahead of the harvest season, and growing tensions between the Jazīra region and the Abbasid capital. These intersecting environmental and social pressures help situate the Mosul revolt within broader patterns of instability in the empire. It would be from Mosul itself, ultimately, that the calendar would be reformed to correct this state of affairs by connecting it to a well-established understanding of seasonality in relation to agriculture.

Keywords: Climate anomalies, Mosul revolt, Abbasid period, social pressures, calendar reform

Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a marked increase in scholarly interest across various disciplines in the role played by the environment in human history. More specifically, this interest has often adopted a perspective that might broadly be described as palaeo-climatological, meaning an approach aimed at explaining, whether partially or wholly and with varying degrees of methodological sophistication, the impact of climatic fluctuations or specific meteorological events on human affairs. Within this framework, scholars have proposed links between climatic or weather-related phenomena and both long- and short-

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term historical developments, ranging from the decline of a polity to sudden episodes of social unrest (HALDON et al. 2018; WHITE et al. 2023; DEGROOT et al. 2022; HEWETT et al. 2022).

This article examines a particular case in which the source itself offers, within a single passage, a concise description of an adverse weather event, the immediate socio-political context in which it occurred, and a revolt that would contribute to a longer period of regional turmoil. The case in question is the uprising in Mosul during the year 259/873–4, which followed an unusual—though, as we shall see, not exceptional—cold spell, in a broader context of both general crisis within the Abbasid empire and local dissatisfaction with the envoy of a newly appointed governor, nominated by the caliph al-Mu'tamid (r. 256–79/870–92). In addition, the article presents paleoclimatic data from other parts of Eurasia and the Mediterranean, with the aim of situating the 259/873–4 cold spell within a wider climatic context. This material draws upon both historical studies and written sources, the so-called ‘archives of societies’, as well as evidence derived from what are known as ‘archives of nature’ (BRÖNNIMANN, PFISTER and WHITE 2018). Together, these sources suggest the possibility of a period of notable climatic instability around 259/873–4, though this remains to be explored in a more systematic manner. Be it as it may, the purpose of this article is not to offer a definitive account of the climatological history of the Jazīra (northern Mesopotamia) in the latter half of the third/ninth century. Rather, it seeks to use the Mosul revolt as a case study through which to explore the ways in which meteorological events, or possibly climatic fluctuations, may intervene in, and inevitably become entangled with, the social and political dynamics of a given time and place.

In this case, the period in question is that of the deep Abbasid crisis of the third/ninth century, a phase long referred to as the ‘Anarchy at Samarra’, although this term is nowadays increasingly and rightly abandoned. It begins with the assassination of al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–47/847–61) and continues through the reigns of a few weak and mostly short-lived caliphs, who came to power as the representatives of various factions within the court, the administration, and, crucially, the Turkish military forces. These troops, introduced as *mamlūks* under al-Mu'tasim (r. 218–27/833–42), came to play an ever more prominent role in Iraq.²

This period moved towards its eventual resolution under al-Mu'tadid (r. 279–89/892–902), although the process of consolidation began during the caliphate of al-Mu'tamid. As is well known, however, it was not al-Mu'tamid himself—who was as weak, if not weaker, than his immediate predecessors—but rather his brother, the powerful regent al-Muwaffaq (d. 278/891), who was chiefly responsible for this turn (KENNEDY 2012).³ It is worth noting that, both in the eyes of contemporaries and from the perspective of modern scholarship, these years were also marked by a far more serious and consequential uprising than the one under

² The available literature on this period of the caliphate's history is too extensive to be addressed here. David Waines' classic paper is still useful for a broad introduction, but see also Michele Campopiano's discussion of the fiscal aspect of the crisis, which is especially relevant here. Additionally, for an overview of the role played by the Turkish troops, Matthew S. Gordon's seminal study remains indispensable. See WAINES 1977; CAMPOPIANO 2019; GORDON 2001.

³ See also the insightful analysis in TILLIER 2009, and also GORDON 2001, 141–50.

discussion here: the revolt of the Iraqi Zanj, centred in the agricultural lands surrounding Basra (KENNEDY 2003). The broader context of unrest, and, in particular, the considerable attention devoted by Arab historians, most notably al-Ṭabarī, to the major uprising of enslaved agricultural workers in Lower Mesopotamia, may well have contributed to the obscuring of events in Mosul, which, in effect, are known to us almost exclusively through local sources.

The setting is the region of the Jazīra, and more specifically the city of Mosul, situated on the opposite bank of the Tigris River from the ancient city of Nineveh. This is a relatively fertile and prosperous region which, during this phase of the Abbasid period, made a substantial contribution to the food security of the empire's central provinces. According to Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī (d. 335/947), Mosul supplied flour, thanks to the presence of floating mills both within the city itself and in the nearby town of Balad, which will also be mentioned later. Al-Muqaddasī (d. after 380/990) and Ibn Hawqal (d. after 362/973) likewise refer to the province's thriving fruit production, including preserved fruits. Combined with its advantageous position along major communication routes, both westward towards Raqqa and from there to the Mediterranean, and eastward towards Samarra and Baghdad, this suggests that a significant portion of its produce was destined for at least medium-range trade. The same al-Ṣūlī already mentioned above also identifies horse and sheep breeding as distinctive activities of the region—a plausible observation, given the close interspersed of agricultural lands and grasslands throughout Upper Mesopotamia (CANARD 2012).

This was, therefore, a region of considerable importance to the Abbasid state, although Mosul itself welcomed the new Abbasid order with little enthusiasm.⁴ The area remained frequently unstable, often caught up in the struggles of nearby powers, whether Kharijī or Taghlibī, particularly in the wake of the violent death of al-Mutawakkil. It was also a region marked by a strong Christian presence, whose members played a key role in tax collection (ROBINSON 2000, 90–126). The early Islamic period here witnessed a process of social transformation that was undoubtedly gradual.

More broadly, the region clearly forms part of what we now refer to as the Middle East or Western Asia. Together with North Africa, this part of the world occupies a distinctive place in discussions of environmental history and the question of causal links between historical events and climatic or meteorological phenomena. The strongest impetus behind what is often termed the 'environmental turn' in historical studies of these regions has undeniably come from the field of Ottoman studies (TRUMBULL 2017). This is especially true with regard to methodological reflection and the theoretical framing of approaches to environmental history, although earlier, notable examples of research on the role of environment and climate do exist for other periods in the history of the Mediterranean African and West Asian worlds (see, most famously, BULLIET 2011).

Alan Mikhail has observed that 'one of the gaping holes in the global story of the environment thus far has been the history of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Likewise, one of the gaping holes in the study of the MENA has been the history of its environment' (MIKHAIL 2013, 1). He noted that previous scholarship tended to fall into two

⁴ More precisely, the Mosuli elites rejected the appointed governor Muḥammad b. Ṣūl because of his tribal affiliation. See al-AZDĪ 2006, 1:341–42; cf. al-YA'QUBĪ n.d., 2:356–57; ROBINSON 2000, 150–51.

broad categories: ‘descriptions of the continuity of human settlement and community in the face of the delicate stability of environments around them’, and, conversely, ‘examinations of human groups inevitably doomed to collapse because of inherent contradictions in their ecological systems’ (MIKHAIL 2013, 3–5). In other words, there has been a tendency to reproduce narratives of either stasis or inevitable decline and collapse—narratives that have already been the subject of substantial critical reflection within the field, and which often have the effect of sidelining, if not erasing entirely, human agency. Decline narratives in particular invite explanations that assign a primary role to environmental changes, whether human-made or not.⁵

Another Ottomanist, Sam White, has advocated for a long-view approach, which identifies a recurring pattern in the MENA region: cycles of ecological crisis followed by extended periods of recovery. According to White, this pattern must be understood in light of the prevalence of marginal lands across the macro-region, i.e. arid or semi-arid territories which necessitate, on the one hand, the use of irrigation or marginal crops, and on the other, a significant reliance on pastoralism, especially of the nomadic kind. Such practices often gave rise to delicate relations between nomadic pastoralists and sedentary agricultural populations (WHITE 2011, 7–14).⁶ These considerations, however, cannot avoid confronting a fundamental problem that mirrors the erasure of human agency, a problem not unique to environmental histories of West Asia and North Africa: namely, how to ‘integrate the role of climate into the current historiography wherever an abundance of evidence has already provided adequate social, economic, and political interpretations of events’, without reducing it to a superfluous subplot (WHITE 2011, 13). In this respect, the case examined here may prove instructive as a case study for exploring how environmental factors can shape historical developments—specifically, in this instance, within a political-administrative context. The episode under discussion concerns a meteorological event, and perhaps a broader climatic anomaly, which played a decisive role in the fiscal and administrative history of the region. It did so not only by acting as a catalyst for pre-existing political and administrative problems, but also through the sociopolitical response that followed: a reform of the fiscal calendar, itself an expression of human agency, and a reminder that such agency often takes the form of deliberate intervention within broader socio-environmental frameworks.

⁵ Broad-scope examples are DIAMOND 2006; MONTGOMERY 2012. A similar approach closer to our region can be found in ALLEN and HELDRING 2022.

⁶ This last point, moreover, emerges clearly in a recent study on the impact of the 4.2kya climate change event on settlements and population dynamics in the Northern Fertile Crescent. As the authors demonstrate, even in that case environmental change acted primarily as a trigger, anticipating demographic developments whose principal causes lay in social and human domains. The relatively sharp population decrease, and settlement abandonment observed during this period occurred against a backdrop of unprecedented urban and rural growth, likely driven by pastoralism. Pastoral expansion into marginal zones increased economic productivity while raising vulnerability by facilitating exploitation of drier, risk-prone areas (LAWRENCE, PALMISANO and DE GRUCHY 2021).

The Arrival of the New Governor

The events examined in this article concern the arrival in Mosul of an envoy who was also the son of a newly appointed governor. As we shall see, this period is marked by a well-documented weakening of caliphal authority, with the reigning caliph, al-Mu'tamid, being subject to strict oversight by his brother, al-Muwaffaq. The latter, in practice, exercised power independently, bolstered by his strong connections with the Turkish military forces. However, the sources under examination do not clearly indicate whether the appointment of the Turkish military officer Asātakīn as governor of Mosul, as well as the subsequent dispatch of Adhkūtakīn to the Jazīran city, was an initiative of the caliph himself or of his influential brother. While the latter hypothesis appears plausible, it remains unproven.

The texts that discuss what appears to have been Adhkūtakīn's brief stay in Mosul, his conflicts with local notables, the harsh meteorological conditions of late winter 259/873, and the ensuing socio-political unrest are relatively few. The earliest source is the *Tārīkh al-Mawṣil* ('History of Mosul') by Yazīd b. Muḥammad al-Azdī (d. 334/945–6), who is not only the historian closest in time to the events in question, but also constitutes, in essence, the primary source not only for contemporary scholarship but also for later Arabic historians who referenced these events in their works, such as Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233) and al-Nuwayrī (d. 733/1333.) As is evident, this body of sources is not particularly extensive. However, it is worth noting that the biographies of the two earliest historians allow for greater confidence in the reliability of their accounts. Both al-Azdī and Ibn al-Athīr were natives of Mosul and spent most of their careers in the city. Al-Azdī, who is of particular interest here, was a *qāḍī* and the son of a member of the local elite, which allowed him direct access to what were essentially archival sources. These complemented his undoubtedly more bookish training in the general history of the *dār al-Islām*.

As C.F. Robinson has previously observed, al-Azdī, while not averse to using imperial materials as sources for his local historical writing, also clearly draws upon local sources—namely, a diverse corpus of Jazīran materials, including official documents, narratives of local history, genealogies and *ʿilm al-rijāl* literature. Robinson further emphasises that this reliance on Mosuli-specific data is particularly pronounced in those sections of the *Tārīkh* most relevant to our inquiry, namely those concerning the Abbasid period closest in time to the author himself (ROBINSON 2006). We may therefore assume that it was upon these materials, that is local sources, that al-Azdī relied in presenting the following account of the events of 259/873–4 in his city:⁷

7 The chronology of the episode requires clarification. Al-Azdī and, following him, Ibn al-Athīr, place the event within the chapter dedicated to the year 260 AH, yet the narrative itself begins in Jumādā I of the year 259 (5 March 873 – 3 April 873). The action then unfolds in April 'of the same year', a phrase that may in fact refer to 260 AH rather than 259. This ambiguity arises because the same formula is frequently employed in annalistic historiography—and by these very authors—to transition between topics within a single chapter. Nonetheless, the more straightforward reading remains that of 259 AH. However, one argument in favour of dating the events to 260 should be mentioned: later in the same passage, both al-Azdī and Ibn al-Athīr note that following the expulsion of Adhkūtakīn, the situation did not change 'until the end of 260 [AH]'. Why, then, situate these events in the chapter on the year 260 if most of what is described occurred prior to it? One possible explanation has already been suggested above: the chapter

The caliph al-Mu'tamid appointed to Mosul someone named Asātakīn, who was one of the most prominent Turkish commanders. In Jumādā I of the year 259, he dispatched his son, Adhkūtakīn, to Mosul. Then, on the day of Nawrūz of that same year, which fell on the thirteenth of April (al-Mu'taḍid bi-llāh changed it), he invited Adhkūtakīn and the notables of Mosul to a pavilion in the parade ground, where he brought all kinds of amusements and abundant wine, which he drank in public. His companions openly engaged in immorality and committed evil deeds, and he led the people astray. (al-AZDĪ 2006, 2:83)⁸

According to the chronological data provided by the historian, Adhkūtakīn was sent to Mosul in the April of 873 CE, shortly before the *Nawrūz* celebrations—that is, the opening of the fiscal year (*iftitāḥ al-kharāj*). Although the precise procedures governing the collection of land tax (*kharāj*) at that time remain unclear, it is known that this date typically marked the final deadline for requesting any recalculations of the amount due, for instance in response to exceptionally adverse meteorological conditions. It was also the moment when the authorities expected the first instalment of the tax to be paid.⁹

But when exactly did *Nawrūz* fall? On this point, it is important to bear in mind that, regardless of the calendrical and fiscal administrative practices of the Sassanian period, we can be reasonably certain that at least until the third/ninth century, the caliphate did not implement intercalations or other adjustments to address a long-recognised issue: the Iranian calendar used in administrative contexts, lacking Julian-style leap years, caused its New Year, *Nawrūz*, to shift one day earlier every four years. If, at the time of the Arab-Islamic conquest, *Nawrūz* fell around the summer solstice, by 259/873 it had shifted to mid-March, with detrimental, though still tolerable under normal conditions, consequences for taxpayers. As al-Azdī himself notes, it was only under al-Mu'taḍid that the caliphal administration implemented measures of lasting impact to address this quite specific issue of the fiscal

concerning 259 is largely taken up with reports on al-Muwaffaq's operations against the Zanj. Yet the question remains open. For the purposes of this article, we have chosen to adopt the simpler reading. It should be noted, however, that placing the events in 260 AH would allow for closer synchronization with European sources, which describe the winter of 873–4 as particularly harsh, a matter we shall return to below. Of course, such reasoning would be largely circular. The tables used here are from CRISTOFORETTI 2000, 125–29.

⁸ The precise date of 13 April given by al-Azdī for the *Nawrūz* of 259/873 is incorrect. *Nawrūz*, the first day of the month of Farwardīn, fell on the 17 April in both 259/873 and 260/874. Yet this error offers some insight into al-Azdī's sources. In fact, *Nawrūz* did fall on 13 April rather than 17 April only during the years 257 to 260 of the Yazdagird era (888–91 CE). Al-Azdī, as a *qāḍī*, had access to administrative materials, though he was not himself an administrator. It is entirely plausible that he consulted a table intended for bureaucratic use—one based on the solar reckoning of the Iranian system, that is, the Yazdagird era—in order to determine the date of *Nawrūz* in 259 AH. Perhaps through a simple oversight, he recorded the *Nawrūz* date for 259 Yazdagird, rather than for 259 AH. This hypothesis is, for the present writer, especially persuasive: I myself once made a similar mistake when consulting comparable tables. Moreover, in the context of the events described by al-Azdī, a discrepancy of a few days in the dating of *Nawrūz* does not substantially alter the substance of the narrative.

⁹ For a general overview see KATBI 2010; On the issue of continuity and change, the most recent contribution, which also contains a detailed bibliography, is BENFEY 2024.

calendar.¹⁰ As for Adhkūtākīn and Asātākīn themselves, the movements of father and son are difficult to trace within the intricate political and military events of those years, although we know that they were dispatched to the Iranian plateau to reassert some degree of control.¹¹

The Cold Snap

The fragility of the caliphal administration in the latter half of the third/ninth century was thus both general—stemming from political instability, the power struggles that followed the assassination of al-Mutawakkil, and the overwhelming dominance of the Turkish military—and more specific, being linked to the increasingly early opening of the fiscal year and the resulting difficulties for landowners subjected to *kharāj* taxation. However, in the case under examination, this fragility ultimately led to a full-scale uprising due to an additional factor: a frost, an adverse meteorological event that, while not catastrophic, had a disproportionately severe impact precisely because it occurred within an already unstable context.

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Al-Azdī describes the situation succinctly:

That same year saw intense cold that destroyed trees, fruits, wheat and barley. Nonetheless, he demanded the *kharāj* on the crops that had perished, which greatly distressed the people. If he heard of anyone possessing a fine horse, he would seize it. (al-AZDĪ 2006, 2:83)

The account, and especially the destruction of wheat and barley, is consistent with the scenario of an unseasonal late frost—an unusual but not impossible event for the region. Under normal circumstances, the notables of Mosul would have been able to request tax exemptions. However, Adhkūtākīn was not a man familiar with the customs and practices of fiscal administration; rather, he belonged to the military elite and exercised his authority in a manner that al-Azdī explicitly portrays as predatory. Moreover, due to the short interval between the devastating frost and the opening of the fiscal year, with Adhkūtākīn arriving in Mosul just as tax collection was about to begin, petitions for exemption were not granted.

As previously noted, the events that took place in Mosul at this specific time are not recorded in other sources. However, a couple of indications confirming that it was an

¹⁰ On this reform and a short-lived earlier precedent, see BORRONI 2021.

¹¹ It seems they, like others, managed to carve out a degree of autonomy. This autonomy was challenged some ten years later, in 276/899, when al-Muwaffaq himself launched a campaign against them. According to al-Ṭabarī and his sources, the primary aim of al-Muwaffaq's expedition was to recover a considerable treasure allegedly amassed by the two Turkish commanders in Rayy. The information had come from Asātākīn's own secretary, yet the regent—so far as the sources indicate—found nothing and continued his Abbasid pacification efforts in the direction of Karaj and Isfahan. Asātākīn and Adhkūtākīn (sometimes Yadhkūtākīn) appear to have avoided direct confrontation, but from this point onwards, they seem to vanish—or nearly so—from the historical record. The scant information we possess about them nevertheless contributes to an understanding that the difficulties faced by the Abbasid state were not confined to Mosul. The revolt under discussion here must indeed be explained through local factors, yet it must also be situated within the broader context of the Abbasids' weakening grip on the provinces. (al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 9:549, 10:16)

unusually cold year in the Mesopotamian region can be found in later Arabic sources. The first relates to one of the most immediate indicators of agricultural distress: price fluctuations. Al-Ṣuyūṭī, in fact, records a sharp rise in prices in Iraq as early as the following year, 260 AH (27 October 873 – 15 October 874). It is important to bear in mind that the Iraqi lands remaining under direct caliphal control were highly dependent on agricultural production from the Jazīra:

A great scarcity prevailed in Hijaz and Iraq, and a *kurr* of wheat in Baghdad rose to one hundred and fifty *dīnārs*. (al-SUYŪṬĪ n.d., 265)

Furthermore, Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī identifies 259 AH as a year of particularly heavy snowfall, at least in the central region of Tust:

He [i.e. al-Muḥallab b. al-Akḥṭal b. al-Muḥallab] narrated from Abū Nu‘aym, ‘Abd al-Razzāq b. Hammām, and others. He died in Tust in the year two hundred and fifty-nine, the year of the great snowfall there. (IBN ḤIBBĀN al-BUSTĪ n.d., 5:545)

More generally, cold spells such as the one described by al-Azdī are not unheard of in Mosul, but they are certainly exceptional, particularly after the month of January.¹² By coincidence, a rare example of a meteorological phenomenon akin to the one under discussion occurred precisely while this article was being written, in late February 2025.¹³ In the final third of the month, average temperatures in Mosul would typically be around 5 °C. However, between 24 and 26 February 2025, a Siberian air mass descended from the north, bringing harsher conditions, with recorded minimum temperatures of −3.3 °C, −2.4 °C and −2.3 °C on the 24th, 25th and 26th respectively. These temperatures, it should be noted, were still milder than those predicted by the weather forecasts, which had warned of frost risks as low as −7 °C.¹⁴ Analogous cold episodes were recorded during the winters of 2020 and 2008, though in those cases their impact was moderated by increased precipitation.¹⁵ Such events, then, are exceptional but by no means unknown, and in the case of the cold spell of 259/873–4, its particularly harmful effects may have resulted from its lateness in the season, its severity, or a combination of both.

It is therefore not strictly necessary to posit an anomaly of a much larger scale to explain the event—although, as we shall see, it cannot be ruled out that the years 873 and 874 CE were marked by significant climatic instability across a broad swathe of Eurasia and the

¹² Events of this kind are often attributed to the so-called ‘Cold of the Old Woman’ (Ar. *bard al-‘ajūz*), a term denoting a late cold spell following an initial spring warming, traditionally the three days before the twentieth of February. For a discussion of the Persian and Arabic sources, see MIRFAKHRAIE and NEGAHBAN 2015. Relevant in this context is also M. Widell’s work on Michael the Syrian’s Syriac records (sixth/twelfth century), which contribute to our understanding of sixth/twelfth-century palaeoclimatic conditions (WIDELL 2007).

¹³ This data is derived from ‘Weather in Mosul—Climate Monitor on February 2025’.

¹⁴ This was, of course, covered by several online newspapers. See, for instance, QANĀT al-SŪMARĪYA al-‘IRĀQĪYA 2025.

¹⁵ Closer to the time of our source, similar events are famously mentioned in the winter of 926 CE (DOMÍNGUEZ-CASTRO et al. 2012, 79).

Mediterranean.¹⁶ There are, in fact, indications from other regions suggesting that this period was a meteorologically unusual one across much of Eurasia and the Mediterranean. The best-documented phenomenon is an exceptional proliferation and migration of locusts. These insects, whose reproductive cycles are favoured by certain meteorological conditions, multiplied in vast numbers at the mouth of the Danube before migrating westward into Europe, eventually reaching present-day northern Italy and France. The large scale of the swarms serves as an indication of unusual conditions, at least in their region of origin along the north-western coast of the Black Sea (McCORMICK, DUTTON and MAYEWSKI 2007, 886; ZADOKS 2017, 1144; FOOT 2010, 32; CAMUFFO and ENZI 1991, 43). These locust swarms, combined with an exceptionally harsh winter in 873–4, led to famines, plagues and widespread mortality across much of Western Europe, including al-Andalus. The situation in the Mediterranean regions of Africa is less clear. In the Maghreb, 260 AH appears to have marked a pause in a prolonged period of drought.¹⁷ However, the main source for this claim is the Moroccan historian al-Nāṣirī, who wrote his *al-Istiqṣā li-akhbār duwal al-Maghrib al-aqṣā*, a history of Morocco, in the nineteenth century, and it has not been possible to determine the sources upon which he based this assertion (al-NĀSIRĪ n.d., 1:236).¹⁸ Additional data from corporate archives and climatological records for North Africa would be particularly valuable, especially given the greater attention that has so far been devoted to European sources. Hypotheses have already been proposed linking the harsh winter of 873–4 CE to a possible volcanic eruption, evidenced by a deposit of volcanic sulphur material found in Greenland’s ice.¹⁹

Meanwhile, Tang China experienced unstable and drought-prone weather conditions in 873 CE, which had severe repercussions for the empire’s political stability, within the broader context of the Late Tang Weak Monsoon Period (ZHANG et al. 2008). It is also worth noting that a recent dendrological study conducted in western China identified 873 CE as one of the five wettest years in the 2,917-year period under examination (WANG, SHAO and LI 2019). Additionally, a valuably early Arabic source, al-Ya‘qūbī, reports at the end of his annalistic history that in 259/873–4 the Nile, which is, as is well known, directly influenced by the monsoons, ‘turned a yellowish colour and remained in that state for days’, which would point to an alteration of its proportions of minerals and organic matter that remains impossible to define better.²⁰

¹⁶ See HEWETT et al. 2022 for a diachronic reconstruction of rainfall in the region and its long-term climatic context.

¹⁷ MEKLACH et al. 2021, 1666. See also the supplementary materials.

¹⁸ For more on al-Nāṣirī, see CALDERWOOD 2012. On the general trends of this period, see PATARNELLO 2020, and the forthcoming doctoral dissertation by the same author.

¹⁹ In fact, the year in which this sulphate (SO₄) deposit appears in the GISP2 ice core data is 876 AH. However, allowing for a margin of error of up to two and a half years, McCormick argues that ‘the precision of the written sources works to fix the less precise GISP2 chronology’. While one may not fully share the climatologist’s confidence in aligning the GISP2 record with what is found in textual sources, it remains a hypothesis worth considering. See MCCORMICK, DUTTON and MAYEWSKI 2007, 887.

²⁰ Al-Ya‘qūbī also notes that pilgrims faced severe hardship in that year. However, in this case, it is difficult—indeed, perhaps unwise—to isolate meteorological factors from the broader array of challenges encountered along the route to Mecca. Al-Faḍl b. al-‘Abbās b. al-Ḥasan led the pilgrimage that year, and

It is clearly difficult, based on this evidence, to make any precise or reliably certain claims about the climatology of Eurasia between 873 and 874 CE—and such an endeavour is not the aim here. Rather, a broader consideration of the information provided by both textual sources and palaeoclimatological records helps lend greater credibility to what would otherwise remain a relatively isolated reference to a late cold spell affecting the Mosul region in the early part of 873 CE. In other words, one may say that the credibility of our (nearly) sole source rests on three pillars: the temporal and geographical proximity of al-Azdī to the events in question; the corroboration offered by a later author, Ibn al-Athīr, who was likewise based in Mosul; and a broader context (though still only partially defined) that points to a period of marked meteorological instability. To these three considerations, one might also add the fiscal calendar reform enacted by al-Mu'taḍid to which we will now turn, which, albeit more indirectly, allows us to trace a connection between the causes of the revolt, its resolution, and the reassertion of effective caliphal control over Mosul.

The Revolt

Al-Azdī's account continues with the consequences of Adhkūtakīn's misrule in an already difficult situation. The triggering event is the assault on a young woman:

The people of Mosul remained patient until one of his men assaulted a woman, attempting to abduct her on the street. She resisted and cried for help. A man named Idrīs al-Ḥimyarī, known for his Qur'an recitation and piety, saved her from him. The soldier went back to Adhkūtakīn and lodged a complaint against Idrīs. Without investigating the matter, Adhkūtakīn had Idrīs brought before him and gave him a severe beating. The prominent citizens of Mosul gathered in the congregational mosque, saying, 'We have endured the confiscation of our wealth, the violation of our honour, the neglect of proper religious practice and tyranny. Now the matter has gone as far as seizing our women.' They all agreed to drive him out and present a grievance against him to the caliph. When Adhkūtakīn heard this, he rode out with his forces, taking incendiary archers along with him. The townspeople confronted him and fought fiercely until they expelled him from Mosul and plundered his house. He was struck by a stone from a sling, and that same day he departed towards Balad, and then travelled on to Samarra. (al-AZDĪ 2006, 2:84)

The name Idrīs al-Ḥimyarī does not appear to be known to other authors, suggesting that, despite the good reputation he reportedly enjoyed in the city according to al-Azdī, he was not a figure of major significance. In any case, his role remains almost as marginal as that of the

it is recorded that earthquakes, violent winds and an unusual darkness afflicted the regions around Medina, affecting the Banū Sulaym, Banū Hilāl and other Qays tribes, along with various Bedouin groups. These communities fled to Medina and Mecca, seeking refuge near the Prophet's tomb and the Ka'ba, bringing with them possessions taken from pilgrims they had robbed en route. According to their own reports, a large number of their companions had perished in the desert. These events are placed in the year 259/873 (al-YA'QUBĪ n.d., 2:511).

assaulted woman, as he does not feature in the subsequent events concerning the city. For this reason, it seems likely that the assault, while undoubtedly plausible, played only a minor role in the population's decision to expel Adhkūtākīn. The violation of a maiden is a well-established literary cliché that serves to spur righteous men into action against an oppressor: a trope well attested in Abbasid historiography, with the capture of Amorium being the most famous example (SPERL 1977, 30). However, economic and fiscal grievances appear to have been far more substantial factors, to the extent that even the narrative itself cannot avoid recalling them. It may also be worthwhile to mention that the premature opening of the fiscal year in early spring caused problems even in normal years. An initial, albeit short-lived, solution was introduced under al-Mutawakkil, and the sources that discuss this early attempt also describe, albeit within a fabulous or anecdotal framework, the kinds of difficulties taxpayers faced. Abbasid society was highly monetised, meaning that tax payments, including agricultural levies such as the *kharāj*, were generally made in cash rather than in kind, though exceptions did exist. While this is typically regarded as a sign of institutional stability and an indicator of overall economic health, in this specific case it also allowed for the collection of land taxes before the harvest had even taken place, largely relying on a sophisticated and complex system of yield estimation. As al-ʿAskarī (d. 254/868) recounts, taxpayers often had to resort to loans at unfavourable interest rates in order to meet their obligations, without yet having any reasonable certainty that the agricultural yield would meet expectations. As the sources put it, this occurred 'when the barley in the fields was still green', barley being the earliest crop to ripen (al-ʿASKARĪ 1987, 185–86).²¹

The cold spell of 259/873–4 thus played a role in the expulsion of Adhkūtākīn. However, this role can only be fully understood in the broader context of the Abbasid administration's calendrical challenges and the general disorder that characterised imperial governance at the time, particularly in relation to provincial control. These conditions allowed for the appointment in Mosul of a military figure known for his rapacity who was lacking in administrative competence, if not entirely devoid of it. In other words, the rebellion of 259/873–4 should be seen as a symptom of long-standing systemic issues—problems that had been building over time and would, in all likelihood, have erupted sooner or later. In this case, however, they were triggered by an adverse meteorological event, which, though not extraordinary in itself, served as a disproportionate catalyst for unrest.

The Aftermath

The expulsion of Adhkūtākīn and the installation of Yaḥyā b. Sulaymān in his stead did not provoke an immediate response from the governor Asātakīn, who remained inactive for a considerable period, until 261/875–6. At the beginning of that year, the governor is said to

²¹ This very predicament, moreover, is said to have been experienced by al-Muʿtaḍid himself—clearly before assuming this honourific title as caliph—when he was still primarily known as the son of al-Muwaffaq. This episode is recalled in the long *qaṣīda* composed by his cousin, Ibn Muʿtazz, in praise of his governance. The Arabic text and a German translation are available in LANG n.d., 40:563–611, 41:232–79.

have written to the Taghlibī al-Ḥaytham b. ‘Abdallāh b. al-Mu‘ammar al-‘Adawī, urging him to march from Diyār Rabī‘a towards the Jazīra in order to restore control over Mosul, also providing him with ‘robes of honour and a banner’. Al-Ḥaytham attempted to fulfil the task assigned to him, but was met with a bloody defeat. Asātakīn then turned to another Taghlibī, Ishāq b. Ayyūn, who, according to al-Azdī, assembled a force of 20,000 men. Among these was Ḥamdān b. Ḥamdūn, whose family would later become highly influential in the region’s history. Ishāq’s campaign, despite an initial success which allowed him to take control of parts of the city, was ultimately unsuccessful. At this point, al-Azdī’s narrative breaks off, turning instead to events in other provinces of the empire.

The subsequent information offered by al-Azdī is sparse. Still in 261/875–6, a third Taghlibī figure was reportedly appointed governor of Mosul by Caliph al-Mu‘tamid, though it remains unclear whether he fared any better in collecting the *kharāj* revenues (al-AZDĪ 2006, 2:84). By 263/877–9, the city had fallen into the hands of the Khārijīs, led by Hārūn b. ‘Abdallāh al-Bājālī (al-AZDĪ 2006, 2:87). In 274/887–8, when al-Mu‘tamid made a brief attempt to challenge the authority of his brother al-Muwaffaq, only to be compelled to accept what was formally a reconciliation, his supporters, fleeing al-Muwaffaq’s reprisals, sought refuge in Mosul (al-AZDĪ 2006, 2:94). Paradoxically, this suggests that the city was, or was still perceived to be, outside the effective control of the caliphate.

Such shifting allegiances and rapid turnover of appointments continued throughout al-Mu‘tamid’s caliphate, especially in its final years, which were marked by the struggles between Ishāq b. Kundāj and his son Muḥammad, the Shaybānīs centred in the Jazīra north, and Ḥamdān b. Ḥamdūn. Our main concern here, however, is not so much to retrace the detailed and often chaotic developments of political affairs in Mosul or the Jazīra during the final years of al-Mu‘tamid’s caliphate, but rather to keep in view that, from the revolt of 259/873–4 onwards, Mosul remained almost continuously and notoriously beyond caliphal control. Its lands were marked by a state of turbulence that would persist until the 280s AH. It is a period that may be understood as a sociopolitical amplification of the effects of a moment of meteorological difficulty and administrative weakness which, while undoubtedly problematic, does not appear to have been of an intrinsically extreme severity.

Al-Mu‘taḍid’s Calendrical Reform

As previously mentioned, it was only under al-Mu‘taḍid that the caliphate took measures to address in the long term the calendrical issue outlined above, which had escalated in Mosul into the revolt against Adhkūtākīn in 259/873. At least in intent, these measures were meant to be long-term, and the reform remained in force beyond the caliphate of al-Mu‘taḍid. One of the reasons we are able to trace the continued observance of the *Nayrūz Mu‘taḍidī* is the ministerial directives instructing local officials not to anticipate the opening of the fiscal year and to comply with the reform.²² The most well-known account of the issuance of the reform is that of al-Ṭabarī, who recounts how, at the beginning of his caliphate, al-Mu‘taḍid marched towards the Jazīra to restore it to caliphal control, which at the time was merely nominal, as

²² *Nawrūz* is most commonly spelled *nayrūz* in Arabic sources, following the form *fay‘ūl*.

we have seen.²³ Upon reaching Mosul—apparently without encountering significant resistance—al-Mu‘taḍid sent missives ‘to the provinces’, postponing the opening of the fiscal year to the 11 June and instituting a new *Nawrūz*, known as the *Nawrūz Mu‘taḍidī*, which would henceforth remain fixed on that Julian date (al-ṬABARĪ n.d., 10:39).²⁴

It is quite evident that it would be difficult to regard as coincidental the fact that the long years of unrest and conflict over control of the Jazīra and Mosul, which began with the revolt against Adhkūtakīn in 259/873, fuelled by a combination of the lieutenant governor’s rapacity, unfavourable weather conditions and an increasingly premature opening of the fiscal year, ultimately culminated in the issuance of a measure aimed at rectifying the last, if not also the first, of these issues. Moreover, it is not incidental that the postponement of the fiscal year’s opening to June fits seamlessly within a broader framework of administrative reform undertaken under al-Mu‘taḍid. There is no doubt that the strict enforcement of al-Mu‘taḍid’s decree would have significantly reduced the recurrence of similar situations. This effort at rationalisation may even have had a broader cultural dimension, as suggested by the work of the scientist and mathematician Thābit b. Qurra (d. 288/901). Under al-Mu‘taḍid, Thābit gained privileged access to the caliphal entourage and dedicated to him a treatise on the solar year. Furthermore, he initiated a pioneering endeavour (what we might today describe as historical climatology) by systematically recording daily weather conditions in the Baghdad region over the course of several years in an attempt to discern patterns in meteorological phenomena.²⁵ Finally, it does not seem improbable that the choice of 11 June—a date corresponding to the calendar used by the Christian community—was made on the advice of Mosul’s elite. This hypothesis would also provide a rationale for the decision to anchor the festival, originally determined by the Iranian calendar, to a date in the Syriac calendar, given that Mosul still hosted a significant Christian presence at the time.

Just as the cold spell prompted a social response that was disproportionate to its actual severity, owing to the broader context outlined above, so too did the revolt of 259/873–4 have unusually enduring consequences. According to al-Azdī, these consequences were largely due to the limited political capacity of Adhkūtakīn, his father the governor Asātakīn and the general instability that characterised the Jazīra during the third/ninth century. It is also worth

23 Al-Ṭabarī sees the expedition to Northern Mesopotamia as mainly intended to curb the power of Ḥamdān b. Ḥamdūn.

24 This measure was clearly intended to re-establish the opening of the fiscal year around the summer solstice, and there is no clear indication that it was meant to inaugurate a new festival per se. However, this is precisely what transpired, as evidenced by references to both popular celebrations in Baghdad and court festivities found in various Arabic sources. It remains unclear if the decree actually saw application beyond the regions watered by the Tigris, the Euphrates and their affluents.

25 The work of Thābit b. Qurra was later continued by his son, Sinān, which attests to both sustained interest and a long-term research agenda. Unfortunately, this work has been lost, and only a small portion survives in al-Bīrūnī’s *Chronology*, where it is, however, intermixed—if not overshadowed—by similar notions of distinctly Ptolemaic origin. Both al-Bīrūnī and Ibn Qurra were fully aware that regional climatology, understood as its air (*hawā’*) and thus distinct from its climate (*aqālīm*), was highly variable, primarily due to factors such as orography and proximity to the sea. For this reason, they recognised that direct observation was the correct approach to its study. See al-Bīrūnī 1923, 242–43 and the following chapter; SAMSÓ and BLAS RODRÍGUEZ 1976.

noting that both Abbasid society and the state eventually responded—albeit several decades later—in a decisive manner under al-Mu‘taḍid. They addressed the primary factor that had made the cold spell of 259 so disruptive: the gradual seasonal delay in the opening of the fiscal year. This reform was not limited to Mosul or even to the Jazīra more broadly. On the contrary, it reflects the fact that, despite the tendency to view the second half of the third/ninth century as the beginning of a period of decline, perhaps in part for environmental reasons, Abbasid society and governance retained the intellectual resources necessary to respond to crises of this nature.

Conclusions

The Mosuli revolt of 259/873–4 offers a vivid example of how a meteorological event, specifically an unusually late and severe cold spell, could act as a catalyst, triggering the eruption of underlying socio-political tensions rather than independently generating new dynamics. This raises the broader issue that, in certain cases, historical sources may fail to record meteorological phenomena, or even more prolonged environmental events, either because these had no significant consequences or because their consequences were not of interest to the authors of the sources that have survived. More generally, the case study examined here illustrates the role of environmental factors which, while impossible to ignore in reconstructing the sequence of events, operated largely in an indirect manner. They served not as primary causes but as triggers for pre-existing, thoroughly human problems, thus falling outside the strict category of causality. Even a preliminary reading of the available data suggests that the years in question were marked by a degree of instability, and that 873 and 874 may represent a climatological outlier for several Eurasian regions. This is not an entirely novel observation, but it remains in need of more precise verification through climatological records, historical sources and regional differentiation—particularly regarding the possible, though by no means established, role of volcanic activity.

As recent cases cited above show, the cold spell discussed here may well have been a localised event, and its exceptional character remains to be clarified, especially to determine whether its disruptive force stemmed primarily from its lateness, its intensity, or the combination of both. As Alan Mikhail and Sam White have both argued, the integration of environmental factors into historical analysis demands a high degree of contextual specificity in the human domain, in order to avoid slipping into narratives of decline or inertia; a warning especially pertinent to studies of the Islamic world. The aftermath of the revolt, most notably the reform of the fiscal calendar under al-Mu‘taḍid, also provides a concrete example of adaptive human agency in response to climatic stress, embodied in the proactive role played by political and administrative structures in fostering historical resilience.

To conclude, this case study shows how even relatively minor environmental disturbances can expose structural vulnerabilities within complex social and political systems, while also revealing the capacity of historical actors to respond, adapt, and implement reforms. An approach that draws upon both written sources and natural archives offers historians fresh insights into past interactions between societies and their environments—insights that may also carry valuable lessons for the challenges of our own time.

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Sobriety (*zuhd*) and Hunger (*jūʿ*): Ethical Responses to Natural Disasters in al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) Theology of Creation

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Abstract

Although al-Ghazālī's cosmology emphasises divine harmony and providential wisdom, natural calamities nonetheless pose a challenge to his theodicy. Al-Ghazālī resolves this tension by situating disasters within a providential design that integrates both time and space. While their ultimate purpose remains beyond human understanding, for al-Ghazālī, catastrophes function as divine signs—either as trials for believers or as punishments for the impious—that demand an ethical and spiritual response. The appropriate response required of the believer is made possible through the Sufi concepts of *zuhd* (ascetic detachment) and *jūʿ* (voluntary hunger), which cultivate self-discipline, purify the soul and redirect the believer toward reliance on God. These practices not only prepare individuals to endure trials with patience and gratitude but also strengthen communal solidarity, particularly in times of crisis such as epidemics. By integrating theodicy with ascetic discipline, al-Ghazālī transforms adversity into a means of spiritual elevation, affirming that faith requires both intellectual adherence and transformative praxis.

Keywords: al-Ghazālī, natural disasters, *zuhd*, *jūʿ*, Islamic ethics, eschatology

Introduction

It is striking to observe how the theme of natural disasters (*balāʾ*)—whether these be famines, epidemics or climatic catastrophes—occupies a marginal place in the works of al-Ghazālī. This apparent gap is puzzling, especially considering that, as Eric Ormsby has shown in *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, natural disasters represented a central challenge for medieval Islamic theodicy, directly bringing the notions of divine justice and providence into question (ORMSBY 1984). However, when discussing creation, al-Ghazālī rarely dwells on the apparent dysfunctions of the natural world. On the contrary, most of his writings develop a cosmology in which the human microcosm and the sublunary and celestial macrocosm bear witness to harmony, the work of transcendental divine wisdom. This vision, as Frank Griffel has highlighted in *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, is based on a theology of causality that reaffirms the absolute sovereignty of divine will while rejecting Avicennian notions of an inherent necessity in natural laws (GRIFFEL 2009). From this perspective, catastrophes are

not the result of blind mechanics but of a providential design aimed at purposes that may elude human comprehension. For al-Ghazālī, as a theologian of harmonious creation, everything contributes to its perfection: it is ‘the best of all possible worlds.’ Yet, this theology of a harmonious creation clashes with the questions raised by the violent and deadly reality of natural calamities. These disasters, striking believers and non-believers alike, not only challenge divine justice but also constitute a trial of human faith (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2007, k. 32, b. 7:1409). Thinkers such as Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 313/925), Ibn al-Rāwandī (d. 299/910), or al-Ma‘arrī (d. 449/1058), in the centuries preceding al-Ghazālī, had articulated often radical critiques of the idea of a just and benevolent God, denouncing the absurdity of a world in which the misfortunes of nature seem to prevail.¹

In his response, the coherence of which varies across his writings, the author of the *Iḥyāʾ* develops a theodicy that, both spatially and temporally, transcends the mere tragic materiality of the event, thus offering a form of eschatological phenomenology of catastrophes (GRIFFEL 2009, 175ff.). By breaking the linearity of time, the natural disaster reintegrates the ultimate and eschatological purpose of creation into the ordinary experience of believers. It invites them to a new experience of time, opening their perspective to the eschatological dimension and calling them to move beyond the tragic immediacy of the event. However, al-Ghazālī is aware that purely rational argumentation is insufficient to foster adherence, particularly among ordinary people. The recognition and acceptance of the theodicy he proposes require an ethical framework that provides access to knowledge capable of dispelling doubt and objection (ABUL QUASEM 1978).² This ethic is not merely a moral discipline but an active journey that engages the entirety of the person—their thoughts, actions and intentions. For al-Ghazālī, only through constant praxis (a progressive transformation of the soul through detachment, inner purification and the cultivation of virtues) can one become capable of perceiving the trials of life not as absurd calamities but as necessary elements of a just and wise divine order. Ethics thus becomes the means through which individuals are prepared to receive this illuminative knowledge (*‘ilm ladunī*), forming in them an inner disposition of acceptance and trust in divine justice. Without this ethical transformation, the mind remains trapped by doubts, rational objections and emotions that overwhelm the heart in the face of misfortune. Ethics, as an active path, thus connects the intellectual recognition of the principles of theodicy to their existential acceptance, enabling the believer to fully surrender to God’s wisdom and goodness.

To achieve this liberation from the senses, thereby allowing humanity to fulfill what al-Ghazālī calls its ‘kingship’, he mobilises several Sufi concepts, among which *zuhd* (sobriety) and its connection to *jūʿ* (hunger) play a significant role. In al-Ghazālī’s ethical thought, *zuhd* and *jūʿ* are not merely ascetic practices but essential dispositions that redirect the soul toward God, overcoming material attachments and worldly illusions. *Zuhd* represents a voluntary disengagement from earthly goods—not out of disdain for creation but in recognition of its transitory nature and in the hope of proximity with the divine. As for *jūʿ*, it is more than an

¹ See STROUMSA 1999; ADAMSON 2016; ADAMSON 2021; VAN ESS 1992; MONTGOMERY 2013; STROHMAIER 1999; URVOY 1996.

² For al-Ghazālī, unveiling and inner illumination are the effects of divine grace, yet they are most often a reward for human effort in striving to draw closer to God.

act of deprivation; it becomes a discipline that sharpens the spiritual senses and dismantles the illusions of the *nafs* (ego), fostering absolute dependence on God (*tawakkul*) (GIANOTTI 2001). According to Jabre, this articulation between *zuhd* and *jūʿ* is rooted in an ethic of inner transformation, where mastering material desires becomes a step toward realising the ultimate purpose of creation: knowledge of God (*maʿrifa*) (JABRE 1958, 207). Al-Ghazālī does not consider these practices as ends in themselves but as means of cultivating an inner disposition of patience (*ṣabr*), gratitude (*shukr*) and vigilance (*murāqaba*) in the face of divine sovereignty. The practice of *zuhd* and *jūʿ*, by habituating believers to detaching themselves from essential goods (food, shelter, clothing and housing), equips them to face the adversities of the natural world with trust, serenity and surrender. Thus sobriety, far from being a posture of resignation, becomes an active tool for transcending the limits of human sensory perception.

In the context of natural disasters, *zuhd* and *jūʿ* fit into a temporality open to the eschatological horizon: they transform the tragic event into a sign that unfolds a transcendent perspective, reminding humanity that, inscribed in finite time, it remains entirely dependent on the divine will, which surpasses and directs it toward its ultimate fulfillment. While Richard Frank has shown that al-Ghazālī associates these practices with a divine pedagogy—disasters, by revealing human fragility, call the believer to renew their relationship with God through a return to these fundamental ethical virtues (FRANK 1992)—here we wish to emphasise how *zuhd* and *jūʿ* are not merely individual responses to crises but elements of a communal and eschatological ethic. These practices reintegrate humanity into a divine and cosmic order, offering a way to transcend immediate tragedy. Thus, after a brief presentation of al-Ghazālī's theodicy and his theology of creation, we will examine the theological and spiritual interpretations he offers in response to natural disasters. Finally, we will analyse how *zuhd* and *jūʿ* constitute a spiritual discipline that allows believers to experience and confront natural trials not as obstacles to faith but as blessings and opportunities for inner transformation.

1. Natural Disasters in al-Ghazālī's Theodicy

Al-Ghazālī's theodicy has been the subject of several seminal and thought-provoking studies, notably those of Eric Ormsby and, more recently, Stephen Ogden (ORMSBY 1984; OGDEN 2016). For the sake of clarity and without delving into the nuanced distinctions these scholars have highlighted through their analyses of various texts by al-Ghazālī, the following summary can be offered in three key points: *primo*, God is the absolute cause of both good and evil; *secundo*, the world is the best of all possible worlds; and *in fine*, suffering or death resulting from natural events should not be understood as isolated individual realities but rather within a global perspective. That is, these events are part of a divine economy that orders all things toward an ultimate good; a good that may remain hidden from the believer's view if they confine themselves to the linearity of time instead of embracing an eschatological horizon.

1.1 God, the Absolute Cause of Good and Evil

For al-Ghazālī, God is the first and absolute cause of all things, whether they be blessings (*niʿam*) or calamities (*balāʾ*). This assertion is part of a theology of divine will (*irāda*) according to which God freely chooses everything that happens in the world (al-GHAZĀLĪ 1997, 56). In contrast to a dualistic vision that would separate the forces of good and evil, al-Ghazālī considers that everything, including natural catastrophes, proceeds from the divine decree (*al-qadāʾ wa-l-qadar*). In question five of the *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* ('The Incoherence of the Philosophers'), he does not directly address the issue of natural catastrophes, but his critique of the Aristotelian philosophy of Ibn Sīnā has, of course, consequences. By asserting that every observable event depends exclusively on divine will, al-Ghazālī opens the possibility that natural catastrophes are not the result of a mere chain of independent material causes, but rather an intervention or divine decision that wills the sequence of these material causes. From this perspective, events such as earthquakes, epidemics or floods are not autonomous accidents of nature, but potentially signs or manifestations of divine will.

As Ormsby has demonstrated, this position is based on a categorical rejection of the idea of a God constrained by external necessities: for al-Ghazālī, God acts not out of obligation but by sovereign choice (*ikhtiyār*). Thus, even human suffering and disasters find their origin in divine wisdom. This wisdom is that of justice, for as al-Ghazālī highlights in his explanation of the divine names, God is 'the Just' (*al-ʿadl*), and consequently, everything that happens is just, even though it is not given to humans, whose wisdom is limited, to understand His justice in the events that occur (al-GHAZĀLĪ 1986, 105–9). However, should not God then necessarily be just, which would reintroduce necessity into Him?

To this question, al-Ghazālī responds that divine omnipotence excludes any form of external or internal constraint that could limit God. Adopting the framework of Ashʿarī theology, al-Ghazālī rejects any form of rationalisation that would impose a 'necessity' on God. His justice is therefore not a binding justice stemming from a higher order, but a justice that derives from His absolute will (*irāda*) and His essence. Divine justice is defined by what God decides is just, and not by an external norm that would pre-exist Him. In *al-Iqtisād fī l-ʾiʿtiqād* ('The Moderation in Belief'), he writes that there can be no injustice in God, since injustice consists of acting against the power of another over something, and God, being the One who does not act within the domain of another, and who is not subject to the command of any other, cannot therefore be unjust (AL-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, q. 3, 4, 126–27). In other words, injustice, as defined by al-Ghazālī, is the transgression of the rights or authority of another, and God, being the owner of all that exists, due to His sovereignty (*rubūbiyya*), therefore cannot intervene unjustly. Furthermore, not being subject to any authority, He cannot transgress an external command. While human justice is characterised by the existence of intersubjective relations and an external authority, divine justice is intrinsic (*dhātī*) and unconditioned. Therefore God, as *al-ʿadl*, is necessarily just, but this necessity is internal to His essence and flows from His perfect being. However, does not such a reading lead to reducing divine justice to His mere will?

This perspective must be balanced by the conjunction of the names of God. Indeed, God is also *al-ḥakīm*, 'the Wise'. Therefore, divine justice, far from resembling pure voluntarism,

is also the result of divine wisdom, which is often veiled to humans or inaccessible.³ For al-Ghazālī, God's actions are always imbued with wisdom and aim at good. There is coherence and purpose, and creation, in its harmony, reflects God's intrinsic wisdom, while a theology of pure voluntarism would lead to positing a capricious God. This wisdom ensures that divine actions are neither arbitrary nor absurd, but reflect a coherent and teleological order that manifests the perfection of the divine essence. Thus, al-Ghazālī's theology maintains a delicate balance between divine freedom and the affirmation of an intelligible and wise order. In this framework, al-Ghazālī states that natural laws are subordinate to God, just as *kalām* is subordinate to the scribe's finger (al-GHAZĀLĪ 1986, 157). They are an instrument (*wasīla*) of the divine decree (*qadar*). Everything that exists in nature is a divine instrument (*al-ālāt*) willed by God according to the principle he formulates as follows regarding the divine name *al-hakam*: 'Everything that comes into existence does so by necessity (*bi-l-wujūb*), not by an inherent necessity of itself (*wa-in lam yakun wājiban li-dhātihī*), but by the eternal determination (*al-qadā' al-azālī*) that cannot be repelled' (al-GHAZĀLĪ 1986, 103).

Al-Ghazālī's theodicy is therefore based on a conception of justice that is both theocentric (the definition of justice is centered solely on God and excludes any other reference), ontological (injustice is impossible because it contradicts the divine essence) and apophatic (human beings are incapable of fully grasping its reality). These assertions allow for the reconciliation of divine omnipotence with the apparent existence of chaos or injustice in the created world. It leads al-Ghazālī to assert that the world, as it is, is the best of all possible worlds.

1.2 The World as the Best of All Possible Worlds

Al-Ghazālī's worldview is one of harmony, balance and the interweaving of created realities, such that contemplating the world (*tafakkur*) becomes a pathway to discovering the glory of the Creator, reflected in the order and beauty of creation. It is thus understandable why al-Ghazālī frequently employs metaphors drawn from the natural world, such as the balance between the needs of creatures and divine providence, to illustrate God's perfection and generosity. From this perspective, the order of the world transcends human notions of justice or goodness (al-GHAZĀLĪ 1353/1934, 5–19 ; al-GHAZĀLĪ, 1908). The world is, therefore, the best of all possible worlds—a thesis also found in Avicenna, as Richard Frank has demonstrated (FRANK 1992, 21, 61–77, 83–86).⁴ Al-Ghazālī provides a theological foundation for this view in the *Kitāb al-tawhīd wa-l-tawakkul* ('Book of Divine Unity and Trust in God') through the argument that any alternative to this world would entail defects incompatible with the nature of God. He asserts that if God had created a different or 'better' world than this one, it would imply that He exhibited either miserliness (*bukhl*) or injustice

3 Al-Ghazālī writes about the names *al-dārr* and *al-nāfi'*: '*Huwa alladhī yaṣḍuru minhu al-khayr wa-l-sharr wa-l-naf' wa-l-darr wa-kull dhālika mansūb ilā Allāh* (He is the One from whom good and evil, benefit and harm, emanate, and all of this is attributed to God)' (al-GHAZĀLĪ 1986: 156–57).

4 Ormsby has highlighted the influence of Avicenna on al-Ghazālī while noting his originality in applying this idea within a strictly theological framework centered on divine will. Al-Ghazālī transcends NeoPlatonic cosmology by asserting that the world does not result from an emanative process but rather from a deliberate choice (*ikhtiyār*) made by God.

(*zulm*), which would contradict His generosity (*jūd*) and justice (*‘adl*) (AL-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 35, sh.1, b. 2:1612. See also OGDEN 2016). In the words of al-Ghazālī:

[Everything that God has created] occurs according to a necessary and true order (*al-tartīb al-wājib al-ḥaqq*), in conformity with what is appropriate, as it ought to be, and to the extent that is fitting. There is absolutely nothing better (*aḥsan*) in terms of possibility, nor more perfect (*atamm*), nor more complete (*akmal*).

Therefore, the world, despite its catastrophes, is the best of all possible worlds. But how, then, can we understand disasters and misfortunes? In his response, al-Ghazālī argues that their existence serves to highlight what is perfect, and the manifestation of perfection contributes to the fact that the world is the best possible world.⁵ This argument is not without its weaknesses and exhibits a tautological nature, as if perfection is truly absolute, it seems inconsistent that it would rely on a contrast with what is imperfect or harmful. This implies a certain reduction of perfection to a reality that depends on something else, whereas, in a purer theological vision, divine perfection should be autonomous and self-sufficient, without requiring a ‘counterpart’ for its manifestation. Alternatively, it should be conceivable to envision a world in which goodness and perfection are revealed without necessitating the presence of evil or suffering. This tension finds resolution in a conception of time wherein the evil caused by human sins or natural evil brought about by catastrophes contributes to a higher purpose willed by God. From this perspective, disasters and misfortunes are elements of a perfection that could not exist without them.

Here, the aim is less to isolate these phenomena for individual evaluation and more to integrate them into a global process that unfolds according to its own purpose. However, while coherent, the idea that evil contributes to a greater good can seem unsatisfactory in cases of extreme suffering. Certainly, al-Ghazālī’s cosmic vision, rooted in God’s will and wisdom, provides coherence to his theodicy. Similarly, the notion of the perfection of the whole allows for the justification that individual parts might endure deficiencies or hardships. Yet, even if this theological system is coherent, it is not certain that it satisfies the believer. It is here, drawing deeply on his Qur’anic knowledge and Prophetic traditions, that al-Ghazālī offers a teaching aimed at ordinary believers, encouraging them to expand their perspective on trials and approach them in a spiritual manner.

2. Spiritual Readings and the Challenges of Natural Disasters and Epidemics

The spiritual interpretation that al-Ghazālī offers regarding natural disasters is grounded in the metaphysical framework of his theodicy while providing a more explicit and accessible coherence for ordinary believers. This perspective is rooted in an eschatological dimension that, by transcending both the linearity of time and the materiality of space, expands the

⁵ This argument, which can also be found in Avicenna, raises a philosophical difficulty as al-Ghazālī rejects the idea that God is necessitated to create the world yet follows Avicenna in deducing that this world is the best possible. See GRIFFEL 2009, 229–30; ORMSBY 1984, 78–79, 257; OGDEN 2016, 58.

believer's horizon. True to his pedagogical concerns, he perceives epidemics as instruments of purification, tests of faith and reminders of the very essence of the relationship between humanity and its Creator, thereby endowing them with a moral and edifying significance.

2.1 The Theological Relativisation of Trials

Just as Plato and Philo of Alexandria describe God as an active teacher who directly guides and instructs humanity, al-Ghazālī envisions God as a pedagogue who, through His actions, educates and informs people about both visible and invisible realities. Within this framework, suffering and calamities are interpreted as divine signs that allow individuals to glimpse the reality of Hell and the trials awaiting the sinner in the afterlife should they persist on the path of disobedience. The hardships experienced by the unjust serve not only as warnings but also as anticipations of the torment they will endure in the fires of Hell. For the righteous, these afflictions should be a cause for joy, as they reveal the reality of divine justice. This revelation enables them to better appreciate the happiness they experience today and the bliss that awaits them in the hereafter. Thus, through contrast and opposition, al-Ghazālī asserts that the misfortunes of some become the blessings of others (*'maṣā'ib qawmin 'inda qawmin fawā'id'*, al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 32, sh. 2, r. 3, b. 1:1464–65). However, if natural disasters are understood as just punishments inflicted upon sinners, foreshadowing the torments of the afterlife, what then should be made of the trials that befall believers, while the impious sometimes seem to be spared? This observation introduces a tension—perhaps even a contradiction—within his reasoning: why do the righteous suffer while the unjust prosper? To resolve this difficulty, al-Ghazālī reorients his initial perspective and synthesises two complementary arguments. First, he distinguishes between immediate punishment and deferred punishment: the worldly prosperity of the unjust and the unbelievers is, in reality, an illusion—temporary and ultimately deceptive. Second, he maintains that if the impious are not afflicted by suffering in this life, it is so they may further immerse themselves in sin, thereby worsening their fate in the Hereafter.⁶ From this perspective, being afflicted by misfortune is, paradoxically, a sign of divine favour. Al-Ghazālī argues that these trials serve as an expiation (*kaffāra*) for believers, purifying them so they may be prepared for their ultimate meeting with their Lord (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 32, sh. 2, r. 3, b. 1:1470). Thus, the eschatological significance of natural disasters varies according to the faith of those affected. For unbelievers, these calamities serve as divine punishment, and if they appear to be spared at times, this reprieve is merely temporary—an interval before a far more severe reckoning in the hereafter. In contrast, for Muslims, suffering serves as expiation, purification and, ultimately, a promise of eternal felicity.

Thus, al-Ghazālī maintains, albeit with a degree of hermeneutical duplicity, that the interpretation of natural disasters varies according to each individual's spiritual disposition. For the believer, they constitute a purifying trial, an opportunity for growth in faith, and a means of drawing closer to God. For the impious, however, their very absence is an ominous

⁶ 'And know that what awaits the disbeliever is far worse; if he is given a respite, it is so that he may sin more, thus increasing his punishment (*i'lam anna al-kāfir qad khubbi'a lahu mā huwa akthar wa-innamā umhila ḥattā yastakthira min al-ithm wa-yaṭūla 'alayhi al-'iqāb*)' (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 32, sh. 2, r. 3, b. 1, 2, 1466). The Qur'anic reference is to Q 3:178.

sign—a form of divine neglect intended to push them further into error and exacerbate their ultimate condemnation in the afterlife. Al-Ghazālī’s approach entails a fundamental ambiguity: it establishes a flexible interpretative framework in which any situation—whether marked by suffering or not—is retrospectively justified as part of a coherent divine plan. The believer is always led to interpret their fate in a positive light, while the impious—whether they suffer or prosper—remain trapped in a schema of both immediate and deferred condemnation. Such a theological construction seeks to reinforce a vision in which catastrophe never undermines faith but instead mechanically strengthens it. In practice, however, this formulation risks overlooking the true complexity of spiritual experience in the face of suffering. Moreover, this differentiation in the interpretation of misfortunes—depending on whether they affect a believer or not—is not solely rooted in an eschatological temporality. It also pertains to the very nature of suffering itself. Thus, al-Ghazālī distinguishes between two categories of trials or calamities (*balāʾ*): absolute trials (*muṭlaq*) and relative trials (*muqayyad*) (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 32, sh. 2, r. 3, b. 1:1464–65). Through this distinction, he relativises the trial posed by natural disasters. Indeed, regardless of the material violence that the believer endures, what is even graver is that which affects religion, corrupts divine unity or leads to vice (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 32, sh. 2, r. 3, b. 1, 2:1466). Such trials distance one from God in the afterlife and foster unbelief in the present world. In contrast, a relative trial pertains to poverty (*faqr*), illness (*marād*), fear (*khawf*) or other hardships that do not directly concern faith (*dīn*) but rather worldly life or daily existence. In this passage from the *Ihyāʾ*, these ‘relative trials’ primarily refer to the social, medical or psychological condition of an individual rather than a disorder caused by a natural catastrophe. However, the distinction remains applicable insofar as epidemics fall under the category of illness. Al-Ghazālī’s analysis here draws upon Qur’anic teachings that are widely appropriated in Sufi thought to emphasise the relative nature of suffering: what appears to be a misfortune can ultimately prove to be a blessing for the believer.⁷ As a result, for the believer, suffering becomes a sign of divine election: the individual whom God tests—without leading him into unbelief—is the one to whom God wishes to grant patience. As the Prophetic *ḥadīth* states, ‘When God loves one of His servants, He tests him; and in testing him, He makes him patient (*inna Allāh idhā aḥabba ‘abdan ibtalāhu wa-idhā ibtalāhu ṣabbarahu*)’ (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 32, sh. 2, r. 3, b. 1:1468–69).⁸ For al-Ghazālī, the reward for enduring patience in the face of trials is greater than what has been lost (*thawāb al-ṣabr ‘alā al-muṣība akthar mim mā fāt*), for the loss suffered in this world is, by nature, ephemeral, whereas the reward for patience is eternal (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 32, b. 7:1409). In al-Ghazālī’s perspective, patience in the face of natural disasters is neither a mere human effort nor solely the product of individual will but rather the manifestation of divine grace at work. Far from being an autonomous virtue that a person might cultivate on their own, patience is bestowed by God, who is its ultimate source. While the tested individual may exercise their will and exert effort, these remain entirely contingent upon divine assistance, without which they would be impossible. Thus, patience in enduring trials sent by God is not so much a

⁷ See Q 2:216, ‘*wa-‘asā an takrahū shay’an wa-huwa khayrun lakum*’.

⁸ One may also read ‘*inna Allāh idhā aḥabba ‘abdan ibtalāhu wa-idhā ibtalāhu ṣabbarahu*’, in which case it is the servant himself who endures and demonstrates patience, emphasising his own merit.

conquest of the soul as it is a bestowed gift, revealing the believer's radical dependence on the Creator (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 32, sh. 2, r. 3, b. 1, 5:1469).

Within the category of 'relative trials', it is essential to distinguish between different degrees of hardship. Al-Ghazālī emphasises that a catastrophe could always have been more severe than it actually was, and thus the appropriate attitude for the believer is one of gratitude (*shukr*) toward God: one should 'thank Him that the trial was not more severe in this world (*fa-l-yashkur idh lam takun a'zama minhā [al-muṣība] fī l-dunyā*)'.⁹ Another form of relativisation concerns theological determinism: every event is already inscribed in the Preserved Tablet, and what was decreed to happen has indeed come to pass. Consequently, it is incumbent upon the believer to hope that this trial will be the last he must endure (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 32, sh. 2, r. 3, b. 1, 4:1467). Furthermore, al-Ghazālī asserts that the reward awaiting the believer who has endured hardships will be greater than if he had been spared them.¹⁰ This relativisation leads to two complementary perspectives—one pragmatic and the other eschatological. On the pragmatic level, trials are perceived as opportunities to strengthen the believer's relationship with God: they encourage prayer, patience, gratitude and acceptance (*riqā*). On the eschatological level, they are situated within a framework of divine retribution, fostering the believer's hope in the reward that accompanies the acceptance and endurance of trials when they arise (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 32, sh. 2, r. 3, b. 2:1472–73).

After addressing the relativisation of natural calamities in both time and space, it is worth turning our attention to a specific affliction to which al-Ghazālī devotes discreet yet significant consideration in several passages of the *Iḥyā'*: epidemics. We shall see that his approach to this issue is marked not only by a certain pragmatism but also by his conviction that such trials serve as a test revealing the true strength of the believer's faith.

2.2 Al-Ghazālī's Pragmatic and Moral Approach to Epidemics

From the earliest decades of Islam, plague and epidemics struck the Muslim world with full force. The death of one of Muḥammad's companions, Mu'adh b. Jabal (d. 18/639), during the plague of Emmaus, which decimated thousands of Muslims, remains a painful episode. It raises questions about the theological and spiritual significance of epidemics, whose recurrence marks history, prompting doctrinal reflections and legal debates on the cause and management of these scourges (DOLS 1977). The *ḥadīth* corpus is employed to respond to the questions raised and to arrive at a theological and practical understanding, while Arab medicine seeks to contain epidemics and proposes remedies (See IBN RIḌWĀN 1984, 1–74). The *Iḥyā'* echoes this, as al-Ghazālī provides advice on what to consume or which flower to use for anointing the body in the case of an epidemic (*wabā*).¹¹

⁹ One might think of Job (Ayyūb), who, according to the Biblical narrative, was afflicted with all the misfortunes of the world. In the Qur'an, however, there is no explicit mention of his trials but rather of his unwavering faith in God and his supplications (Q 38:41–44 and Q 21:83–84).

¹⁰ 'The reward associated with trials is greater than the trials themselves, for the hardships of this world are but pathways leading to the Hereafter (*anna thawābahā akthar minhā fa-inna maṣā'ib al-dunyā ṭuruq ilā al-ākhirā*)' (Al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 32, sh. 2, r. 3, b. 1, 5:1467).

¹¹ Reference to flowers that cure feverish conditions following epidemics is found in Graeco-Arabic medicine, particularly in the work of Avicenna. See IBN SĪNĀ 1971, *al-Kitāb al-Awwal fī al-adwiya al-*

Relying on the *sunna*, al-Ghazālī sees the plague as a divine punishment (*rijz*)¹² that was inflicted (*udhḥiba bihi*) on certain peoples before the advent of Islam. However, it did not disappear, and thus it may still strike the Muslim community. Should it still be seen as a punishment? This is not the case, for another *ḥadīth* specifies that unlike earlier communities, for a Muslim dying from the plague is now akin to dying as a martyr, just as is the case for Muslims who die in battle. As we previously saw regarding natural disasters, al-Ghazālī also proposes here a positive reading of the plague for the believer. By perceiving time and space in their eschatological dimension and deconstructing the image of the plague as a punishment, al-Ghazālī questions the proper attitude to adopt toward an epidemic. His opinion is nuanced and demonstrates particular attention to context. For him, generally speaking, leaving or fleeing a place is legitimate whenever there is harm, a serious temporal nuisance (*nikāya*), an infectious disease such as the plague (*tāʿūn*) or an epidemic (*wabāʾ*) (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 17, b. 1, f. 1, q. 4:695). In all these cases, fleeing is lawful. However, while there is no harm in fleeing epidemics (*lā ḥaraja fī dhālika*), he grants the plague a specific status according to which it should only be fled under certain conditions.¹³ The existence of such an epidemic is indeed a trial for the Muslim community, which must therefore overcome it collectively. It serves as a measure of solidarity among the believers. This is how he reinterprets the famous *ḥadīth*: ‘If you learn that there is plague in a certain place, do not go there! And if the plague strikes a place where you are, do not flee!’ (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 17, b. 1, f. 1, q. 4:695). For him, the medical issue, ie. avoiding the risk of being infected by the disease or transmitting it, is not the point of the *ḥadīth*. The Prophetic command to stay in the place where the epidemic is raging is driven by the necessity of caring for the Muslim community (*umma*). He compares it to a structure (*bunyān*) in which each element supports the others. During epidemics, the believers, who are like a single body (*ka-l-jasad al-wāḥid*), must therefore help one another.¹⁴ The key issue is to measure the solidarity between Muslims within the same city. In this regard, al-Ghazālī allows for the possibility that healthy individuals may enter a city infested with the plague when no one is left within to care for the sick. Yet, he stresses that this is in no way a sacrificial act, since, according to him, such a move is only justified as long as the risk of death in that city remains uncertain.¹⁵ In the *Kitāb al-Maḥabba*, in response to those who argue that it is as inappropriate to remain in a plague-infested city as it is a city marked by sin, he counters that in the case of an epidemic, staying in place is justified by the necessity of caring for the sick so that they do not succumb due to neglect or starvation (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 35, b. 8:1647). The attention and care given to the members of the community must take precedence over any individual consideration. Nevertheless, as

mufrada (‘The First Book of Simple Remedies’).

12 The word is synonymous with ‘*adhab*, ‘torment’, ‘divine punishment’.

13 Al-Ghazālī’s legal theology of disasters places natural disasters and social, political and economic catastrophes on the same level. These can include social disorder (*fitna*), disputes between individuals or groups (*ḥuṣūma*), rising prices (*ghalāʾ*) and harm (*adhiyya*).

14 ‘*Idhā samiʿtum bihi bi-arḍ fa-lā taqḍumū ʿalayhi wa-idhā waqaʿa bi-arḍ wa-antum bihā fa-lā takhrujū firāran minhu*’ (al-BUKHĀRĪ 2001, Kitāb al-Tibb, 7:172).

15 ‘*Wa-l-muslimūn ka-l-bunyān yashuddu baʿḍuhu baʿḍan wa-l-muʾminūn ka-l-jasad al-wāḥid idhā ishtakā minhu ʿuḍw tadāʾā ilayhi sāʾir aʿḍāʾihi*’ (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 35, b. 8:1647).

a proper Ash‘arī scholar, the final decision on staying or fleeing always comes down to following God’s decree: he speaks of fleeing from God’s decree to God’s decree (*naḥara min qadar Allāh ilā qadar Allāh*) (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 36, b. 16:1717).¹⁶

Although al-Ghazālī draws on these *ḥadīths* to develop his pragmatic and moral guidance on how to respond to epidemics, the *Iḥyā’* itself remains largely silent on the issue of the plague. There are, however, a few references to the subject in relation to the emergence of an innovation or in support of a theological position. The first such example concerns the justification of a practice that is sometimes criticised: the visitation of graves. In the fortieth book of the *Iḥyā’*, al-Ghazālī presents the *statu quaestionis* and relies on a statement by Bishr b. Maṣṣūr to regard it as a recommended and desirable practice (*mustaḥabba*) (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 40, b. 3:1870): invocations for the dead after an outbreak of the plague are described as gifts. The second example comes from the same book and refers to the death of a young girl who died of the plague—in the devastating epidemic known as *al-tā‘ūn al-jārif*. This plague, which affected the inhabitants of Basra, occurred around the year 69 AH, during the reign of ‘Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr. It was particularly deadly as it is said, according to certain historical sources, to have caused the death of around 70,000 people (IBN KHĀTIMA 2010, §44, at ts. ‘70,000 victims on the first day of the epidemic’). In his account of the young girl’s death, al-Ghazālī reports that her father saw her in a dream, where she taught him the necessity of putting into practice what is known about the virtues of supererogatory prayers (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 40, b. 3, b. 2:1892).¹⁷

Thus, through his readings, or reinterpretations, of traditional narratives, al-Ghazālī gives substance to his theodicy or, more precisely, infuses a spiritual dimension into the tragic events of natural disasters. Every trial, no matter how painful—whether materially or emotionally—becomes, for the believer, a path of purification and a promise of eschatological blessings. It calls for communal solidarity, transforming adversity into an opportunity for both spiritual and collective reinforcement. Al-Ghazālī powerfully demonstrates how each of these trials is a positive sign and an expression of divine election. However, to neutralise one’s sensitivity to material hardships, to discern the eschatological signs they reveal, or to perceive them as a call to solidarity, one must possess the necessary spiritual capacity and sagacity. In this regard, the entire purpose of the *Iḥyā’* is to demonstrate that faith requires a spiritual conversion, which is realised through the Sufi path (al-GHAZĀLĪ 1959). This praxis—a journey of conversion, transformation and alchemy of the heart—is the very focus of the *Iḥyā’*. For al-Ghazālī, full acceptance of the trials caused by natural disasters is achieved through the ethics of deprivation. From this perspective, he draws on the Sufi concept of *zuhd*, which he interweaves with that of *jū‘*, to teach an ascetic discipline. The practice of this asceticism gradually shapes the soul, preparing it to embrace his teachings on trials (*balā’*) and his theodicy.

¹⁶ There is no reference regarding the salvation granted to the Muslim who dies from the plague and is considered a martyr, as found in the *ḥadīth*. Here, the issue is not staying to prevent the spread, but staying to provide support for the sick.

¹⁷ In the same vein, and following the *ḥadīth*, al-Ghazālī justifies the use of poetry, citing the example of Abū Bakr and Bilāl, who were struck by fever after Medina was afflicted by an epidemic (*wabā’*) and recited poetry in response (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 22, b. 1, b. 2:721–22).

3. *Zuhd* and *jūʿ*, or The Mastery of Passionate Desires in the Face of Natural Disasters

The question of renunciation, asceticism or sobriety (*zuhd*) holds a significant place in the Sufi tradition (KINBERG 1985; SVIRI 2023; KHUDAYBERGANOVA 2022; YALDI 2016). It constitutes one of the fundamental aspects of the mystic's praxis, enabling the purification of the soul and detachment from the desires of the stomach and the lower self. It is not merely an abstention from certain pleasures but rather an effort of spiritual transformation aimed at mastering passions and freeing oneself from anything that might divert a person from the pursuit of divine truth and obedience to divine commands. In a passage from the *Iḥyāʾ*, al-Ghazālī highlights the connection between *zuhd* and worldly trials. He demonstrates how *zuhd* fosters an attitude of renunciation that helps one endure these trials with serenity and profound faith. This ethic of sobriety is closely linked to the practice of voluntary hunger (*jūʿ*). By becoming accustomed to food deprivation, the believer strengthens self-mastery over desires, allowing them to affirm sovereignty over worldly trials.

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3.1 *Zuhd* as a Path to the Fulfillment of Humanity's Royal Vocation

As we have seen, for al-Ghazālī, the believer must attain mastery over their emotions when faced with a painful event caused by an epidemic or any other natural disaster. This self-mastery reflects one's ability to govern oneself, a concept he develops in the *Kitāb al-Ṣabr*, where he distinguishes between two forms of kingship: the illusory kingdom (*al-mulk al-majāzī*) and the true kingdom (*al-mulk al-ḥaqīqī*) (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 32, b. 7:1411). The first kingdom is ruled by human beings, who are merely trustees of divine power, while the second represents true sovereignty, which belongs to God alone. The earthly kingdom is only relative, precisely because it is contingent, fragile and marked by suffering and trials, whereas the latter remains unaltered by adversity or misfortune.

However, al-Ghazālī's teaching acquires a spiritual dimension when he asserts that the human heart is meant to reflect celestial light (al-GHAZĀLĪ 1964, 49–51). This analogy aligns with the NeoPlatonic and Sufi traditions, which associate the purity of the heart with the ability to perceive ultimate reality (*ḥaqīqa*). However, in the *Iḥyāʾ*, it is not only about reflecting divine light but also divine kingship. Man attains this by mastering both the passions of the stomach and the lower self, as well as the emotions stirred by external events. According to al-Ghazālī, sobriety leads to a form of impassibility in the face of suffering and trials. Through this self-mastery, man exercises, affirms and fulfills his royal vocation. In a subtly subversive manner, al-Ghazālī thus challenges the authority of worldly rulers: on the one hand, he asserts that every human being is destined to become a king in this life—suggesting that kingship is not merely a matter of political power within society—and on the other, he demonstrates that one is not truly a king simply by bearing the title if one lacks control over one's passions and emotions.

Al-Ghazālī argues that fulfillment of this royal vocation in this world is attained through sobriety (*zuhd*) (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 32, b. 7:1411). This involves learning to govern one's desires, aspirations and emotions. Without such mastery, one who believes himself to be a ruler is, in reality, merely a servant (*mamlūk*) (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 32, b. 7:1412). Through *zuhd*, a person gains authority over their instincts and passions. Paradoxically, a nation's king

may be a slave to his desires, while his servant, through the practice of *zuhd*, attains true freedom. Only the latter is genuinely a king, for one who rules over his instincts cannot be a slave to a sovereign who himself remains enslaved by his passions. Once again, this mastery of passionate impulses carries eschatological significance: the one who realises their royal vocation in this world is promised a closer proximity to divine sovereignty in the hereafter. The control of passions through *zuhd* is therefore essential, as it prevents confusion between the illusory kingdom, which is subject to natural disasters, and the true kingdom. By regulating appetites, it simultaneously regulates needs and desires. However, this discipline requires training—an education in restraint, particularly concerning food. The acquisition of sobriety should not be an immediate and total renunciation but rather a gradual and gentle process (*talaṭṭuf wa-tadrij*), expressions that reflect a balanced approach to transformation, acknowledging human limitations while guiding individuals toward continuous self-improvement (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 32, b. 7:1412).

From this perspective, al-Ghazālī theorises the merits of hunger, identifying ten benefits that align with his theology of sobriety. Of these, one of the key benefits is that it enables believers to face trials or catastrophes with a pacified soul. While not all of these merits are directly related to the theme of natural disasters, they converge with it insofar as dietary sobriety contributes to the attainment of true kingship.

3.2 *Jūʿ* as the Disciplining, Regulation and Purification of Appetites

The connection between hunger (*jūʿ*), sobriety (*zuhd*) and eschatology is established from the very first lines of *Kitāb Kasr al-shahwatayn* ('The Book on Breaking the Two Desires'), through a tradition reported by ʿUdayy in *al-Kāmil* (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 1:943). The trial of hunger, understood as the renunciation of eating to satiety, is for al-Ghazālī a necessary path, as it opens the soul to the reality of the afterlife. Through the experience of deprivation and, consequently, vulnerability, it becomes a means of obedience to God, shielding one from the assaults of arrogance (*baṭar*) and tyranny (*tughyān*) (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 1:943). To criticise those who indulge in excessive eating, al-Ghazālī invokes the image of leprosy (*baraṣ*) (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 1:945). In a strikingly original causal metaphor, he suggests that lack of restraint in food consumption is what triggers the punishment of an epidemic.¹⁸ In response to illness, al-Ghazālī adheres to the medical principle that the remedy lies in its opposite—in this case, voluntary hunger (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 31, r. 3:1364). While this principle holds from a strictly medical perspective, for al-Ghazālī it is even more significant in a spiritual sense. At the conclusion of the chapter on the merits and benefits of hunger, he summarises his thesis by quoting a pious predecessor (*salaf*): 'Hunger is the key to the afterlife and the gateway to sobriety (*al-jūʿ miṭāḥ al-ākhirah wa-bāb al-zuhd*)' (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 2:952). The articulation is clear: sobriety is impossible without the trial of hunger.¹⁹ By positioning this statement as the conclusion of

¹⁸ The tradition cited by al-Ghazālī, '*Inna al-akl ʿalā al-shabāʿ yūriṭhu al-baraṣ*', is not explicitly identified. See al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 1:945.

¹⁹ See also al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 3:959, where he reports the words of al-Qāsim al-Juʿī (d. 248/862) regarding the definition of *zuhd*.

his chapter on voluntary hunger, al-Ghazālī does not merely reference an argument within a dialectical reasoning process; rather, he explicitly affirms it as his own thesis (PISANI 2023).

For al-Ghazālī, the practice of dietary sobriety possesses three key virtues: restoring the purity of the heart (*ṣafā' al-qalb*), fostering the illumination of intelligence (*īqād al-qarīḥa*) and opening the way to the acuteness of inner clairvoyance (*infādh al-baṣīra*) (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 2, f. 1:948). By granting access to divine realities and deep insight, *jū'* sustains the believer in wisdom, offering a depth of perception that broadens their vision and enables them to acquire true knowledge (*'ilm*), while simultaneously purifying the heart. Unlike the body and its actions, the heart, according to al-Ghazālī, belongs to the celestial realm (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 2, f. 4, m. 2, 1, 141). The voluntary practice of hunger, therefore, leads to the delight of invoking God. A remarkable aspect of this arrangement of Sufi concepts and ideas is that, by softening and purifying the heart (*riqqat al-qalb*), hunger prepares it to perceive the sweetness of perseverance (*ladhdhat al-muthābara*) and to be moved by the remembrance of God (*al-ta'aththur bi-l-dhikr*). Through this process, faith is kept alive, revitalised, and protected from weakening under the pressure of the trials of life. The necessity of remembering God is even more pronounced for the soul experiencing hunger than for one that is satiated, as hunger heightens the awareness of human frailty, and shields against arrogance²⁰ and exuberant joy (*farah*), both of which are disconnected from gratitude (*shukr*). The continuous experience of hunger thus serves as a safeguard against powerlessness and despair, which can overwhelm individuals in times of hardship. Without ascetic practice and habituation to deprivation, al-Ghazālī warns, 'the soul is crushed by hunger: it is humbled when a mere morsel of food escapes it, and the whole world darkens for it when a sip of water is delayed' (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 2, f. 3:948–49). The primary goal of voluntary fasting, therefore, is not merely to discipline the body but, above all, to purify the soul. By attaining a state of humility (*dhull*) through hunger, the soul is freed from arrogance and from its attachment to the transient world.

Moreover, hunger is also a trial in itself: it serves as a reminder that God sends trials (*balā'*) as well as punishment (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 2, f. 4:949). More importantly, in the face of adversity, the well-fed man complains, whereas he who is accustomed to hunger learns to put hardships into perspective and integrate them into his life. For al-Ghazālī, hunger not only ensures that one does not forget the trials of the afterlife, but also encourages the nourishment of the hungry and, consequently, concern for those afflicted by hardship. In other words, it fosters altruism (*ithār*), which strengthens solidarity among believers and becomes imperative when, for example, an epidemic of leprosy afflicts a city and those who are satiated and live in comfort remain indifferent to the suffering of others.²¹ Eating little, therefore, cultivates altruism (*ithār*) and acts of charity (*taṣadduq*) towards those in need (al-

²⁰ al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 2, f. 3:948–49. Al-Ghazālī states that it evokes *inkisār*, the Form VII derivative of the root *kasara*, meaning 'to break.' In al-Ghazālī's lexicon, *inkisār* refers to the voluntary breaking of pride and selfish desires—an inner submission and self-shattering aimed at spiritual elevation. In this passage, it is contrasted with *al-baṭar*, which denotes pride and arrogance. See also al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 4:961.

²¹ 'And the one who is satiated remains heedless of the suffering of the hungry (*wa-l-shab'ān fī ghaflat 'an alam al-jā'ir*)' (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 2, f. 4:949).

GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 2, f. 10:951). Among the other benefits that al-Ghazālī attributes to *jūʿ* is that it also serves as a safeguard against all forms of disobedience by curbing passions and subduing the soul that incites to evil (*al-naḥs al-ammāra bi-l-sūʾ*) (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 2, f. 5:949). This concept, which has a Qurʾānic origin,²² carries particular significance in al-Ghazālī's thought and in Sufi spirituality more generally. It represents the first and lowest level of the human soul, which is dominated by material desires, passions and selfish instincts, and constitutes the gateway to disobedience. Through *jūʿ*, one strengthens spiritual control by disciplining the soul. By taming his soul through an ascetic praxis, the believer detaches from worldly passions and opens himself to celestial reality, drawing closer to God. Another benefit of hunger is that it keeps one awake, enabling the believer to continue acts of worship such as the supererogatory night prayer (*tahajjud*) (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 2, f. 6:950). It thus provides more time for religious devotion (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 2, f. 7:950). Additionally, it prevents diseases linked to excessive food consumption, which weaken both body and heart (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 2, f. 8:950–51). Thus, for al-Ghazālī, voluntary hunger renders the individual free (*ḥurr*) and independent of others (*istaghnaʾ* *ʿan al-nās*). This freedom should be understood not only as detachment from material possessions but also as the condition of one who, through self-mastery, becomes a king in this world (al-GHAZĀLĪ 2003, k. 23, b. 2, f. 9:951).

Conclusion

In response to the existence of natural disasters and the necessity of addressing the plight of those affected by them, al-Ghazālī developed a theodicy that not only integrates these calamities but also provides a theological foundation for the belief that the created world is the best of all possible worlds. This thesis is not without its challenges, and Ormsby has demonstrated how it has been criticised, even among the Ashʿarīs themselves (ORMSBY 1994, 92–134). Although natural disasters occupy little space in the *Iḥyāʾ*, we have observed al-Ghazālī's concern with accounting for them by integrating them spiritually within an eschatological vision of time. However, the coherence and depth of his system cannot stand alone without a practical path—one of asceticism, renunciation, sobriety and voluntary fasting. Al-Ghazālī's ethical approach to natural disasters serves as a significant example of his belief that there can be no true theological and philosophical intelligibility without a Sufi praxis.

²² Q 12:53, 'Indeed, the soul is persistently inclined towards evil, except for those upon whom my Lord has mercy'.

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Scorpions on the Cheek, Stars in the Gaze: Astrology, Power, and Poetic Imagination in the Late Abbasid World

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Abstract

Across the intellectual sky of the late Abbasid world, the stars no longer served merely as tools of calculation but as mirrors of legitimacy, theology and desire. This article traces the transformation of astrology in Arabic culture—from a science of cosmic governance to a language of poetic imagination—revealing how celestial symbolism became a means of negotiating divine order and human authority. In the later Abbasid centuries, as imperial power waned, astrology became a privileged idiom through which poets reflected on fragility, irony and loss. Through a tripartite analysis, the study examines the political role of astrology in shaping Abbasid ideals of sovereignty, its theological contestation within debates on fate and free will, and its poetic afterlife as a field of aesthetic invention. In the verses of al-Buḥturī (d. 284/897), Ibn al-Muʿtazz (d. 296/908), Abū Bakr al-Arrajānī (d. 544/1149) and al-ʿAntarī (d. 570/1175), the Moon in Scorpio and the scorpion on the cheek cease to portend doom and instead shine as emblems of beauty, wit and peril. By tracing the evolution of astrology from science to art, this paper examines how the late Abbasid imagination transformed the heavens into a stage of persuasion—where rhetoric, faith and legitimacy converged beneath the indifferent stars.

Keywords: Astrology, Abbasid poetry, political legitimacy, theology and determinism, poetic imagination, celestial symbolism, Arabic literary culture.

Introduction

In closing his entry ‘Astrology’ in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Muslim World*, Nomanul Haq invokes a verse from Muḥammad Iqbāl (d. 1938) that vividly expresses scepticism toward the astrologer’s craft: ‘How can it transmit my fate? / A star! / Humiliated, helpless / In the infinite vastness of the heavens!’ (HAQ 1995, 145). Yet, despite Iqbāl’s reservations, the stars—those tiny, celestial bodies—have served as enduring points of reference for scholars and literati across centuries of Muslim civilisation. From the *Jāhiliyya* onwards, astrology was regarded not only as a scientific discipline but also as a cultural language through which natural phenomena, political events, and human emotions could be interpreted. As Nader El-Bizri and Eva Orthmann remind us, astrology (*tanjīm*) was grouped with other pre-modern forms of knowledge and divination under the category of *ʿulūm gharība* (occult sciences), providing ‘explanatory frameworks for phenomena that eluded

explanation by the four classical elements [n.d. earth, air, water, and fire]’ (EL-BIZRI and ORTHMANN 2018, 6). Indeed, the sciences of the occult occupied a space between natural philosophy and metaphysics, often intersecting with them in direct ways. For example, *astronomia* (*‘ilm al-nujūm*) combined mathematical astronomy with astrology, while arithmology and numerology accompanied the sciences of arithmetic and number theory. A closer look at these pre-modern forms of knowledge can undoubtedly ‘enrich our understanding of the boundaries of science and its epistemological implications’ (EL-BIZRI and ORTHMANN 2018, 7), but their linkages with other forms of knowledge such as literature are also illuminating, especially when these began to be understood as reflecting a professional approach. Because Islamic cultures sought to develop the concept of *‘ilm* (knowledge, science)¹ as one that emerged from its own tradition and inquiries—ultimately flowing into a broader investigation of a perfectly ordered cosmos, in which each point corresponded to a notion of divine perfection—astrological beliefs coexisted alongside religious and philosophical sciences. This coexistence created a dynamic counterpoint, offering frameworks for grappling with uncertainty, especially in periods marked by political upheavals or disruptions, such as the sixth/twelfth to eighth/fourteenth centuries, when most of the investigations gathered in this special issue are situated.

With specific reference to the scholarly focus of this volume, i.e. environmental challenges and disasters as subjects of narratives of power and legitimacy, I believe it would not benefit from an exploration of astrology itself, about which a rich plethora of studies exists, nor even of the genre of *malhama*, which deals with omens and which has already been investigated by Kristine Chalyan-Daffner and Toufic Fahd (CHALYAN-DAFFNER 2018 and FAHD 2012). Drawing upon a diversified methodology combining close readings with the reflection on astrology as an epistemic system (e.g. KENNEDY 1998; EL-BIZRI and ORTHMANN 2018) and a focus on intellectual and cultural history (e.g., SHĀMĪ 1982; COHEN-MOR 2001), my interest lies in understanding how astrology found a place in literature, specifically in poetry, and the aims it served. Given that astrological beliefs provided frameworks for navigating unpredictability, this article explores how late Abbasid poets incorporated these frameworks—or, at times, merely the mention of astrological tools—into their literary production, often guided by three main premises. Poets harnessed astrology to praise or critique rulers, comment on the rise and decline of dynasties, or reflect on political inertia. However, as well as employing astrological references to position themselves within the theological debates of their era, they also used *tanjīm* as a literary *topos*. The fascinating image of the ‘scorpion on the cheek’, which gives this study its title, encapsulates this transformation: it epitomises astrology’s passage from a science dealing in ominous cosmological sign to poetic ornament, symbolising how celestial language became a mirror for human emotion and aesthetic craft in the late Abbasid imagination. In employing it in such ways, poets not only underscored the inescapability of astrological references, but also used them as a vehicle for critique, revealing the pervasive familiarity with astrology of both *al-khaṣṣa* (the elite) and *al-‘amma* (the common people), albeit from markedly different perspectives. Before analysing the three main premises addressed by the case study that

¹ For an excursus of the early conceptualisation of *‘ilm* and other terms related to knowledge see MESTYAN 2011, 74–76.

comprises the primary focus of this article, a brief introduction will highlight the enduring presence of astrological references in Arabic literary culture, long before the Abbasid era. Viewed in this light, astrology in Abbasid thought and poetry becomes more than a repository of cosmological belief: it functions as a language through which intellectuals, theologians and poets alike negotiate the boundaries of knowledge, persuasion and wonder. The heavens offered not merely symbols of fate, but a grammar of meaning—acting as a mirror through which rhetoric could imitate divine order while asserting human ingenuity. What follows traces this transformation from astrology as a science of legitimacy to its aesthetic afterlife as a medium of poetic and rhetorical craftsmanship.

1. The Long Path to The Stars: Astrology in the Arabic Poetic Tradition

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Extraordinary celestial events have always been viewed as having astrological significance, from the earliest days of human history. During the *Jāhiliyya*, astrology held a distinctive place within the cultural and religious landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia, intertwining celestial observation with divinatory practices and mystical beliefs. Far from constituting a formalised science, it served as a framework through which Arabs sought to interpret fate, natural phenomena and human destiny. As has been well-described by Evelyn Edson and Emilie Savage-Smith, soothsayers often relied on the lunar mansions (*manāzil al-qamar*) and the constellations (*al-anwāʾ*) to forecast events: for instance, *al-Thurayyā* (the Pleiades) was associated with rainfall and prosperity, while *al-Dabaran* (Aldebaran) signified drought and hardship (EDSON and SAVAGE-SMITH 2004, 33). Celestial occurrences were likewise interpreted as omens, with comets viewed as harbingers of disaster, shooting stars as signs of change, and *Rāʾs al-Ghūl* (Caput Algol) associated with bloodshed (al-ṢUFĪ 2020, 114, 271–78). Pre-Islamic poets drew upon such imagery to express themes of fate and misfortune. For example, Umayma bt ʿAbd Shams (fl. sixth century CE) referred to a star as an omen of death when elaborating on the loss of her nephew (al-ABBASI 2008, 86). Conversely, the famous poet al-Nābigha al-Dhubayānī (d. 604 CE) used imagery relating to eclipsed stars in a poem on the loss of his friend Ḥusayn al-Firāzī,² giving life to a literary *topos* would be frequently employed by later poets to comment on the passing of their patrons:

يقولون: حصن، ثم تأبى نفوسهم وكيف بحصن، والجبال جنوح
ولم تلفظ الموتى القبور، و لم تزل نجوم السماء، والأديم صحيح.
(al-DHUBYĀNĪ 1984, 148³)

² For more information on this member of the *Jāhili* elite, see BĀBTĪ 1998, 109–11.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

They say: ‘Ḥiṣn is gone’—but their souls refuse to believe it | How could Ḥiṣn
 be gone, while the mountains still stand firm,
 the graves have not yet yielded up their dead | the stars of heaven still shine,
 and the sky remains unbroken?

At the same time, astrological beliefs carried practical weight, influencing decisions about such matters as the timing of conception, and therefore births, and propitious times to undertake journeys and engage in warfare, with the Moon’s presence in Scorpio regarded as an especially ill omen (ABŪ MA‘SHAR 2013, 663). Yet underlying these practices was a broader fatalistic outlook in which *dahr* (time or fate) was seen as the ultimate determinant, limiting astrology’s claims to the realm of minor predictions rather than that of ultimate control over destiny (COHEN-MOR 2001, 47).

As Haq affirms, it was only after the rise of Islam and the Arab military expansions that astrological observations and beliefs began to be structured into a more organised body of knowledge. At this point, astrological practice branched into four broad categories: (i) genethliology, which relates all aspects of an individual’s life to the situation of the heavens at the moment of his nativity; (ii) catarchic astrology, which consists in determining on the basis of the celestial configurations whether a given moment is auspicious (*sa’d*) or inauspicious (*naḥs*) for a particular activity; (iii) general astrology, which is concerned with periodic heavenly situations (eclipses, planetary conjunctions equinoxes, etc.), relating them to events affecting large numbers of people, nations or the whole world; and (iv) interrogational astrology (*masā’il*), which answers specific questions on the basis of the heavenly configuration at the time of the query (HAQ 1995, 143). In Islamic civilisation, the complex phenomenon of rearranging non-Arabic astrological compendia, which served as inspiration for the above-described systematisation, was certainly intricate. These compendia were usually translated into Arabic from Pahlavi and Sanskrit, as well as from Syriac and directly from Greek. Thus, the Islamic astrological tradition displays not only certain characteristically Hellenistic features but also elements that originated in India and Iran. In contrast to many other Islamic sciences, these Eastern elements retained a strong influence in Islamic astrology:

Thus, despite their intimate relationship and similar routes of transmission, the science of astronomy underwent in Islam a thorough Hellenization, whereas astrology continued to show a dominance of characteristically Indo-Iranian features, with emphases on interrogational, military, and political astrology. (HAQ 1995, 143)

One of the most striking examples of how astrology found a place in literature, while also maintaining this multicultural flavour and the influence of the style and structure of the ancient traditions, is the *malḥama* genre,⁴ which has received little attention in contemporary

4 Given two variations of the word’s meaning—i.e. *malḥama* as an ‘apocalyptic war’ versus ‘prediction’—we distinguish at least three literary genres or groups of texts to which this term is applied, the most famous of which is the epic poem. The other two are the apocalyptic *malḥama* of pseudo-historical character and the astro-meteorological *malḥama* handbooks. See CHALYAN-DAFFNER 2018, 137. Cf. CHALYAN-DAFFNER 2013.

scholarship.⁵ This genre, which is usually referred to in Western literature as the *Arabic Hermetica*,⁶ arose from a synthesis of multiple cultural traditions, particularly Assyrian-Babylonian omen literature, Egyptian-Hellenistic and Byzantine-Greek astrology, and Coptic calendrical systems. Rooted in this broad heritage, *malhama* handbooks sought to predict social and natural outcomes through geophysical, astro-meteorological and hydrological signs. Following a formulaic ‘if ... then ...’ structure, they explained natural phenomena such as earthquakes, eclipses, comets, storms and the irregular flooding of rivers—above all, the Nile—as portents of future prosperity or disaster. Examples illustrate both the range and style of the tradition, whose debut, however, escapes a precise dating. An anonymous text, attributed to Daniel and Ptolemy, used the Coptic calendar to foresee famine and social unrest if the first of *Tūt* fell on a Wednesday, while another anonymous fifth/eleventh-century compendium, *Kitāb Gharā’ib al-funūn wa-mulāḥ al-‘uyūn* (ANONYMOUS 2013), tied the Nile’s inundation to the orbit of Mars, predicting abundance, balance or deficiency according to its position. In the same text, comets, for instance, were considered to be especially ominous:

If the comet known as ‘The Lamp’ appears in the east, it is a sign of a great famine in that region, fires, civil wars, bloodshed, and abundance of thunderbolts. It also foretells flames of no known cause destroying forests and inhabited regions, setting ablaze the mansions of kings and especially those which they have erected for themselves, corrupting the fruits, drying up the springs and the rivers and bringing heat to the horizons. And there is a multitude of shooting stars. If this comet appears in the west and the south, it is a sign of civil war erupting in the midst of the region in which it appeared, bringing cruelty, wars, and the corruption of crops in the west. This is what it looks like. (EDSON and SAVAGE-SMITH 2004, 41–42)

As the above example demonstrates, these works, beyond their predictive content, assumed a vital social function by offering interpretive frameworks through which communities could make sense of misfortune and natural catastrophe. The deterministic patterns that structure these texts encouraged the acceptance of events as manifestations of divine order. Notably, the pious disclaimers embedded within them—such as the recurrent phrase ‘by the permission of God, the Almighty’ (*bi-idhn Allāh ta‘ālā*) (SALIBA 1994, 32)—drew attention to the persistent tension between human attempts at prognostication and the imperative of theological submission. Yet for all their cultural significance, *malhama* texts were characterised by anonymity and,⁷ which interests me most, their literary modesty. To evade

⁵ See FAHD 2012 and CHALYAN-DAFFNER 2018. Chalyan-Daffner’s bibliography contains a recent overview of scholarship on the subject. For a further expansion on how natural disasters were addressed in the broader intellectual climate of Mamluk Egypt, see her earlier work, CHALYAN-DAFFNER 2013.

⁶ The astrological *Arabic Hermetica* and their antecedents, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, must be distinguished from the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which is primarily theological and philosophical in nature. See GUNDEL and GUNDEL 1966, 12, 27.

⁷ The work of the late-Mamluk astrologer, geomancer and historian Ibn Zunbul, entitled *al-Kitāb Naql min Kitāb al-Qānūn*, which has been studied by Kristine Chalyan-Daffner (CHALYAN-DAFFNER 2018), is an exception. For more on Ibn Zunbul, see LELLOUCH 1994.

criticism from religious scholars, who found that any kind of predictions contradicted the message of the Qur'an, authors often masked their identities or attributed their works to famous historical authorities, such as Aristotle or Alexander the Great. The result is a genre more valuable for the cultural and historical insight it affords than for any intrinsic aesthetic achievement.

As Octavio Paz has claimed, 'Human writing reflects that of the universe; it is its translation, but also its metaphor: it says something totally different, and it says the same thing' (PAZ 1974, 134–35; translation mine). Yet, alongside pursuing this ambition, pre-modern poetry also inverted this perspective, at times conceiving the celestial realm as a mirror of earthly order. By invoking constellations, eclipses and planetary conjunctions, poets crafted allegories that resonated with audiences steeped in astrological lore. In Umayyad literature, astrological discourses reflect both the survival of pre-Islamic traditions and the formative influence of early Islamic thought, with celestial imagery deployed to negotiate themes of fate, power and human destiny (SAVAGE-SMITH 2004, 5). Poets continued to invoke the stars and lunar mansions as determinants of human affairs. In the realm of love poetry, the *ghazal* incorporated astrological imagery to frame the beloved's beauty or the lover's plight, comparing the face of the beloved to the Moon or interpreting separation through the ill-fated presence of the Moon in the *ḡayqa*⁸ or inauspicious *zajr al-ṭayr* (divination from the direction or pattern of a bird's flight),⁹ as in al-Akḥṭal al-Taghlibī's (d. 110/728) lament (al-AKḤṬAL 1995, 20). At the same time, celestial omens were also marshaled to reinforce political legitimacy, as when Jarīr (d. 110/728) reprises an old association from the *Jāhili* poetic imaginary and describes the Sun as eclipsed in grief at the death of Caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz:

فالشَّمْسُ كاسفةٌ ليست بطالعة تبكي عليك، نجوم الليل والقمر.

(JARĪR 1964, 235)

The Sun is eclipsed, never to rise again | the stars of night and the Moon weep
for you.

Umayyad poets such as al-Farazdaq (d. 110/728) employed eclipse imagery in their elegies but refrained from attributing agency to the stars, reflecting a spreading Islamic theological rejection of astral determinism (al-ABBASI 2008, 132). Rather than negotiating a path that reconciled astrology with religious doctrine, they largely preserved the motifs and stylistic patterns of pre-Islamic tradition, using celestial imagery as a familiar rhetorical and aesthetic resource. Astrology thus enriched explorations of destiny, authority and emotion while

⁸ One of the narrow paths through which the Moon passes when moving from one lunar mansion to another, and of evil portent. See al-ABBASI 2008, 28 and 133.

⁹ Toufic Fahd notes that *ṭayfa*—the art of divining omens from the flight, cries or posture of birds—was a well-established Arabian practice. *Zajr*, to which the poet specifically alludes, constitutes a subcategory of this technique: it involves provoking a bird to take flight, for instance by throwing a stone, and interpreting the direction of its movement (right being a favourable omen, left an unfavourable one). See 'Les animaux de présage chez les Arabes' in FAHD 1966, 498–518.

maintaining continuity with earlier literary heritage. By contrast, the Abbasid period witnessed a more critical engagement with astrological language, as questions of cosmic determinism and religious orthodoxy grew more complex, shaped by an added dimension: the recognition of human agency and the poets' deliberate awareness of it as creators of wonder.

2. A New Conceptual Framework for Discussion: The Revival of Astrology Under the Abbasids

The revival of astrology under the Abbasids can be attributed to a number of factors. First, the translation movement that flourished during the Abbasid era can be seen as the physician who revived the body of this knowledge. The reappearance of a learnable *tanjīm* founded upon an organised and plausible system of knowledge established the scientific status of astrology. Carlo Alonso Nallino has commented on the special character of medieval Muslim astrology, noting that:

Astrology [...] becomes an art which demands a solid scientific preparation, and which tends to give an ever greater mathematical complication and exactness to its methods of research among celestial phenomena [... while] in the Hellenistic world astrology flourishes while astronomy decays; in the Muslim world of the Middle Ages astrology becomes a potent ally of mathematical and observational astronomy. (NALLINO 1921, 91)

The astrological vocabulary significantly enriched the poetic lexicon, providing inspiration through its diverse and increasingly sophisticated practices. In addition to the lunar mansions, constellations and comets, poets now drew on detailed reflections on the twelve signs of the zodiac and astrological houses, as well as on specialised techniques such as *masā'il* (the practice of casting horoscopes to answer specific questions on issues such as love, relationships or fate), *ikhtiyārāt* (which determined auspicious times for activities like building cities or launching military campaigns), *ḥadathān* (mundane astrology, which predicted large-scale societal events), or even practical tools like *al-zīj* (an astronomical handbook that contained tables and texts for calculating the positions of the stars), which were all employed in a professional manner.¹⁰ The significance of astrology can be gauged by the fact that the chancellor secretary Abū Ishāq al-Ṣābī (d. 384/994) could conceive of no better gift to present to the Buyid ruler 'Aḍud al-Dawla (d. 372/983) than a *zīj*:

أهديت مختلفاً زيجاً جداوله لم المكائيل يستوفي بها العمر

¹⁰ For all these terms, see ABŪ MA'SHAR 2013, 918, 297, 112, 132–36, and al-BĪRŪNĪ 2004, 37–8, 123, 429, 73 and *passim*.

فقس به الفلك الدوار واجر كما يجري بلا اجل يخشى وينتظر.
(al-THA'ĀLIBI 2000, 2:331)

I gave a gift to a celebrator; it was a *zīj* whose tables | were like weights that
measure our life span.
So, measure with it the orbits of the heavens so that | you, like they, will be
immortal, neither living in fear nor passing the days in dread.

The *munajjim*'s (astrologer's) 'tools of the trade' nourished the creativity of Abbasid-era poets and enriched their sources of poetic reference, as they formed part of the shared courtly milieu inhabited by both astrologers and literati. As Yahyā Shāmī affirms, astrologers indeed occupied a position of ever-increasing influence in the Abbasid courts, where their expertise was sought for both practical and ideological purposes. For example, court astrologers such as Nawbakht (fl. second/eighth century) and his son Abū Sahl b. Nawbakht (fl. second/eighth to third/ninth century) played decisive roles in shaping Abbasid political culture. From the reign of al-Manṣūr (d. 158/775) to that of Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 193/809), they framed the dynasty's rule as divinely sanctioned through celestial signs (SHĀMĪ 1982, 258–61). Their expertise was not confined to abstract prognostication but was also made visible in ritualised acts at key political moments: al-Manṣūr's astrologers famously selected an auspicious horoscope for the foundation of Baghdad, embedding cosmic order in the very fabric of the new capital (al-KHAṬĪB al-BAGHDĀDĪ 2002, 1:66–69). Later, Ja'far b. Yaḥyā al-Barmakī (d. 187/803) sought astrological counsel before entering his palace, a gesture that transformed a private architectural decision into a public performance of divine alignment (al-MAS'ŪDĪ 1973, 2: 270). Most strikingly, al-Ma'mūn (d. 218/833) relied on his astrologer al-Faḍl b. Sahl (d. 202/818) to reinforce his authority during times of political crisis (al-MAS'ŪDĪ 1973, 2: 281). In each case, astrology functioned less as a neutral science than as a medium of legitimacy: by staging the heavens as allies of the caliph, astrologers helped render Abbasid sovereignty both inevitable and sacrosanct, thus reinforcing their own claims, founded on Muḥammadan lineage and religious orthodoxy.

From a theological perspective, astrology was condemned as deterministic, with a few attempts to incorporate it into a coherent philosophical and religious narrative. As Dalya Cohen-Mor notes, the conflict between astrology and Islamic theology during the Abbasid period and beyond centred on the problem of human agency in relation to divine omnipotence, 'which, however, was considered to be compatible with freedom of choice and human responsibility' (COHEN-MOR 2001, 240). Astrology's claim to reveal future events sat uneasily with the Qur'anic doctrine that God alone governs destiny, raising the question of whether celestial influence left room for genuine human choice. Abbasid-era theologians criticised astrology for either fostering fatalism or arrogating divine prerogatives by attempting to unveil the unseen (*al-ghayb*). At the same time, court astrologers such as Abū Ma'shar (d. 273/886) sought to reconcile their discipline with Islamic principles by arguing that the stars did not compel but merely signalled tendencies, leaving individuals responsible for their responses. This attempt at harmonisation mirrored broader theological disputes over *qadar* (predestination) and *ikhtiyār* (choice), where Mu'tazilis emphasised human responsibility while Ash'aris stressed God's determining power (PINGREE 1968, 20–24; COHEN-MOR 2001, 7). As I will describe in the following paragraphs, this tension is also evident in

Abbasid and late Abbasid poetry: satirists mocked astrologers as liars who confused divine will with astral signs, while court poets could praise patrons by aligning their reign with auspicious constellations, thereby dramatising the ambiguous cultural status of astrology.

3. Heavenly Signs, Earthly Thrones: Reading Astrology up to Late Abbasid Verse

In the later Abbasid period, astrological imagery assumed heightened importance as political fragmentation deepened. The waning authority of the caliphate coincided with increased poetic recourse to astrology as a means of interpreting chaos and uncertainty. Stars and planets became symbols of instability, destiny and the elusive search for order in a disordered world. Thus, in late Abbasid culture, astrology did not disappear under the weight of theological critique but instead became integrated into literary expression. Poets employed astrological motifs to praise or undermine rulers, to interpret dynastic fortune and decline, and to reflect on political inertia. These references situated poetry within the broader theological debates over fate and agency, while also exploiting astrology's symbolic and aesthetic resonance as a literary *topos*. The persistence of such allusions—familiar to both elite and popular audiences—attests to enduring cultural presence of astrology. The case study that follows will illustrate these dynamics through examples drawn from both the later Abbasid period and prodromes in earlier Abbasid poetry. I will begin by examining how astrological imagery was mobilised to negotiate questions of political legitimacy, before turning to its theological implications and its function as a recurring literary motif.

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3.1 From Fatalistic Doctrine to Rhetorical Flourish: Astrology and Political Legitimacy in Abbasid Poetry

In the early Abbasid court, astrological imagery served as a nuanced medium for commentary on caliphal legitimacy, dynastic fortunes and divine justice (CRONE 2004, 115; SALIBA 2004, 353; SHĀMĪ 1994, 112–15). As Dimitri Gutas observes, 'astrological history is the account of dynastic history in terms of cyclical periods of varying lengths of time governed by the stars and the planets'. This branch of astrology carried a dual function: a political one, in which it presented Abbasid dominion (whose cycle was just beginning) as divinely ordained, thereby discouraging rebellion; and an ideological one, which positioned the Abbasid state as the legitimate heir to the ancient empires of Mesopotamia and Iran, and most immediately to the Sasanians (GUTAS 1998, 110).

Within this framework, poetic allusions to celestial cycles often echoed these legitimising narratives, situating the caliph's reign within an order sanctioned by the heavens. Poets skilfully wove stars, planets and celestial cycles into their verses—sometimes to magnify rulers with cosmic grandeur, at other times to subtly critique the powerful by invoking the language of fate (NETTON 1989, 211–13). Yet the use of astrology in courtly poetry was never purely ornamental. As I have shown in an earlier work, Abbasid poets and rhetoricians conceived of language itself as a craft, a calibrated instrument that combined reason and marvel (*'aql* and *'ajab*) to persuade, enchant and instruct (FONTANA 2025a, 25–28). In this sense, astrological rhetoric mirrored the epistemological ambition of Abbasid *balāgha*: to

transform scientific discourse into an art of power that was capable of sustaining political legitimacy through eloquence. As the rapport between poets and their audiences deepened, poets increasingly experimented with their craft, moving fluidly from earnest praise to biting satire.¹¹ The growing sophistication of poetic circles and the appetite for wit fostered an environment in which irony and sarcasm, inspired by astrology's symbolic vocabulary, became both fashionable and effective vehicles for social and political commentary (SHĀMĪ 1982, 243–45). Abū Nuwās (d. 198/814) exemplifies this duality: while he lauded patrons by likening their generosity to the beneficent radiance of Jupiter (ABŪ NUWĀS 1953, 221–22), he also lampooned the conventions of astrological flattery, using horoscopic language to describe a turkey and thereby playfully mocking both astrology and the excesses of courtly panegyric:

انعت ديكاً من ديوك الهند كريم عم و كريم جد
حتى إذا الديك ارتأى من بعد ونجمه في النحس لا في السعد
رأيته كالفارس المعد يخطر خطراً مثل خطر الأسد.

(ABŪ NUWĀS 1953, 89–90)

I mourn a turkey | noble in manners and illustrious in lineage.
From afar I beheld it | its star portending ill fortune rather than blessing.
It strode like a valiant knight | its step proud and leonine.

Such verses demonstrate how astrological discourse, once the prerogative of science, was domesticated into poetics and became a medium in which wit and knowledge, *ilm* and *balāgha*, were intertwined. The astrological technical lexicon lent poetry the aura of learned authority, while poetry, in turn, infused astrological symbolism with affective and persuasive depth. The poet's mastery of celestial language thus mirrored the scholar's manipulation of eloquence: both turned the mechanisms of order into instruments of art. Since astrologers were increasingly prominent at court, satirical critique also extended to them, as in the verses of al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad al-Anbārī (d. 304/915): '*innī bi-aḥkām al-nujūm mukadhdhib ... Allāhu yu'ī wa-huwa yamna' qādiran ... fa-man al-munajjim wayḥahu wa-l-kawkab*' (I am a denier of the stars' decrees [...] For God bestows, with power, and withholds, so what of the astrologer and his star? Alas for him!, al-ḤAMAWĪ 1993, 634). At the same time, poets such as Abū al-Shiṣ al-Khuzā'ī (d. 196/811) employed cosmic imagery with solemnity, mourning the death of one caliph while celebrating the accession of another, dramatising the tension between inevitable fate and political renewal (SHĀMĪ 1982, 243–45). In both satire and eulogy, the rhetoric of the stars served as a means of legitimising human order through celestial analogy—a linguistic act that reveals how eloquence becomes a cosmological practice, sustaining belief through persuasive means.

¹¹ On the heightened literary self-consciousness of third/ninth-century poets and its relationship to the intellectual and cultural environment of the period, see FONTANA 2025b.

As Abbasid authority began to weaken in the late third/ninth century, astrological rhetoric increasingly reflected not confidence in dynastic permanence but anxiety about political decline (KENNEDY 1998, 114–18). The seminal poet and rhetorician Ibn al-Mu‘tazz (d. 296/908), himself remembered as the ‘one-day caliph’, mocked the illusion of rulers’ cosmic favour (SALIBA 2004, 358), insisting that no planetary conjunction could guarantee justice or secure dynastic stability. At the same time, as a prince of the Abbasid house, he sought to reassure his audience that the dynasty’s misfortunes were not the inevitable result of hostile horoscopes but part of the ordinary course of politics.¹² His ironic approach is epitomised in the line:

ولا تفزعن من كل شيء ومفزع
فما كل تربيع النجوم بضائر.

(IBN al-MU‘TAZZ 1961, 249)

Do not be terrified by every fearful thing, for not every | quadrature of the stars
is harmful!

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Here, the technical vocabulary of astrology becomes at once a satirical barb and a rhetorical reassurance (HARB 2020, 101–4). In a culture where knowledge was power, and power demanded eloquence, the manipulation of astral imagery became a hallmark of political craft. The poet, like the astrologer, calibrated his words to balance fate and agency, knowledge and wonder. Ibn al-Mu‘tazz’s near contemporary Ibn al-Rūmī (d. 283/896) honed this technique, explicitly drawing on imagery of malefic planets and eclipses to portray patrons as suspended between hostile astral forces. His biting polemics exposed not only the precarious dependence of poets on volatile patrons but also, by extension, the precariousness of Abbasid rule itself.¹³

Other poets of the declining Abbasid era extended this register of fragility. Thus al-Buḥturī (d. 284/897), in his celebrated *Ṣīniyya* on the ruins of the Sasanian palace at Ctesiphon, cast imperial collapse in cosmological terms, suggesting that even Jupiter, normally a beneficent planet, had become portentous of ruin. Though ostensibly about Persia’s fall, the ode simultaneously gave voice to contemporary disillusionment with Abbasid patronage (SPERL 2006). The grandeur of the Sasanians, refracted through astral imagery, became a mirror for the fragility of the Abbasid empire and the instability of caliphal legitimacy.¹⁴ Later, al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965) explained political defeat in terms of hostile

¹² For an expansion on Ibn al-Mu‘tazz’s political demeanour, see ARAZI 2005 and BRAY 2010.

¹³ *Nasīmuka ḥattāma lā yanbarī ... wa-ṭayfuka ḥattāma lā ya‘tarī / Ramā Zuḥalun fī azfārihi ... wa-ḥalla fada‘abanī al-Mushtarī / ‘Uṭāridu hal laka min ‘awdah ... fa-arji‘u minka ilā ‘unṣuri*—How long shall your breeze refuse to fade, and your vision ever haunt my shade? Saturn hurled me into his cruel snare, But Jupiter came — and stroked me with care. O Mercury, will you not return once more, to guide me back to my primal core? (WĀLI 1996, 82-3).

¹⁴ A substantial body of scholarship has addressed al-Buḥturī’s *Ṣīniyya*, examining its ekphrastic, political, and nostalgic dimensions. Among the most significant contributions are those of Suzanne Stetkevych, Richard A. Serrano, Julie Scott Meisami, and Akiko Motoyoshi Sumi, all of which are discussed in detail by Stefan Sperl (SPERL 2006), who offers a comparative reading that situates the ode alongside Virgil and Wilfred Owen. Sperl interprets the poem’s engagement with the Sasanian past as a meditation on political decline, imperial memory, and the reconstruction of poetic selfhood amid ruin. See also al-BUḤTURI 1963,

stellar alignments (HAMORI 1990, 307), for example when he attributed Shabīb al-‘Uqaylī’s downfall to the enmity of *al-Thurayyā* (the Pleiades) and *al-Dabaran* (the star Aldebaran). Yet, in other contexts he ridiculed astrological credulity, a tension reflecting the broader theological and intellectual debates of the late Abbasid court. Al-Sarī al-Rafā’ (d. 366/976) went so far as to portray Ṣayf al-Dawla’s power as capable of bending the heavens themselves:

له قلم تجري النجوم بحريه طيع له حتم القضاء ويسمع
يريد سعوداً أو نحوساً وإنه من الفلك الدوار في الجو أسرع.
(al-RAFĀ’ 1981, 2:389)

He wields a pen whose course the stars themselves must follow | destiny
listens, and obeys its decree.

Whether he calls for auspicious joy or ominous ill, both hasten to fulfil his will |
—swifter than the revolving firmament in its celestial orbit.

The hyperbolic claim that the planets submit to Ṣayf al-Dawla’s will starkly underlines how far panegyric could stretch the use of cosmic language. Beyond poetry, intellectuals of the late Abbasid and neighbouring courts grappled with astrological terminology in more technical contexts. Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī (d. 440/1048), though serving in Ghazna rather than Baghdad, epitomises this ambivalence. Celebrated for encyclopaedic works such as *al-Āthār al-bāqiya* and *al-Qānūn al-Mas‘ūdī*, he recorded astrological doctrines with scientific rigour while often voicing scepticism. In one telling anecdote, the Sultan of Ghazna challenged him to predict which door he would use to exit an assembly. Al-Bīrūnī consulted his astrolabe and gave an answer; the Sultan tried to confound him by creating a fifth door, only to discover that al-Bīrūnī had already anticipated the ruse. Frustrated, the Sultan imprisoned him for six months, then released and rewarded him, remarking: ‘Kings are like children: they wish to hear only what pleases them, and it would have been better had al-Bīrūnī predicted wrongly’. (ḤASAN 1965, 397). The story reveals the perilous tension between astral science and sovereign desire, a tension no less acute in the Abbasid palace.

The later Abbasids, from the sixth/twelfth to the seventh/thirteenth centuries, increasingly saw astrology pressed into service in pursuit of both reassurance and critique. Ibn Sanā’ al-Mulk (d. 608/1212), for instance, inverted the symbolism of the traditionally baleful omen of the Moon in Scorpio, declaring it auspicious for his patron Tūrānshāh (d. 648/1250):

سُعدتُ برجة عقرب فكذب عندي قول كل منجم.
(al-ḤAMAWI 1993, 5:582)

I am delighted by the Moon whose sign is Scorpio | thus, he refutes all
astrologers’ claims.

455 and SALIBA 2004, 362.

By overturning negative horoscopes, poets implied that strong rulers could bend the heavens to their will—a poetic conceit that reasserted sovereignty in an age of political vulnerability. Court panegyrics under both Abbasid and successor regimes praised rulers for outwitting or reversing astral configurations, implicitly contrasting their vigour with the dynasty's decline. Such reversals of cosmic omens transformed astrology from a doctrine into an art of rhetorical mastery: what the stars decreed, the poet could re-script through language. Read in this way, the long arc of Abbasid poetry charts a shift from astrology as a medium of legitimacy to astrology as a register of decline. The poetic imagination thus became a parallel arena of power, in which celestial determinism yielded to human ingenuity. By the late Abbasid period, the celestial sphere no longer mirrored divine order but reflected the anxieties of a fragmented polity—its rulers invoking the stars less as guarantors of legitimacy than as emblems of fragility, irony and loss. Even in philosophy, astrology's predictive language assumed a prophetic-literary function: Ibn Sīnā's *malḥama* employed planetary conjunctions to provide a symbolic framework for historical upheaval, later read as a foreshadowing of the Mongol invasions. This trajectory reached its endpoint in 656/1258, when the Mongol sack of Baghdad—the 'Round City', itself conceived on cosmic principles (WENDELL 1971)—was interpreted by contemporaries as the ultimate celestial catastrophe (CHALYAN-DAFFNER 2013, 45–47; FAHD 1966, 228–30). Eclipses and conjunctions were taken as signs that the Abbasid dynasty, once aligned with astral harmony, had fallen irreversibly due to the malign influences of the planets. Thus, the trajectory of Abbasid poetry and thought reveals a striking reversal: what began as a language of promise and divine sanction ended up, in the late Abbasid imagination, as one of precarity, irony and cosmic doom. In this evolution, Abbasid poetry reflects not merely the end of empire but the endurance of a literary cosmos in which astrology, once the language of divine sanction, became the instrument of self-conscious art.

3.2 Stars, Shadows and the Limits of Knowledge in Late Abbasid Poetry

As outlined above, astrology was both condemned as deterministic and embraced as symbolic. While theologians cautioned against it, poets exploited its evocative power. In the courtly milieu of the early Abbasids, astrological imagery frequently functioned as a vehicle for commentary on divine justice. Stars, planets and celestial cycles were woven into verses offering coded reflections on power and fate (SHĀMĪ 1994, 175–77; SALIBA 2004, 345). In this sense, poetry became a space where the boundaries of science, revelation and rhetoric were constantly negotiated—where cosmic language was reinterpreted through imagination and persuasion rather than doctrine. Such interplay between epistemology and eloquence recalls a form of literary 'craftsmanship', in which language itself became a tool of symbolic inquiry—a mode of articulating wonder, persuasion and political legitimacy beyond the limits of dogmatic theology (FONTANA 2025a, 17–19).

Later theologians carried the debate forward: al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) dismissed astrological determinism by portraying human actions as 'acquired' (*kasb*) within God's creative act, likening humans to shadows moved by a higher reality.¹⁵ As Seyyed Hossein

¹⁵ In *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, al-Ghazālī compares humankind to puppets in a shadow play: just as the puppeteer animates rags and makes children believe they move and speak of their own accord, so too does God

Nasr notes, ‘for al-Ghazālī, the stars could be signs, but never causes, for God alone is the true agent in the cosmos’ (NASR 1993, 187). According to this view, astrology was considered dangerous not only because it encroached on divine sovereignty but also because it undermined moral accountability, as human beings were held accountable for their choices even within a universe foreordained by God (CRONE 2004, 112). This balance between determinism and moral agency reflects the broader Abbasid fascination with ordered systems—cosmic, linguistic and political alike—according to which harmony could only exist through a higher governing principle. Thus, from Abbasid courts and poetry to the scholastic elaborations of later centuries, astrology became a contested site where the limits of human freedom were tested against the absoluteness of divine will.

The persistence of astrological imagery in late Abbasid poetry must also be understood within the broader intellectual climate. Theological scholars, particularly within orthodox Sunni circles, rejected astrology as an encroachment upon divine omnipotence (SHĀMĪ 1994, 190). Yet philosophers, influenced by Neoplatonic and Aristotelian thought, such as al-Fārābī (d. 338/950) and Ibn Sīnā (d. 427/1037), outlined in their works frameworks that allowed celestial influence to be discussed in naturalistic and metaphysical terms (NETTON 1989, 205–9). Ibn Sīnā admitted the stars’ indirect effects on the physical world—shaping humours, climates and temperaments—but firmly denied their ability to foretell human fate, thereby safeguarding divine sovereignty while acknowledging cosmic causation. As Ian Netton summarises, ‘Avicenna relegated the stars to secondary causality: their natural effects are real, but their divinatory pretensions are illusion’ (NETTON 1989, 207).

Similarly, the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, in their encyclopaedic *Rasā’il*, harmonised astrology with a Neoplatonic cosmology according to which the celestial spheres acted as intermediaries that governed the sublunary world but remained themselves subject to divine command. This position offered a philosophical framework within which poets could appropriate astral language without succumbing to fatalism (NASR 1993, 173–80). The polymath al-Bīrūnī epitomises this ambivalence. In his aforementioned works *al-Āthār al-bāqiyā* and *al-Qānūn al-Mas’ūdī*, he recorded astrological doctrines with unrivalled genius, yet frequently distanced himself from their metaphysical pretensions. His scepticism underscored the tension between astrology as a science of calculation and as a claim to predictive authority (al-BĪRŪNĪ 2004, 117). KENNEDY remarks that ‘al-Bīrūnī knew astrology as well as any practitioner, but ‘he knew equally well its limits as a science of fate’ (KENNEDY 1998, 120). In this interplay between method and marvel, one may discern the same intellectual aesthetic that shaped the Abbasid understanding of rhetoric and *balāgha*: knowledge that persuades not through proof alone but through harmony, proportion and eloquence. These negotiations shaped the late Abbasid poetic reimagining of astrology. It should be borne in mind that the unified governance of the early Islamic period had undergone a process of separation of powers. The disappearance of the single religio-political leadership was advantageous for astrology or any knowledge of pagan nature or origin. Patricia Crone comments on this political phenomenon that:

move human beings, who mistakenly imagine that their actions are self-determined. The analogy encapsulates his doctrine of *kasb* (“acquisition”), whereby human acts are created by God yet appropriated by individuals. See al-GHAZĀLĪ 2005, 4:122; MOREH 1987, 47–48.

By c. 800 the community of believers came in several rival versions and had at least two different types of leadership within each version, one political and the other religious. The proliferation of the types of leadership was not to stop there, for the caliphs soon came to coexist with kings and sultans, while the religious scholars soon came to coexist with philosophers and Sufis (mystics) too. (CRONE 2004, 32)

In this contested space, poets used astrology symbolically without endorsing its predictive claims. The interplay between theology, philosophy and poetry meant that astrological imagery resonated on multiple levels: as political allegory, as metaphysical reflection, and as cultural commentary. It is in this sense that astrology became one of the Abbasid age's most potent rhetorical resources—a language of cosmic order that, like eloquence itself, could persuade, mystify or unsettle. Thus, the late Abbasid period represents a moment when astrology, though doctrinally suspect, was imaginatively indispensable.

The theological dispute over astrology's compatibility with divine omnipotence and human agency also found powerful expression in Abbasid and later poetry. Some verses even reconciled astral signs with orthodox belief by making supplication to God the means of averting ill omens, thereby preserving both divine sovereignty and human agency (FAHD 1966, 224). Thus Abū Tammām, in his famous 'Ammūriyya' ode, derided astrologers who had predicted defeat and instead framed al-Mu'taṣim's (d. 227/842) military triumph as a vindication of divine will and human initiative over stellar prognostication (ABŪ TAMMĀM 1951, 47–48; STETKEVYCH 1991, 200). Abū Firās al-Ḥamdānī likewise drew on astral vocabulary only to reject its claims, asserting that no *nuḥūs* (inauspicious moments) or *su'ūd* (auspicious moments) could bind his fate, since salvation lay solely in God's decree (al-SHANTARĪNĪ 1998, 3:214; SHĀMĪ 1982, 245). More radically, Abū l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī ridiculed the very possibility of astrological foresight, declaring himself an 'unbeliever' in the planets' power and stressing that all events, past and future, were fixed only by the Divine Guardian (al-MA'ARRĪ 1977, 155; TRITTON 1934, 720). These literary treatments show that debates about *qadar* (predestination) and *ikhtiyār* (choice) were not confined to theologians: poets, too, made their verses a stage for exploring the tension between cosmic determinism and divine omnipotence. Alongside poets and theologians, astrologers themselves were sometimes compelled to critique their own discipline. Umayya b. Abī l-Ṣalt (d. 592/1135), for example, oscillated between critique and defence. On the one hand, he warned that no benefic or malefic planet, not even Jupiter or Saturn, could alter what God had decreed, as he attests in the following verses:

لا ترج في أمرك سعد المشتري ولا تخف من فوقه نحس زحل
وارج و خف ربحما فهو الذي ما شاء من خير و من شر فعل.

(IBN ABI 'UṢAYBĪ'A 1965, 513)

Do not place your hopes in Jupiter's favour, nor fear Saturn's baneful might;
Hope in—and fear—their Lord alone, for He is the One who does as He wills,
in good and in evil alike.

Yet elsewhere, Umayya praised the astrolabe as a mirror of cosmic harmony, anticipating the later Abbasid fascination with astrology as an image of intellectual and poetic order—a theme elaborated in the following section. This ambivalence—between critique and reverence—captures a broader intellectual tension of the Abbasid age, during which the boundaries between science, faith and art were continually negotiated and reimagined. Other voices were less accommodating. Abū l-Ḥasan Aḥmad b. Ayyūb al-Baṣrī derided the *zīj*, dismissing it as useless paper and a source of error rather than guidance. Al-Kamāl Muḥammad b. Ṭalḥa al-Naṣībī (d. 652/1254) went further, composing verses that condemned reliance on astrologers outright, warning that the attribution of earthly events to planets was tantamount to paganism:

إذا حكم المنجم في القضايا بحكم حازم فاردد عليه
فليس بعالم ما الله قاض فقلّدي و لا تركن إليه.
(IBN al-‘IMĀD 1982, 7:448)

Whenever an astrologer judges any case | you should refute his opinion with strong evidence,
Which is that no one is able to know what God has decided | therefore follow my example and never rely on him.

In the same spirit, al-Bahā’ Zuhayr (d. 656/1258) urged believers to reject the concept of planetary influence altogether, affirming that only God ordains human destiny:

لا ترقب النجم في أمر تحاوله فالله يفعل لا جدي و لا حمل
مع السعادة ما للنجم من أثر فلا يغرك مريخ و لا زحل
الأمر أعظم والأفكار حائرة والشرع يصدق و الإنسان يمتثل.
(al-BAHĀ’ ZUHAYR 1968, 179)

Do not consult a star on any of your affairs: it is God who ordains [your fate], and neither Mars nor Saturn determine anything. | If your destiny is happiness, they can have no influence whatsoever on
Your fate, therefore, pay no heed to Mars and Saturn. The matter [of our destiny] is greater [than we can conceive] and overwhelms the mind, | yet all we have to do is to believe in God’s law and treat the matter with submission and resignation.

Condemnation also took ironic forms: the preacher Abū Muḥammad b. Jābir al-Māhānī (d. 389/998) mocked a crucified astrologer by asking whether he had foreseen his fate in the stars, eliciting the astrologer’s bitter retort that he had indeed seen himself in a lofty position but had not realised it would be on a cross (al-TAWḤIDĪ 1988, 1:54). Similarly, critics ridiculed Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 320/932), the eminent physician and astrologer, for failing to foresee or avert his own misfortunes despite his encyclopaedic claims to knowledge (IBN al-‘IBRĪ 1992, 158). Such anecdotes reveal a transformation in tone: early Abbasids employed celestial imagery to affirm legitimacy and cosmic order, while later writers turned it into a

vehicle for irony and moral reflection. The stars ceased to promise empire or prosperity and instead exposed the vanity of human pretensions to knowledge. From this recognition of human limitations, the late Abbasid poet inherited not only a sense of irony but also a renewed awareness of language as a mode of creation—an art balancing precision, persuasion and wonder. In this sense, the literary appropriation of scientific discourse mirrored the Abbasid conviction that true eloquence could transmute knowledge into beauty, and argument into art.

From this recognition of human limitation, a new sensibility emerged. Poets began to move beyond the theological dispute over fate and freedom, transforming astrology into a mirror of human emotion rather than divine decree. Celestial imagery—once invoked to praise rulers or defend orthodoxy—became a language of eros, wit, and self-irony. What had served to measure the distance between man and God now charted the tremors of desire: its uncertainty, its peril and its irresistible beauty.

3.3. Scorpions on the Cheek: The Aesthetic Afterlife of Astrology

Beyond theological polemics and political legitimation, astrology flourished in Abbasid poetry as a literary *topos*, a decorative motif as opposed to a political or metaphysical commitment. Poets employed celestial vocabulary to enhance their satire, irony or descriptions of beauty, often without doctrinal significance. In this ornamental register, stars and planets served less as omens of fate than as metaphors of passion, allure or ridicule. This aesthetic detachment marked not the decline of cosmic discourse but its refinement—an evolution from celestial causation to rhetorical craftsmanship according to which the heavens became a canvas for human imagination rather than divine decree. One of the earliest Abbasid examples comes from al-Buḥturī, who parodied astrologers by reducing their technical jargon to comic effect. Yet his satire, though humorous, also demonstrates a precise grasp of astrological theory. In a famous poem, he ridicules the astrologer Abū Ghānim, nicknamed Ibn Abī Qimāsha (fl. third/ninth century), who failed to foresee the betrayal of his lover despite his professed mastery of the stars. The poet mocks his blindness with biting irony:

قد كان حقاً عليك أن تعرف المكنون من سر صدرها الكلف
بما تعاطيت من الغيوب وما أوتيت من حكمة ومن لطف
فكيف أخطأت أي أخي ولم تركز إلى ما سطرت في الصحف.
(al-BUḤTURĪ 1963, 778)

You ought to have known the secret your beloved | concealed within her
lovesick breast—
with all your vaunted mastery of the unseen, your gift | of wisdom and subtle
insight!
How could you err so grossly, my friend, and fail to | consult the very tables
you yourself inscribed?

Here, astrological ‘intervention’ (*istiḥāla*) becomes a metaphor for love’s deceit: Mars (the betrayed astrologer) and Venus (the faithless beloved) are separated by Mercury (the

treacherous friend). Al-Buḥturī's witty use of references to planetary motion transforms technical astrology into moral allegory, exposing both the vanity of human control and the inevitability of fate. His poem thus serves as a prologue to a broader Abbasid tendency to treat astrology as a language of art rather than a system of belief, a process which exemplifies the Abbasid art of poetic calibration: the transformation of scientific lexicons into vehicles of affect, where linguistic elegance mirrors cosmic order.

While al-Buḥturī weaponised the stars to mock human folly, Ibn al-Muʿtazz (d. 296/908) refined their light into ornament. His poetry does not treat astrology as a target of ridicule or a vehicle of moral commentary but as a distant echo, a reservoir of suggestive imagery that may or may not retain its cosmological charge. In his verses, celestial and corporeal languages subtly converge, not through doctrine but through metaphor. In a celebrated description of feminine beauty, he writes:¹⁶

هي وردة الخدّ، دقيقة الخصر، لها وجنة عقرب ونظرة فاترة.

(IBN al-MUʿTAZZ 1961, 305)

She is rosy-cheeked, slender-waisted, with a scorpion cheek and a languorous gaze.

Here, the word *ʿaqrab* (scorpion) may not necessarily refer to the zodiacal sign but to a fashionable coiffure of the Abbasid period which incorporated a lock of hair curved across the cheek in the shape of a scorpion (al-ABBASI 2008, 215). However, the ambiguity of the image invokes an astral undertone: the beloved's beauty appears at once earthly and fated, alluring and dangerous. Whether or not Ibn al-Muʿtazz intended an astrological resonance, his verse captures the Abbasid refinement of turning technical or natural language into ornament, translating the vocabulary of learned discourse into the idiom of desire. This marked a wider Abbasid trend in which astrological imagery was absorbed into *ghazal* conventions, enriching love poetry with cosmic resonance, an aesthetic that peaked during the sixth/twelfth (FAHD 1966, 224). Even theologians such as al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), who were critical of astrology in their mature writings, nonetheless employed its vocabulary in their youthful poetry. For example, the following lines attributed to al-Ghazālī turn the astrological conjunction of the Moon and Scorpio into a metaphor of irresistible beauty:

حلت عقارب صُدغه في خده قمراً فجعل به عن التشبيه
ولقد عهدناه يحل ببرجها فمن العجائب كيف حلت فيه.

(IBN al-ʿIMĀD 1982, 4:19)

The scorpions of her temple have descended into her | cheek, a perfect moon,
beyond all likeness.

¹⁶ The image likely alludes to a fashionable hairstyle of the period, in which women would draw a lock of hair across the cheek in the shape of a scorpion. See al-ABBASI 2008, 215.

We once knew the Moon to enter the mansion of Scorpio; | how wondrous,
then, that Scorpio has entered into the Moon.

Here the astrologer's omen becomes the lover's marvel: the beloved's face is a celestial map, and her beauty bends the rules of the heavens. The attribution may be debated,¹⁷ but the lines epitomise how, by the late Abbasid period, astrology was increasingly aestheticised, detached from predictive science and transformed into a reservoir of metaphor. Such poetic reworking resonates with the broader Abbasid understanding of rhetoric as a form of cosmic imitation—hence a 'language as craft', suspended between science, marvel and persuasion (FONTANA 2025a and 2025b). In this sense, when al-Ghazālī—or poets like him—reversed the ominous symbolism of the Moon in Scorpio, they not only humanised astrology but also reaffirmed *balāgha* as a mirror of divine creativity: words themselves became astral bodies, capable of illuminating and transgressing their own orbits. Such literary reached their most refined expression in the poetry of Abū Bakr al-Arājānī (d. 544/1139), who fuses astronomical precision with amorous despair:

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معقرب الصدغ يحكي نور غرته بدر بدا بظلام الليل معتكرا
قد سافر القلب في صدري إليه هوى ما عاد قط و لم أسمع له خيرا
وهو المسيء اختياراً إذ نوى سفراً و قد رأى طالعا في العقرب القمر.
(IBN al-ʿIMĀD 1982, 6:308)

Her temple bears a scorpion's curve, and the radiance of her brow | gleams like
a full moon rising through the darkness of night.
My heart, bewitched, set out toward her dwelling. | It never returned, nor has
word of it ever reached me.
Yet my heart is to blame, for though it saw the Moon ascendant in Scorpio, | it
still chose the journey, knowing full well the peril that awaited.

Astrological science here informs the metaphor—the Moon in Scorpio is a sign of ill fortune and perilous travel—but its poetic function is now to dramatise the lover's ruin. Later poets such as al-ʿAntarī (d. 570/1175) elaborated this conceit, multiplying omens for rhetorical emphasis:

و بابلي اللحاظ كالقمر أصبح لي في الأرض فتنة البشر
أولاه فيض الجمال أجمعه والحسن والظرف واهب الصور

¹⁷ Ibn al-ʿImad is sceptical about the attribution of these lines to al-Ghazālī, whereas al-Bayṭar affirms that al-Ghazālī composed these lines in his twenties, as a young man, before his conversion to Sufism (al-BAYṬAR 1962, 592).

خشيت من عقرب به قمر فكيف بالعقربين في قمر.

(IBN ABĪ UṢAYBĪ'A 1965, 395)

She of the Babylonian eyes is like the Moon | a temptation upon the Earth that ensnares all humankind.

The Creator of Forms bestowed on her the fullness of beauty, | grace and charm beyond compare.

I once trembled when I saw the Moon in Scorpio. | What then should I feel when I behold *two* Scorpions in the Moon?

This doubling of ill omens intensifies the metaphor: the beloved's beauty does not simply echo the heavens, it surpasses them. Erotic imagery also extended to interrogational astrology, as poets playfully mapped horoscopes onto lovers' encounters. Al-ʿAntarī, for example, describes a nocturnal tryst in terms of planetary conjunctions:

ومخطف الخصر زارنا سحرا في غنج عينيه سحر هاروت

يحمل تفاحة موردة كدرة رصعت يياقوت

كأنها النجم في تولده قارن بدر السماء في حوت.

(IBN ABĪ UṢAYBĪ'A 1965, 394)

A slender-waisted one visited me at midnight, with the | magic of Hārūt in her alluring eyes.

She came; in her cheek was an apple like a pearl | ornamented with rubies.

It shone like the bright Star when in conjunction with | the Moon in Pisces.

This transformation finds its most vivid expression in Umayya b. Abī al-Ṣalt's celebrated praise of the astrolabe, where the instrument becomes a literary emblem of the universe's hidden order, a man-made reflection of divine craftsmanship. In the following verses, he extols it as a terrestrial analogue of celestial wisdom, a symbol that, within the broader poetics of the Abbasid age, echoes the idea of the 'Preserved Tablet' (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*)¹⁸ as a record of cosmic decree:

جرم إذا ما التمسست قيمته جل عن التبر وهو من الصفر

مسكنه الأرض وهو ينبئنا عن جل ما في السماء من خير.

(IBN ABĪ UṢAYBĪ'A 1965, 511–12)

It is a body whose worth, if you sought to measure, | exceeds pure gold though fashioned from brass.

¹⁸ In the Qur'an (Q 85:22), 'The Preserved Tablet', i.e. *al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*, is the tablet containing the eternal Decree of God, which is kept in Heaven. See WENSINCK and BOSWORTH, 2012.

Its dwelling is on earth, yet it reveals to us much of the | great secrets of the
heavens

Here, astronomy, theology and aesthetics converge: the astrolabe (both instrument and metaphor) translates divine cosmography into poetic craftsmanship, embodying the Abbasid fascination with the correspondence between the heavenly and the human. Other later Abbasid poets extended this ornamental register into satire. Many who combined astronomy with astrology expressed unease about astrology's scientific pretensions and sought to distance themselves from quacks and charlatans. Al-Badr al-Aṣṭulābī (d. 534/1139), for example, ridiculed an apprentice whose ignorance of basic planetary positions exposed the absurdity of astrological pretension, mocking him as a bull who had mistaken Taurus for the Sun:

قام إلى الشمس بآلاته لينظر السعد من النحس
فقلت: أين الشمس؟ قال الفتى: في الثور. قلت: الثور في الشمس.
(al-ḤAMAWĪ 1993, 5:587; IBN ABĪ UṢAYBĪ'A 1965, 377)

He took his tools and faced the Sun to observe auspicious and inauspicious signs.
I asked him 'Where is the Sun?' The lad replied, 'In Taurus.' I said 'Rather it is Taurus that is in the Sun.'

While, as mentioned earlier, Abū l-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (fl. sixth/twelfth to seventh/thirteenth century) derided the astrologers' tables as worthless paper:

كنت إذا ما سرت في حاجة أطلع التقويم و الزيج
فصار لي الزيج كتصحيفة وعاد لي التقويم تعويج.
(al-SHANTARĪNĪ 1998, 1:131)

Before embarking on any action, | I would consult the aalendar and *zīj*.
Yet the *zīj* proved nothing more than useless paper, | and the calendar led me astray.

In prose and anecdote, astrology also functioned as ornament. For example, the prediction of al-Ma'mūn's death was retold less as theology than as narrative curiosity (al-MAS'UDĪ 1973, 3:121), while Ibn Sīnā employed planetary conjunctions as a literary framework for forecasting upheavals later identified with the Mongol invasions in his *maḥama* (NASR 1993, 173; PINGREE 1968, 77–79). These examples illustrate how, by the late Abbasid era, astrology had become a flexible poetic currency. Earlier dynastic poetry had mobilised celestial imagery for legitimacy (see §3.1), and theological debates had condemned or reshaped it (see §3.2). But as a literary *topos*, astrology endured—adorning satire, elegy and *ghazal* alike, across Baghdad and its wider orbit, as a symbolic resource unmoored from scientific or doctrinal pretensions.

Conclusion

By the late Abbasid period, astrology had completed a remarkable semantic journey. Once invoked to secure dynastic legitimacy and divine sanctions, it had become a vehicle for self-awareness, irony and aesthetic play. The language of the stars, once predictive and theological, was reimagined as a language of emotion and craft. Poets, theologians and philosophers transformed celestial vocabulary into a field of negotiation between divine omnipotence and human agency, revelation and imagination, and order and contingency. What emerges from this evolution is not the decline of astrology, but its transfiguration. Detached from its scientific or doctrinal frameworks, it continued to organise meaning according to the same cosmic logic that had once animated the caliphal worldview. In the poetic sphere, rhetoric absorbed astrology's epistemic power, turning its signs into metaphors of love, irony and fragility. The scorpion on the cheek, the moon in Scorpio, the astrolabe as mirror of heaven: these images all testify to the persistence of a cosmological imagination long after its theological authority had waned. Read in this way, the *longue durée* of Abbasid poetry charts a shift from astrology as a medium of legitimacy to astrology as a register of decline—but also as an enduring art of interpretation. The heavens, once the domain of prophecy and fate, became the workshop of language itself, a space in which beauty, persuasion and knowledge converged in the crafting of meaning.

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Mamluk *Maqāmas* on the Black Death

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Abstract

A long-standing narrative about the Black Death (1346–1350) asserts that the disease originated in China in the preceding decade. Recent work in phylogenetics and palaeogenetics has refined this claim, showing that the branch of *Yersinia pestis* (the plague pathogen) that gave rise to the Black Death had its likeliest origins in Central Asia. Nonetheless, geneticists still posit that the pathogen was displaced only in the late 1330s, moving overland from Lake Issyk Kul to the Black Sea in less than a decade, resulting in the massive pandemic that afflicted Western Eurasia and North Africa during the late 1340s. This ‘Quick Transit Theory’ is built primarily upon a literal reading of *Risālat al-naba’ ‘an al-wabā’* by the Mamluk writer Ibn al-Wardī, which literary scholars have long classified as a *maqāma*, a literary tale in rhymed prose that often features an itinerant trickster. We shall show that Ibn al-Wardī’s *Risāla* was one of at least three *maqāmas* composed in 749/1348–9 in the Mamluk realm. Far from being the sole eyewitness account, the *Risāla* shares its tropes and content with these other *maqāmas*, especially that of his contemporary Damascene writer al-Ṣafadī. The *maqāma* of al-Ṣafadī has hitherto been overlooked by literary scholars, an edition of which we provide here based on three manuscripts. All these *maqāmas* depict plague as a roving trickster, but Ibn al-Wardī’s visitor is unique in having a range that extends into China and India. Given their literary nature, these *maqāmas* should not be read as providing historical testimonies about the precise movement of the disease. Nonetheless, by placing them in their original literary contexts, we can learn much about how contemporary scholars coped with such catastrophic events and made the ‘Islamic archive’ speak directly to their situation.

Keywords: *Yersinia pestis*, pandemic narratives, plague, Ibn al-Wardī, al-Ṣafadī, al-Maqrīzī, *adab*

As his contribution to a festschrift produced in honour of the specialist on Islamic numismatics, George C. Miles, the then recently-minted PhD Michael Dols penned a translation and brief analysis of the Syrian historian, jurist and poet Ibn al-Wardī’s (d. 749/1349) *Risālat al-naba’ ‘an al-wabā’* (‘A Treatise on the News of the Epidemic/Plague’). Acknowledging an earlier use of the work in translation by Russian scholars in 1880s,¹ Dols

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¹ Russia suffered at least one major outbreak of plague in a settlement on the Volga river in 1878. Following that, and within the context of the epidemiological Orientalism of the nineteenth century that portrayed plague-ridden societies of the ‘East’ as backward and dirty, Russians invested heavily in ‘epidemiological thought’ and bacteriology (AFANASYEVA 2017). The Russian scholars’ recourse to Ibn al-Wardī’s text

presented Ibn al-Wardī's *Risāla* as the 'only extensive, historical account contemporary with the Black Death in the Middle East which has survived' (DOLS 1974). This is a curious way of introducing the text, although, to be fair, Dols used the term 'Middle East' to refer to the central and eastern lands of Islamic societies, thereby excluding Andalusia from this formulation. In an accompanying footnote, he acknowledged reading at least three contemporary accounts of the Black Death from Andalusia—these are the well-known tracts on plague by the physician Muḥammad al-Shaqūrī (d. 749/1348), the poet, physician and historian Abū Jaʿfar b. Khātima (d. 770/1369), and the physician, chancellor and one-time chief minister of the Nasrid kingdom of Granada Lisān al-Dīn b. al-Khaṭīb (d. 776/1375). For the Middle East, he had access to what he described as 'only fragments of poetry and reports', which he knew from copies of the work of the Egyptian scholar and polymath Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī (d. 911/1505). Over the last five decades, more contemporary eighth/fourteenth-century sources have been found that contain these reports and poetry. However, it was not their survival in later sources that prevented Dols from including them as 'contemporary accounts'; Ibn al-Wardī's *Risāla* is likewise found verbatim in those sources. Rather, the key word in his description is 'historical'. Dols saw Ibn al-Wardī's *Risāla* as fundamentally different from the other poetic and literary accounts. Ibn al-Wardī included the *Risāla* in his chronicle (though not in its entirety) under the year 749/1348–9, after having already reported plague outbreaks in the nearby regions of Crimea in the year 747/1346–7 (IBN al-WARDĪ 1996, 2: 333, 339–40).² Thus, Dols treated the *Risāla* as a literal, fact-based account of the movement of plague from China across Central Asia and into the Black Sea and Mediterranean. This allowed him to incorporate this narrative into his own narrative of the origins of the Black Death in the Middle East (DOLS 1977).³

Even before Dols' book was published, there were already longstanding narratives in European historiography about plague (and other diseases) always arriving from the East, what Nūkheth Varlık has termed, 'Epidemiological Orientalism' (VARLIK 2021a; VARLIK 2021b). By 1951, the World Health Organization plague specialist, Robert Pollitzer had constructed a narrative of a quick transit of plague in the mid-eighth/fourteenth century across Central Asia based on the work of a Malay physician, Wu Liande, and an 1880s Russian discovery of Syriac gravestones near Lake Issyk Kul (modern-day Kyrgyzstan) that marked the burials of a number of people who had died of plague (*mawtānā*) in the years 1338–9 and 1341–2 (GREEN 2022, 147; FANCY and GREEN 2021, 157–8).⁴ Dols not only knew Pollitzer

should be understood within that context. For more on epidemiological Orientalism, see VARLIK 2021a.

- 2 Ibn al-Wardī does not include the entire *Risāla* in his *Tārīkh*. Rather, he introduces selections from it with the phrase *wa-minhā* (and from it). There are also some minor differences between the text found in the *Tārīkh* edition and the edition of the *Risāla* found in Ibn al-Wardī's *Diwān* which may be due to different manuscript traditions.
- 3 The book was based on his PhD dissertation, 'The Black Death in the Middle East' (Princeton University, 1971). Ibn al-Wardī was known to Michael Dols as a poet, as Dols had access to his published *dīwān*, and used an edition of his *Risāla* in combination with manuscripts to establish the text for his translation. Dols was also aware that Ibn al-Wardī composed *maqāmas*, as this fact is mentioned in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* entry on Ibn al-Wardī by BEN CHENEB (1913–36), which Dols cited.
- 4 Ancient DNA recovered from the bodies found in these graves of Eastern Christians has confirmed that they died due to being infected by *Yersinia pestis*, the plague-causing bacterium; see SPYROU et al. 2022.

and Wu Liande's work but incorporated it in his *The Black Death in the Middle East* (DOLS 1977).⁵ All of these factors have contributed to the tendency of historians over the last half century to insist on the narrative of a quick, overland transit of the plague-causing bacterium *Yersinia pestis* from the Tian Shan mountain region (modern-day Kyrgyzstan) to the Black and Mediterranean Seas in the 1340s. In fact, Ibn al-Wardī's *Risāla*, either directly or indirectly, is literally *the* source of the commonplace narrative in almost all histories of plague that the Black Death (and the Second Pandemic) originated in East and/or Central Asia in the mid- to late 1330s.⁶

But what would happen if we situated Ibn al-Wardī's *Risāla* within the intellectual and literary contexts of his time? What would change if we placed it alongside other literary accounts, such as the *kitāb* (book/epistle) that the littérateur, poet, biographer and religious scholar Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363) composed on the plague outbreak in Damascus during 749/1348, or the writing of the celebrated litterateur, poet, and secretary of the Damascene chancellery, Jamāl al-Dīn b. Nubāta (d. 768/1366) on the same outbreak, or the *maqāma* of the littérateur, poet and religious scholar Ibn Abī Ḥajala (d. 776/1375) concerning the subsequent plague outbreak?⁷ One thing is for certain, we would realise that all of these works are *maqāmas*—a genre of Arabic literature that usually, though not exclusively, takes the form of a tale of a travelling trickster (though the trickster became less prominent in later *maqāmas*) using rhymed prose (*saḥ*) and poetry. Ibn al-Wardī's text, rich as it is, is just one of several *maqāmas* composed in the midst of the devastation of the Black Death, and not the 'only extensive, historical account contemporary with the Black Death'.⁸ The difference here

For a critical examination of the additional historical claims made by SPYROU et al., see GREEN and FANCY 2024, 417–22.

- 5 Dols also used the work of Philip Ziegler, who had already incorporated Pollitzer's account of the Christian gravestones to claim that plague spread to Crimea from the regions neighbouring Lake Issyk Kul in the 1340s (ZIEGLER 1969, 25). We thank Monica Green for this reference.
- 6 For example, see HORROX 1994, 9. Horrox explicitly cites Dols in his discussion of the rapid movement of plague through the 1330s across Central Asia (thanks to Monica Green for this reference). Dols was himself building on earlier notions of plague moving from China across Central Asia to the Mediterranean found in the works of the nineteenth-century German historian Justus Hecker, who in turn was using the work of the earlier French historian Abbé (Joseph) de Guignes, which Dols recognised as the source for European accounts (DOLS 1977, 39). De Guignes was relying indirectly on Ibn al-Wardī through the work of a later ninth/fifteenth-century Mamluk historian. We will address this indirect connection in the final section of this paper. For more on how deeply this narrative is embedded in Western academic historiography, thanks to the Arabic literary sources, see GREEN 2022, 146–47; GREEN 2020; FANCY and GREEN 2021, 157–58.
- 7 Herdt identified Ibn Nubāta's and al-Ṣafadī's texts within Ibn Abī Ḥajala's work but he incorrectly assumed that they were just a few verses and a partially quoted *risāla* (HERDT 2018, 231), respectively, when in fact al-Ṣafadī's text, as we will show, is a *maqāma*, and Ibn Nubāta's quoted work is also in the same style and form.
- 8 There are several historical accounts of chroniclers who lived through the outbreaks, many of which will be cited below. There are also several other extant treatises composed on plague written by religious scholars who lived through the outbreaks of 749–50/1348–50. These latter have often been grouped as *plague treatises*, though their forms and content differ markedly from one another. On these treatises, see ARICI 2021; STEARNS forthcoming.

is significant. The eighth/fourteenth-century scholars themselves distinguished between genres that sought to record and narrate historical events (e.g. *tārīkh*, *ṭabaqāt*) and those in which the aesthetics of form and rhetoric dominated (e.g. *risāla*, *shī'r*, *maqāma*). Even though the latter were grounded in, and often responded to, historical events, and the historical texts themselves could be very literary in style and rhetorical embellishments, the goal of literary texts was not to report and record historical testimonies. Rather, the *maqāmas*, much like poetry, help us understand ‘what specific historical events mean in [the writer’s] ideological framework’ (QUTBUDDIN 2011, 196).

The consequences of the *Risāla* losing its status as an ‘historical account’, we would argue, are all positive for medical history and the study of Islamic societies. For medical history, thanks to advances in genetics which have definitively established that the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* was a key agent in the Second Plague Pandemic, we can combine our knowledge of the pathology and ecology of the bacterium and how it transmits with what our primary sources report in order to develop a better understanding of the origins of the Second Plague Pandemic, as Monica Green, Robert Hymes and Nahyan Fancy have done (GREEN 2020; FANCY and GREEN 2021; HYMES 2014; HYMES 2022; FANCY 2022). It frees us from restricting ourselves to the narrative of the quick overland transit of *Yersinia pestis* over 3,000 miles in the 1340s and allows us to probe earlier periods to understand the introduction and focalisation of plague in the Middle East (GREEN and FANCY 2024). This has many positive consequences for the study of the causes and spread of epidemics and pandemics in global history and contemporary public health. In terms of the history of Islamic societies, the *maqāmas* provide us with a window into how the literary and scholarly elites engaged with such catastrophes, and how deeply literature was intertwined with religious scholarship and religious responses to the plague. It may even help us appreciate how literary word-plays, displays of mastery over language, and entertainment combined to develop robust coping mechanisms for scholars and communities dealing with catastrophic death from a disease over which they had little control.

The Expansive Range of *Maqāmas* in the Mamluk Period

The *maqāma* began as ‘a form of narrative prose fiction invented in the fourth/tenth century by Badr al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 398/1008)’ (POMERANTZ and DECTER 2022, 1), though it was the later writer al-Ḥarīrī (d. 516/1122) who was deemed by posterity to be superior and whose style and form heavily informed the work of subsequent writers (al-ḤARIRI 2020, ix). Like the *risāla* from which it emerged, the *maqāma* is written in *sajʿ* (rhymed prose) mixed with poetry, either complete verses or partial. It shares many features with the *risāla*, including in some cases its narrative form. However, philological contests and riddles, the use of *envoi* and an *isnād* (chain of transmitters) introducing the narrator are much more prominent in the *maqāma* than in the *risāla*, and travel in particular is a major feature of the *maqāmas* (HÄMEEN-ANTTILA 2002). There is little doubt that the *maqāma* genre evolved and its popularity exploded in the Mamluk period, from which we know of at least sixty authors of *maqāmas*, most of whose works are extant in manuscript form (BAUER 2005, 124–5). In fact, the two literary forms morphed so much that, in the absence of a title or *isnād*, ‘it is

sometimes impossible to know whether one is reading a *risāla* or a *maqāma* [*sic*]' (HÄMEEN-ANTTILA 2002, 179). We also know that authors of *maqāmas*, for example al-Suyūṭī, sometimes wrote works that were more akin to a *risāla* or *kitāb*, even providing them with their own distinct titles, yet referred to these works within the compositions themselves as *maqāmas* (STEWART 2006, 157–8).

If we turn to the reflections of scholars on the *maqāma* genre writing closer in time to our eighth/fourteenth-century authors, we will be able to see why both Ibn al-Wardī and al-Ṣafadī's compositions should be classified as *maqāmas*, despite the fact that neither of them use that term to identify their compositions. In his famous encyclopaedia of the scribal arts, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā* ('Dawn for the Blind'), the legal scholar and secretary Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418) explains that the *maqāma* is essentially a narrative that may be recited in one session (*majlis*), categorising it as amongst the serious works (*al-jiddiyyāt*) in which secretarial administrators compete (HÄMEEN-ANTTILA 2002, 360–1). This is clearly a very broad definition into which many types of works could potentially fit. Yet, we would say that when we combine this with the presence of a travel motif in Ibn al-Wardī and al-Ṣafadī's writings, which is highlighted by modern scholars as an important feature of this genre, we can recognise how and why Ibn al-Wardī's work, in particular, was accepted as a *maqāma* by later scholars such as Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449) and al-Suyūṭī.⁹ Modern scholars of *maqāmas*, such as Hämeen-Anttila, always include Ibn al-Wardī's *risāla* on plague in their lists of *maqāmas*. Al-Ṣafadī's, and even Ibn Abī Ḥajala's, *maqāmas* on plague, however, seem to have eluded literary scholars.¹⁰

Literary erudition was a central concern for both the Mamluk-era writers and readers of the *maqāmāt*. They delighted in the 'influence' of the past, and used it constantly to enrich 'the Arabic literary tradition' (ROWSON 2003, 110). As such, *maqāmas* have played a wide and significant role in 'Islamic education' from the sixth/twelfth century until modern times, as Matthew Keegan has shown. For example, an important commentary on the famous *maqāma* collection of al-Ḥarīrī written by the Shāfiʿī jurist, *ḥadīth* scholar and Sufi Muḥammad al-Panjdhī (d. 584/1188) was widely read and used by religious scholars in Ayyubid and Mamluk Syria and Egypt (and beyond).¹¹ Al-Ṣafadī clearly knew this commentary intimately, as he copied parts of it into the margins of the luxurious manuscript of al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* that he produced himself (KEEGAN 2022, 90; GACEK 2010). The purpose of the commentary, and its use by later religious scholars, is summarised thus by Keegan:

For al-Panḡdhī, the moral and linguistic ambiguities of the trickster's performances and deceptions are fundamentally linked to Qur'ānic hermeneutics. What the

⁹ Ibn Ḥajar explicitly refers to Ibn al-Wardī's *risāla* as a *maqāma* (al-ʿASQALĀNĪ 1991, 371).

¹⁰ HÄMEEN-ANTTILA (2002) does not list these *maqāmas* despite discussing Ibn al-Wardī's *risāla* on plague as a *maqāma*. The exception is HERDT (2018) who identified Ibn Abī Ḥajala's plague *maqāma* in his study of the *Dafʿ*.

¹¹ Al-Panjdhī was originally from the regions of modern-day Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, but spent much of his adult life in the court of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī (d. 589/1193) in Egypt, and was a personal tutor to his eldest son al-Malik al-Afḍal (d. 622/1225) (KEEGAN 2022, 88).

Ḥarīriyya and the Qur’ān have in common is a penchant for challenging the reader with complex and allusive language, which invites digressive interpretation and endless contemplation. (KEEGAN 2022, 88)

In his commentary, al-Panjdhī opens up “the Islamic archive”—a vast and multifaceted realm of cultural memory that includes the Qur’ān, *ḥadīth*, and a multitude of other Islamic texts and discourses’ (KEEGAN 2022, 85), all in the service of having scholars reflect and contemplate upon al-Ḥarīrī’s *maqāmas* and their richness. We would argue that in composing their own *maqāmas*, Ibn al-Wardī and al-Ṣafadī (both Shāfi’īs) sought to emulate this aspect of contemplation through opening up the Islamic archive within the *maqāma* itself, as a means for their readers to use the text to contemplate upon their experiences of plague and become those the Qur’ān calls ‘the people of understanding’ or ‘those whom God guides’ rather than ‘those whom God leads astray’ (e.g. Q 2:26).

The Works and Manuscripts Used for This Study

In this article, we will focus mainly on al-Ṣafadī’s *maqāma*, an edition of whose text has been appended to the article, to show why Ibn al-Wardī’s *Risāla* should be read as a *maqāma* and its description of the quick transit of plague across Central Asia be understood as an imagined journey, rather than a real, reported historical account of the movement of plague. To strengthen our case for reading the *Risāla* as a *maqāma*, we will bring in references to Ibn Nubāta’s *maqāma* on the 749/1348 outbreak in Damascus, and Ibn Abi Ḥajala’s *maqāma* about the later 761/1360 outbreak when appropriate.¹² Both these writers were prominent poets and literary scholars of their time, and the latter, in particular, composed multiple works on plague, the most well-known being his *Daf’ al-niqma bi-l-ṣalāh ‘alā nabī al-raḥma* (‘Repelling the Trial by Sending Blessings Upon the Prophet of Mercy’) (ROWSON 2003; HERDT 2018; HERDT 2022). Ibn al-Wardī’s *Risāla* has not been critically edited, but can be found in numerous printed works, including a printing of his *Dīwān* from the nineteenth century that was known to Dols (IBN al-WARDĪ 1300/1882). An excerpt of the *Risāla* is found in Ibn al-Wardī’s *Tārīkh*, which is available in a print edition, and a full version of it is also preserved in Ibn Ḥajar’s plague tract, which is available in print (IBN al-WARDĪ 1996, 2:339–40; IBN ḤAJAR 1991, 371–9). We have also had access to two manuscripts of Ibn Abi Ḥajala’s *Daf’ al-niqma*, which includes Ibn al-Wardī’s entire *Risāla*. The two manuscripts are El Escorial, Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo, MS 1772 (E), which Dols had used, and the Istanbul, Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, MS Laleli 1361 (L).¹³ Ibn Shākir al-Kutubī’s (d. 764/1363) chronicle, *Uyūn al-tawārīkh*, also includes Ibn al-Wardī’s entire *Risāla*, a chronicle not used by Dols. We have used a manuscript of this work, Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi, MS III. Ahmet 2922, vol. 24 (A). Finally, for the *Risāla* we have also

¹² The manuscript gives this date of 761/1360, however the outbreak generally recorded in plague lists and by chroniclers is dated to 764/1363–4.

¹³ An edition of the *Daf’ al-niqma* has been published in Amman in 2024 (ed. H.S. al-Qalqashandī), but we were unable to secure a copy of it. We would like to thank Kevin Blankinship for this reference.

had recourse to Dols' earlier translation as well as the more recent poetic translation by Joel Blecher and Mairaj Syed, which can be found in the concluding sections of their translation of Ibn Ḥajar's plague tract (al-ASQALANI 2023).

Al-Ṣafadī's *maqāma* was composed as an account of the plague in Damascus for the poet Bahā' al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 773/1372), son of the leading Shāfi'ī jurist and teacher of al-Ṣafadī, Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355). It is preserved in full in Ibn Shākir's *Uyūn*. Since the Istanbul manuscript (A) of the *Uyūn* is possibly an autograph manuscript (ROSENTHAL 2012), we have used it as our base text for al-Ṣafadī's *maqāma*. This *maqāma* is also found in Ibn Abī Ḥajala's *Daf*, however, some parts have been excised in the manuscripts (E and L) of this work in our possession (we presume mistakenly by the copyist). Dols seems to have been aware of this work from al-Suyūṭī's *Mā rawāhu al-wā'ūn fī akhbār al-ṭā'ūn* ('What the Heedful Ones Have Reported About the Plague'), but he did not consider it in conjunction with Ibn al-Wardī's text (DOLS 1974, 445–46, n. 13).¹⁴

The remaining two *maqāmas* are from Ibn Abī Ḥajala's *Daf*. Ibn Abī Ḥajala states that his own *maqāma* which he entitled *al-'Ayn al-sāhira fī man ḥalla bi-l-sāhira* ('Sleepless in the Face of those Buried in the Earth'),¹⁵ is 'one of many *maqāmas* he composed in the style of al-Ḥarīrī', and was written 'when the people went out to pray at the tomb of [Sultan] al-Nāṣir [Muḥammad al-Qalāwūn] in Cairo during the plague of 761' (*min jumlat al-maqāmāt allatī ansha'tuhā fī ma'nā maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī ḥīna kharaja al-nās ilā al-du'ā' bi-qubbat al-nāṣir bi-l-Qāhira fī wabā' sanat iḥdā wa-sittīn wa-sab' mi'a*) (L, fol. 79a–81b; E, fol. 83a–86a). This is the last in Ibn Abī Ḥajala's collection of *maqāmas* in the *Daf*, and it is immediately preceded by Ibn al-Wardī's *Risāla*, before which Ibn Abī Ḥajala provides the *maqāma* of Ibn Nubāta. Ibn Nubāta composed his *maqāma* on the 749/1348 plague of Damascus, which Ibn Abī Ḥajala says 'he heard directly from the shaykh (*sami'tu min lafẓ al-shaykh*)' (L, fol. 76a–78b; E, fol. 80a–83a).

As we are not scholars of *maqāmas*, it would be hard to provide a critical edition and full translation of all these works. Instead, we have appended an edition of al-Ṣafadī's *maqāma* to the article and discussed some of the content of the other two. Our hope is that someone with more experience with *maqāmas* will edit the other two texts and provide serviceable translations and proper notes for all three. Ibn Abī Ḥajala's *maqāma* is by far the longest and is directly in dialogue with the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī, although it is highly possible that the other three, especially al-Ṣafadī, are engaging with al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* too in their writings.

The Stylistic Features of al-Ṣafadī and Ibn al-Wardī's *Maqāmas*

Al-Ṣafadī and Ibn al-Wardī both use the trope of travel in their texts, in which the plague is personified as a visitor travelling from place to place. Ibn al-Wardī states that its news first emerged from 'darkness', and that it has been present as a 'visitor' (*zā'ir*) for fifteen years,

¹⁴ Bār's edition of al-Suyūṭī's text does not contain al-Ṣafadī's *maqāma* but it is present in at least some manuscripts; al-SUYŪṬĪ 1997.

¹⁵ This is how Herdt has translated it into German ('Schlaflos angesichts derjenigen, die in der Erde ruhen') based on his reading of the *maqāma* (HERDT 2018, 230).

moving from China to India, to the land of the Uzbeks, Transoxiana and so forth until it reaches Crimea and the regions of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Ibn al-Wardī names actual cities once he arrives in this region, describing the plague's movement from Anatolia to Cyprus into Cairo, Alexandria, Upper Egypt, and then Gaza, Acre, Jerusalem and the cities of Syria, all in that explicit order (DOLS 1974, 448–9; IBN HAJAR 2023, 197–9; IBN HAJAR 1991, 371–2).

Al-Ṣafadī begins his text much closer to home. He says that the plague first entered Syria (*al-Shām*) from Gaza, and after describing poetically the death and havoc it caused there, he states that the plague had not even left Gaza before it was already 'rushing to Qat'yā and sharpening its arrows in Beirut' (*wa-mā qaṭṭa 'anhā ḥattā wathaba ilā Qat'yā wa-bāta yabrī sihāmahu fī Bayrūt baryā*). After that, it emptied the residents of Syria, moving to Safad and thence to Damascus, upon which he focuses the rest of the *maqāma*.

The motif of travel, so prominent in the *maqāma* genre, is thus fully present in both these works. Nonetheless, it is worth emphasising how differently both use their understanding of trade routes in their pieces. Ibn al-Wardī's text is clearly using a revised notion of trade wherein the movement is from China to northeastern India (Hind) then northwestern India (Sind) rather than the traditional silk route through Central Asia. This seems to have been the case for the earlier Fatimid period too, from which we have the famous *Book of Curiosities* that provides a similar understanding of trade and regions (RAPPOPORT and SAVAGE-SMITH 2018, 203–4). Ibn al-Wardī then makes his way around to Western Central Asia with the land of Uzbeks and Transoxiana, from which he then moves the plague into Persia, then Anatolia and the Black Sea region, and finally into the Mediterranean. He then, curiously, moves the plague first to the inland city of Cairo, and after that to the port of Alexandria. And from there it bifurcates, wreaking havoc across Upper Egypt and the coast of Syria, starting with Gaza. If one reads this literally, we have a problem with the Quick Transit Theory that posits that plague arrived in Egypt from the Black Sea in 748–9/1348–9 since Ibn al-Wardī is suggesting that plague moved to Cairo from the island of Cyprus without setting foot in the port of entry into Egypt, Alexandria. That should already cast some doubt over reading this text literally. However, a bigger concern is that all historical sources agree that Cairo was hit most severely by plague from the eighth month (Sha'bān) of the year 749 AH (November 1348 CE) onwards, while Gaza and Damascus experienced their most severe outbreaks earlier in the same year (Muḥarram/April and Rabī' I/June 1348, respectively) (A, fol. 98a–99a; IBN KATHĪR 1990, 18:502–5).¹⁶ Ibn al-Wardī himself begins his entry for the year 749 by stating that plague arrived in Aleppo in Rajab (October 1348), a month before it brought Cairo to its knees (IBN al-WARDĪ 1996, 2:339). Plague thus travels diachronically in his *risāla/maqāma*, entirely conforming to his mental map of the region. Prior to reaching the

¹⁶ Ibn Kathīr mentions that in 749/1348–49 there were reports of a plague moving within the neighbouring regions of Syria and Egypt. He states that there were reports of plague (*mawṭān*) in Crimea, from where it moved to the land of the Franks in Cyprus. He then states that the disease was reported in Gaza in the beginning of the year 749 AH. The notion that plague started in Egypt in the Autumn of 748/1347 is found only in the later ninth/fifteenth-century accounts of al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) and Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 874/1470), who nonetheless affirm that it was most intense in Egypt from Sha'bān 749/November 1348 onwards (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1934–73, 2:772ff; IBN TAGHRĪBIRDĪ 1949, 10:195). See also DOLS 1977, 60ff.

Black Sea and the Mediterranean, the only report he has of regions being hit by plague in the preceding years is information about plague striking the land of the Uzbeks in 747/1346, and from there spreading to Crimea, Anatolia and Cyprus.¹⁷ And even in this case, his reporting from 747/1346 makes no mention of plague in Persia or Transoxiana, which according to the *Risāla* would have suffered an outbreak before entering the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

Al-Ṣafadī, on the other hand, seems to be reporting the outbreaks diachronically as they happened, while also fitting them into the local postal and trade routes of Syria, but only partially. He thus states that it entered first Gaza in Syria, but that before it had fully left there it was already being reported in Beirut and in Qaṭyā, a town in the Sinai Peninsula on the postal road from Cairo to Damascus. And having already reported it in Beirut, he describes the devastation it caused in Ṣafad, his hometown, skipping over Jerusalem and other towns in between, which we know from Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 770/1368–9) were definitely impacted by plague. In fact, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa reports that Homs, a city north of Damascus, was hit by the plague in the same month that Damascus first reported plague outbreaks (Rabīʿ I/June), and just a month after plague deaths peaked in Gaza (GIBB and BECKINGHAM 1994, 918–20).¹⁸ The imagery that al-Ṣafadī uses to describe this movement is thus fascinating, since he refers to the simultaneous movement of plague from Gaza northeast and southwest, and then refers to it flying (*hallaqa*) to Damascus (*jilliq*) after having crushed his hometown of Safad in northern Palestine. In short, al-Ṣafadī is following the diachronic order of reports of plague rather than forcing them onto a mental geography of how plague should be travelling, as any trader or traveller would. This is in fact confirmed by how he captures this initial movement of plague in his couplet:

I said to the plague while it was in Gaza | having travelled from Qaṭyā to Beirut
You emptied the land of Syria of its inhabitants | you ruled O Plague as a tyrant.

Notice that in the couplet he refers to an expected journey, from Qaṭyā to Beirut with a stop in Gaza, and he addresses the plague while it is still ravaging all three cities. In the actual prose part of the *maqāma*, he reports the outbreak in Gaza taking place first, after which it moves simultaneously to Qaṭyā and Beirut.¹⁹ We will return to the timing of the outbreaks and rethinking the narrative of the spread of plague in 749/1348–9 in the final section. For now, it should be clear that both Ibn al-Wardī and al-Ṣafadī's texts share a prominent travel-motif. Ibn al-Wardī's text also contains an abbreviated *isnād* of sorts since he begins the

¹⁷ He follows this report about plague in the lands of the Uzbeks in 747/1346 with (undated) outbreaks in Crimea and Anatolia and then the phrase, 'the plague today (*al-yawm*) is in Cyprus' (IBN al-WARDĪ 1996, 2:333). This phrase has been interpreted as suggesting that plague struck Cyprus in 747/1346. Our reading of the text indicates that Ibn al-Wardī means that at the time he is composing his history, it is in Cyprus, i.e. in 749/1348. We know from some Greek accounts that Cyprus definitely suffered a plague outbreak in 1348 (DOLS 1977, 58).

¹⁸ Claudia Tresso has provided and carefully analysed all passages related to Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's encounter with plagues as he travelled through Syria, Egypt and the Hijaz in the year 749/1348–9 (TRESSO 2021, 154–60).

¹⁹ In fact, in his *Tadhkira* ('Reminder'), al-Ṣafadī states categorically that the plague began in Gaza in 749, then spread to Beirut and from there to all of Syria; see IBN HAJAR 1991, 382; IBN HAJAR 2023, 211. Blecher and Syed have mistakenly translated the year 49 as 449 AH instead of 749 AH.

account by stating, ‘news of it emerged from darkness (*ibtada‘a khabaruhu min al-ẓulumāt*)’ (IBN HAJAR 1991, 371). (Neither translations of the *Risāla* capture this trope; see DOLS 1974, 448; IBN HAJAR 2023, 197). Al-Ṣafadī’s text, in contrast, is an exhortative, first-person narrative beginning with ‘O our master’ (*yā mawlānā*), in which he cites his own poetic verses on the events of 749/1348–9 humbly (*qāla al-mamlūk*).²⁰ In another *risāla* which came to be seen as belonging to the *maqāma* genre, al-Ṣafadī also employs the first-person narrative (ROWSON 1997).

Finally, both texts are excellent examples of *badī‘*—usually described as the employment of ornamentation and rhetorical figures in poetry, although it has been convincingly argued by Betty Rosen that these encapsulate a core *habitus* of creativity (ROSEN 2023). These creative embellishments were very popular in the Mamluk period. The famous late Ayyubid, early Mamluk Egyptian poet, Ibn Abī al-Iṣba’ (d. 654/1256), wrote a major work on the science of *badī‘* that covers many different types of creativities and almost always provides crafted verses (either his or those attributed to others) to demonstrate these features (AYDIN 2018). Crucially, his work was not only widely read and well received, but numerous scholars (both literary and religious) studied under him or one of his students, including Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, the father of the poet Bahā’ al-Dīn to whom al-Ṣafadī wrote his *maqāma* about the plague in Damascus. In fact, many of the scholars who formed part of Ibn Abī al-Iṣba’’s network belonged to Ibn al-Wardī and al-Ṣafadī’s Shāfi‘ī school of Sunni legal thought (ROSEN 2025).

The examples already referenced above from al-Ṣafadī exemplify some features of *badī‘* creativity wherein the dotting of the *rasm* (*jinās al-taṣḥīf* or *jinās al-khaṭṭ*) is changed such that the word *ḥallaqa* (flew) turns into Damascus (*jilliqa*), or *ṭā‘ūn* (plague) turns into *ṭāghūt* (tyrant) (al-ḤAMAWI 2001, 1:441–42).²¹ The same pairing of *ṭā‘ūn* and *ṭāghūt* is used by Ibn al-Wardī in a couplet in which he is convinced that God will punish the people of Sis with the plague as well:

The residents of Sis are pleased with what ails us, | which is what you expect from
religion’s enemies
Soon, God will spread it to them | to shatter their false idols with plague (*li-yumazziqa
l-tāghūta bi-l-ṭā‘ūni*).²²

²⁰ The Ayyubid-era administrator and literary scholar, ‘Alī b. Zāfir al-Azdī (d. 613/1216), uses the same phrase *qāla al-mamlūk* to introduce his poetry in his works, much like al-Ṣafadī here (al-AZDĪ 1983, 27). The phrase thus is similar to *qāla al-‘abd al-faqīr* (the humble slave said). We thank Matthew Keegan for helping us understand this rhetorical device better and for the reference to al-Azdī’s work.

²¹ We are grateful to Betty Rosen for providing us with this reference.

²² The wordplay was missed by both the translators (IBN HAJAR 2023, 206; DOLS 1974, 454) and the editor of Ibn Hajar’s work (IBN HAJAR 1991, 377). The *ghayn* is not dotted in manuscript L (fol. 78a), but it is dotted in manuscripts E (fol. 82b) and A (fol. 97b), and even in the edition of Ibn Hajar’s *Badhl* (377), where the last letter (*nūn/tā*) only carries one dot. Only the edition of Ibn al-Wardī’s *Tārīkh* (1996) was edited (correctly) as *ṭāghūt* (340).

Ibn al-Wardī does the same in a couplet describing the fate of the city of Hama, in which he accuses the plague of smelling the city (*shamamtahā*) and poisoning it (*fa-samamtahā*), playing on the word *hamā*, which means mother-in-law.

*yā ayyuha l-ṭā'ūnu inna ḥamāta min | khayri l-bilādi wa-min a'azzi ḥuṣūnihā
lā kunta ḥīna shamamtahā fa-samamtahā | wa-lathamta fāhā ākhdhan bi-qurūnihā*

Pestilence! Ḥamā was once a fortress
You envelop her air with your fetid breath, and your kiss upon her hills is poisonous.
(IBN ḤAJAR 2023, 200)

In the preceding rhymed prose—here in the translation by Joel Blecher and Mairaj Syed—the author also plays creatively with the *rasm* of the word *hamā* to describe how plague removed itself from Homs and established a home in Hama (IBN ḤAJAR 1991, 373; DOLS 1974, 451), and here too he uses the double entendre (*tawriya*) of the word signifying the city and mother-in-law.

Jinās (paranomasia) is used frequently across Ibn al-Wardī's *maqāma*, especially at the beginning, where he plays with the consonantal roots of the names of the affected regions, for example: *awsa'a al-khuṭā ilā arḍ al-Khiṭā* ('[it] extended its steps towards the land of Kḥiṭai'); *qarama al-Qaram* ('[it] gnawed away at Crimea'); *fa-ṣāda Ṣaydā* ('[it] trapped Sidon'), etc. (IBN ḤAJAR 1991, 372; DOLS 1974, 448–49). This alliteration and play on the consonantal roots of words while describing the movement of plague is lost in the English translations. Al-Ṣafadī also makes use of *jinās* when he describes how the plague kills by smell (*bi-l-rā'iḥa*), such that no one enters a house without confirming that the spirit (*rūḥahu*) of everyone in it has returned (*rā'iḥa*). There are many other creative aspects of *badī'* in both Ibn al-Wardī's and al-Ṣafadī's texts, but perhaps our favourite is the way that Ibn al-Wardī (in the prose part) switches one letter across two words to incorporate a Qur'anic verse within an imagined exchange (*murāja'a*) with those who elevate the power of nature above the power of God:

fa-in qāla qā'ilun huwa yu'dī wa-yubīd, qul bal Allāh yubdī' wa-yu'īd

If one says: it infects and annihilates, say: nay, God 'creates and restores'.
(IBN ḤAJAR 1991, 377; DOLS 1974, 454; IBN ḤAJAR 2023, 206; Q 85:13)²³

The concise way in which Ibn al-Wardī turns from concern over plague's infectious nature to concern with God's power over all and the afterlife reveals the central concern of all these *maqāmas*: to make readers reflect and ponder over disastrous events in a way that lead them towards ensuring a blessed afterlife. These authors use a number of common aspects from the Islamic archive to help the readers process and cope with the emotions they were experiencing at the time (BAUER 2005, 111), while also calling them to reflect upon their actions and how they will be judged by God in the next life.

²³ The translators and the editor of Ibn Ḥajar's text have not noted this use of the Qur'anic verse, although they have in other instances.

Sūrat al-Nāzi‘āt* in the Eighth/Fourteenth-Century Plague *Maqāmas

Q 79, *Sūrat al-Nāzi‘āt* (‘The Wresters’), plays a pivotal role in these *maqāmas* in terms of both direct citations and its core themes.²⁴ Verse 14 states, ‘*fa-idhā hum bi-l-sāhira*’, which can be interpreted in many ways but was often read in commentaries as referring to how those who reject the Day of Judgment and God’s message will find themselves staring wide-eyed from fear (NASR et al. 2017, 1470). As mentioned above, Ibn Abī Ḥajala entitled his *maqāma*, *al-‘Ayn al-sāhira fī man ḥalla bi-l-sāhira* (‘Sleepless in the Face of Those Buried in the Earth’). He then begins the *maqāma* itself thus:

*wa-hiya ḥaddatha al-Sāji‘ b. Ḥammām * qāla lammā ḥalla al-wabā’ bi-l-Qāhira *
wa-ashara ‘uyūn ahlihā fa-idhā hum bi-l-sāhira*

This is what Sāji‘ b. Ḥammām reported. He said: when the plague descended upon Cairo, and kept the eyes of its residents awake, then they were wide-eyed [with fear]. (L, fol. 79a; E, fol. 83b)

Ibn al-Wardī similarly states that when the plague’s ‘eye was cast upon Egypt ... the people were wide-awake (*fa-idhā hum bi-l-sāhira*)’ (DOLS 1974, 448; IBN ḤAJAR 1991, 372).²⁵ Ibn Nubāta, on the other hand, assigns the same phrase to the people of Damascus:

*qad šaḥa al-ḥimām fī wujūh ahlihā al-zāhira * fa-idhā hum bi-l-sāhira*

The fear of death was radiant in the faces of its people, such that they were wide-awake. (L, fol. 76a; E, fol. 80a)

Al-Ṣafadī is the only author from this group who does not include this specific verse in his *maqāma*. Instead, he turns to a different verse from the same sura to describe the situation in Damascus: Q 79:34, ‘*fa-idhā jā’ati l-īḥḥat al-kubrā*’ (‘So when the great calamity befalls’) (NASR et al. 2017, 1472). This is a reference to the coming of the Day of Judgment when, as the next set of verses clarify, people will remember all that they strove for and be judged accordingly. The sura is, of course, pushing its readers and listeners to acknowledge the certainty of the coming of this event. Al-Ṣafadī, however, uses it to introduce a symptom of plague that means certain death—the spitting up of blood:

*thumma innahu jā’a bi-l-īḥḥat al-kubrā * wa-l-muṣība allatī ja’alat kull ‘ayn minhā
‘abrā * fa-man baṣaqa daman māt[a]*

Then the plague brought with it the great event * and the calamity that made every person weep * And whoever spat out blood died

The spitting up of blood is indeed affiliated with the pneumonic manifestation of an infection from *Yersinia pestis* as opposed to its bubonic version. The pneumonic manifestation is extremely lethal, and the spitting up of blood would indicate imminent and certain death. This symptom is first associated with plague, as far as we can tell from the surviving textual

²⁴ For citations of the Qur’an, we have used the translation of NASR et al. 2017 throughout.

²⁵ An alternate translation can be found in IBN ḤAJAR 2023, 198.

traditions of North Africa and Western Eurasia, only in the 749/1348 outbreak (DOLS 1977, 79–82).²⁶ Ibn al-Wardī too records this epidemiological novelty of this outbreak:

*fa-matā baṣaqa wāḥid minhum daman * taḥaqqaqū kulluhum ‘adaman * thumma yaskunu al-bāsiq l-ajdāth * ba‘da laylatayn aw thalāth*

When any one of them spits blood up * rest assured each one’s time is up * The one who spits up will be in the cemetery * after two nights or three. (A, fol. 96b; IBN al-Wardī 1996, 2: 340)

The sheer terror of recognising and confronting this fatal symptom of plague is captured well in Ibn al-Wardī and al-Ṣafadī’s texts, both of whom also provide a couplet to represent this symptom and the plague’s destructive power. Both then also invite their readers to turn to God, al-Ṣafadī through his use of the Qur’anic verse itself, and Ibn al-Wardī by his subsequent invocation to God to save Aleppo. Al-Ṣafadī’s description of symptoms, however, is not just limited to the spitting up of blood.

As Fancy has shown elsewhere, a curious feature of the 656/1258 plague outbreaks in Syria was that buboes were only observed in the armpits. This led physicians writing in the aftermath of these outbreaks to boldly assert that even though plague buboes have historically been associated with three main sites (behind the ears, in the armpits and in the groin area), the term *tā‘ūn* in their time refers to the disease in which buboes only erupt under the armpits (FANCY 2022, 64–6; FANCY and GREEN 2021, 168; GREEN and FANCY 2024, 425–6). In the 749/1348 outbreak, however, buboes were seen in all three primary sites again, along with this new symptom of spitting up blood. Thus, al-Ṣafadī systematically goes through each of these symptoms as a way of reminding and warning Bahā’ al-Dīn and his readers about them. He begins with behind the ears, followed by the armpits and then the groin, providing specific couplets for all, before arriving at the most calamitous symptom, the spitting up of blood. There is a lot going on in the text of course, including double-entendres based on using the term *khiyāra* (cucumber) to refer to the bubo in the groin, and by referring to death by the emergence of a small pustule (*bathra*) behind the ear. The surprise (*ta‘ajjab*) expressed in the verse about the bubo behind the ear carries two meanings then. The first is that a person dies from a mere prick and small pustule behind their ear, while the second is that plague buboes were assumed to have arisen only in the armpits for almost a century but now are arising behind the ears as well. Al-Ṣafadī is alerting Bahā’ al-Dīn and his readers that the shifty, travelling plague is taking on new forms.

This sequence of symptoms was misinterpreted and misrepresented by ninth/fifteenth-century historians as a temporal emergence of symptoms in the outbreak of Damascus, since those later chroniclers did not have a memory of the specificities of the 656/1258 outbreak and its subsequent impact on medical and religious scholarship stemming from Damascus. We will return to this issue in the final section, but for now it is worth reading al-Ṣafadī’s text in its entirety to recognise that he is definitely not asserting that there was a time in Damascus when plague-infected patients only had buboes behind the ears, and then under

²⁶ For a discussion of when the various symptoms were associated with plague by physicians and scholars in Islamic societies, see FANCY 2022.

the armpits, and then in the groin. Prior to reporting the symptoms, he has already highlighted the fact that plague has been ravaging and killing people across the entire city, emptying it of its nobles and residents, killing with its smell, etc. His use of temporal phrases after reporting each symptom (*wa-istamarra 'alā dhālika ḥīnan* or *wa-jarā 'alā hādha al-namaṭ muddatan*) is meant to refer back to the travelling aspect of the plague (as well as possibly its trickery) within the structure of the *maqāma*. It is not meant to describe periods during which only one symptom prevailed, to be followed by another.

The verses from *Sūrat al-Nāzi'āt* are not just cited, we would argue, in all these *maqāmas* due to the way they fit with the stylistic features of each of these texts. Instead, these references open up the Islamic archive in a manner that the authors found conducive for dealing with the subject of the pandemic. The sura's central theme is the certainty of the coming of the Day of Judgment when wicked people will be recompensed for the corruption they have wrought. Given the vast number of deaths during the 749/1348–9 plague outbreaks, this in itself is a powerful message. However, many other suras of the Qur'an also engage with the theme of the final reckoning. What makes *Sūrat al-Nāzi'āt* particularly apt for these authors are two subthemes that are present within the sura. The first is the series of oaths with which the sura begins:

By those that wrest violently
By those that draw out quickly
By those that glide serenely
By those that race to the fore, outstripping
And by those that govern affairs. (Q 79:1–5; NASR et al. 2017, 1469)

One dominant interpretation of these verses was that God is swearing by the angels who will extract the souls of the dead from their bodies in specific ways: violently for the disbelievers and the wicked, and quickly and with ease for the believers (al-RĀZĪ 1981, 31:28).²⁷ Using verses from this sura within the *maqāma* thus leads listeners and readers to consider and ponder upon how, when death strikes (and given the plague outbreak, this could be very soon), their souls will be taken by the angels of death. Will they be treated like the wicked and the corrupt, or the blessed and the virtuous?

The second subtheme is the story of Moses and the Pharaoh. In a brief section that begins immediately after the verse *fa-idhā hum bi-l-sāhira*, the sura asks the original audience of the Qur'an whether the story of Moses has reached them. It then provides a very brief summary, ending by recounting how Pharaoh rejected the great signs of God and ruled tyrannically and, as a consequence, God made an example out of him for all by punishing him so that those who fear may reflect upon his story and ponder it (Q 79:15–27). The relevance of the story of Moses in these plague *maqāmas* is manifold. First, as the paradigm of disbelief and corruption, Pharaoh's tyrannical behaviour is meant as a warning for those who have been ruling corruptly and engaging in malice prior to and during the 749/1348 plague outbreak.

²⁷ This interpretation is found in the commentaries of al-Zamaksharī (d. 538/1144), and al-Qurṭūbī (d. 671/1273), both of which were widely read in the Mamluk period (and beyond), and in the commentary of Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), al-Ṣafadī's fellow Shāfi'ī, Damascene religious scholar and historian (al-ZAMAKSHĀRĪ 2009, 1175; NASR et al. 2017, 1469).

The themes of corruption, oppression and attachment to wealth and power are found across all these *maqāmas*. For example, Ibn al-Wardī refers to the oppressive and tyrannical rule within the city of Ma'arra as a plague itself (DOLS 1974, 451; IBN HAJAR 2023, 200). He also creatively flips the medical phrase that attributes the cause of plague to the corruption of air to describe how the love of corruption has brought upon the plague:

Qālū fasādu l-hawā'i yurdī | fa-qultu yurdī hawā l-fasādi

They say: the corruption of air kills | I say: the love of corruption kills.
(DOLS 1974, 454; IBN HAJAR 2023, 205; IBN HAJAR 1991, 377)

And in the midst of the outbreak itself, Ibn al-Wardī points to the continuing corrupt behaviour of some who seek to make profit from others' misery by raising prices or cheating in other ways (DOLS 1974, 453; IBN HAJAR 2023, 204).

Al-Ṣafadī too emphasises obsession with wealth. He contrasts how cheap death is during the plague, which kills someone via a pustule that amounts to no more than a small (inexpensive) seed. He also highlights the Pharaonic attribute of arrogance, insisting that Damascus's pride (*ujb*) in itself brought the plague upon the city. Ibn Nubāta contrasts the scene of the beautiful souks of Damascus with the image that nothing is sold in them any more other than cotton and shrouds (*'fa-law ra'ayta aswāqahā al-ḥisān * wa-laysa yubā'u fihā illā al-quṭn wa-l-akfān'*; L, fol. 76b; E, fol. 80b). And to bring home the point that people do not consider their fate and exist in a state of heedlessness (*ghafla*)—a key attribute of humanity according to the Qur'an, which takes them away from God—al-Ṣafadī highlights their heedlessness even in the face of certain death during the plague pandemic, as they are caught unaware of the bubo emerging in their armpit (*'wa-kāna al-nāsu fī ghaḥalāti amrin | fa-jā'a tā'ūnuhum min taḥti ibṭi'*).²⁸ The theme of corruption is in fact so prevalent in these *maqāmas* and in the chronicles of this time that a century later al-Maqrīzī highlights the abundance of corruption and hypocrisy in Egypt and Syria during the year 749 AH before beginning his detailed description of plague outbreaks (al-MAQRIZI 1934–73, 2:772).

Most importantly though, reference to the story of Moses is also meant to open up the origin story of plague within the Islamic archive. As Lawrence Conrad has shown, there was a long tradition of recording plague outbreaks in Islamic historical writing, dating back to the early third/ninth century (CONRAD 1981), undoubtedly influenced by the impact plague had on the early Muslim community during the seventh-century conquests and expansions into Persia and the Mediterranean in the midst of the first plague pandemic. This third/ninth-century tradition continued into the Ayyubid and Mamluk period in the works of Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) and al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277), amongst others, giving rise ultimately to the major list of thirty-three plagues in Ibn Abī Ḥajala's *Daf'*. The difference between Ibn Abī Ḥajala's list and those of earlier scholars, however, is that Ibn Abī Ḥajala does not restrict himself to the plague outbreaks that had occurred since the birth of Islam. Rather, he includes two outbreaks that took place prior to that: the first of which was in Egypt at the time of

28 This is also an example of *tawriya* (double entendre) as the phrase *taḥta ibṭi* means 'under one's protection' too, and the next line in the couplet refers to the fact that the plague did not ignore any hiding place. We thank Kevin Blankinship for his suggestions on the Arabic passage.

Moses and the second of which was sent against the Israelites after Moses's time (CONRAD 1981, 76–9; L, fol. 58a–59a; E, fol. 60a–61b). What is common to both these is that they were sent down by God to punish disbelievers; the Egyptians in the first case for rejecting Moses and oppressing the Israelites, and the Israelites themselves in the second case for disobeying God's commands. The punishments—*tūfān* (flood) and *rijz* (punishment)—are mentioned in the Qur'an itself and were long interpreted by exegetes as possibly referring to plague. Al-Zamaksharī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, for example, both record these interpretations in their commentaries, regardless of how convinced they are of these opinions (al-ZAMAKSHARĪ 2009, 78:381–2; al-RĀZĪ 1981, 3:98–9, 14:246–7). For Ibn Abī Ḥajala and his contemporaries, such as Ibn Kathīr, there was little doubt that plague was sent as a punishment against earlier people for their disobedience, and that the *rijz* of Q 2:59 and the *tūfān* of Q 7:133 both refer to plague, since there is also a widely-circulated and accepted Prophetic *ḥadīth* that literally states that (IBN KATHĪR 2000, 1:422–3, 6:368–9).

There are two final connections between these plague *maqāmas*, *Sūrat al-Nāzi'āt* and the pre-Islamic history of plagues. First, Q 7:133 refers to various punishments sent against Pharaoh and the Egyptians for rejecting Moses, which include not only *tūfān*, but also locusts, fleas and blood (*al-dam*). Al-Ṣafadī's use of *Sūrat al-Nāzi'āt*'s 'great calamity' to discuss the spitting up of blood thus pushes the readers to probe further this connection with the punishments sent to the people of Egypt described in other suras. Second, although many exegetes claimed that the plague was sent against the Egyptians alone, they also record a version that states that 70,000 Israelites died from the Egyptian plague because one of their leaders disobeyed God and Moses and committed fornication (IBN HAJAR 2023, 9–11). The plague *maqāmas* thus use *Sūrat al-Nāzi'āt* intentionally to open up the Islamic archive with regards to plague being sent as a punishment in the past. The highlighting of the corruption and pride of the people in the various cities of the Islamic world is thus intended to get people to reflect on their states and put their affairs in order before it is too late. And, relying on the Prophetic tradition that plague is a mercy and martyrdom for the believers, Ibn al-Wardī concludes by giving hope to his readers if they are able to do so:

*wa-min fawā'idih taqṣīr al-āmāl * wa-tahṣīn al-a'māl * wa-l-yaqāza min al-ghafla *
wa-l-tazawwud li-l-riḥla*

And amongst its merits are the curtailment of (false) hopes * the perfecting of deeds
* waking up from heedlessness * and securing provisions for the final journey. (IBN HAJAR 1991, 378; DOLS 1974, 454; IBN HAJAR 2023, 207)

The Use of the *Maqāmas* by Mamluk Chroniclers

Ibn al-Wardī himself placed his *maqāma* within his chronicle, though he only provided selections from it rather than the entire text, concluding after the final selection that 'this should suffice for the entire *risāla* is long' (IBN al-WARDĪ 1996, 2:340). The selections are placed early in his entry for the year after he states that plague arrived in Aleppo, in the month of Rajab 749/October 1348, and he reports that it is said to have begun fifteen years prior. After quoting from the *Risāla*, he returns to the regular format of his chronicle, highlighting

various events that took place in that year in Aleppo, including the killing of two *‘ajamī zindīqs* (in Ibn al-Wardī’s time, this is a catchall phrase for non-Arab Muslims or non-Muslims deemed to uphold heretical beliefs or practices), following which he provides a list of notables who died from plague in that year. The last name he lists is that of the historian Ibn Faḍlallāh al-‘Umarī who succumbed to plague in Damascus in the penultimate month of the year 749/January 1349, over three months after the peak of plague mortality in Damascus.

Ibn al-Wardī’s use of the *risāla/maqāma* within a historical chronicle is not unique: Ibn Shākir, as already mentioned, also includes Ibn al-Wardī’s *Risāla* (and does so in its entirety) in his own chronicle. Ibn Shākir was a highly-esteemed historian of his time whose chronicle, *‘Uyūn al-tawārīkh*, was widely used and survives in numerous manuscripts. It has not, however, received as much attention from modern scholars as the chronicle of his younger contemporary, Ibn Kathīr. This is despite the fact that his observations on contemporary Syrian intellectual, social, political and religious life have been lauded. Although it is true that Ibn Kathīr’s *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya* and Ibn Shākir’s *‘Uyūn* contain many identical accounts, both also include many ‘reports and stories that are not found in the other’ (VAN STEENBERGEN 2006, 11). Moreover, Ibn Shākir is known to have sought out ‘new information not to be found elsewhere’, as is visible in his pooling together reports about the 656/1258 plague outbreak in Syria from both the Ayyubid-Mamluk and the Mongol sphere (ROSENTHAL 2012; FANCY and GREEN 2021, 166).

Ibn Shākir’s account of the year 749/1348–9 contrasts sharply with that of the years that precede it. In the previous years, he begins by recording the names of the rulers of Mamluk lands, along with the appointed governors and officials in Syria and Egypt, not too dissimilar to what is found in Ibn al-Wardī’s chronicle, or in the later chronicle of al-Maqrīzī. Like Ibn al-Wardī, Ibn Shākir shifts from this standard format for his account of 749/1348–9 which instead begins first by referring to the widespread plague in this year. However, unlike Ibn al-Wardī, Ibn Shākir first includes al-Ṣafadī’s writing/*maqāma* that he sent to Bahā’ al-Dīn from Damascus to Cairo concerning the outbreak in his own words (*min jumlatihi*). (One should remember that Ibn Shākir and al-Ṣafadī knew each other personally and shared many of the same teachers in Damascus.) After he finishes al-Ṣafadī’s entire *maqāma*, Ibn Shākir seizes upon the recurring phrase ‘the Mamluk said’ to address a different oddity about the 749/1348–9 plague outbreak, namely that far more military personnel (i.e. Mamluk soldiers) died in this plague compared to earlier ones.²⁹ To ruminate on this aspect, Ibn Shākir turns to the account of a plague outbreak in 449/1057 found in the works of Sibṭ b. al-Jawzī (d. 654/1256). This plague wreaked havoc across Central Asia and the lands of Iran and Iraq, as found in Sibṭ’s chronicle. After quoting from this earlier chronicle, Ibn Shākir states that the Mamluks thought there was no plague comparable to that of 749/1348–9 until they came across this report on the plague of 449/1057. However, the two differed in two ways. First, the plague of 749/1348–9 seems to have been even more widespread, sparing neither villages nor cities, with reports even of buboes in the armpits of wild animals. Second, despite the widespread death, older people and the military crucially were less affected in 449/1057 than in the plague of 749/1348–9 (A, fol. 94b–95b).

²⁹ For deaths amongst the Mamluk soldiers during the Black Death outbreaks, see AYALON 1946.

After finishing this account of the plague of 449/1057 from Sibṭ b. al-Jawzī, Ibn Shākir then copies (*naqaltu*) from the autograph copy (*min khaṭṭ*) of Ibn al-Wardī's *Risāla* describing the attributes (*ṣifa*) of this plague (A, fol. 95b–98a). It is only after this point that Ibn Shākir turns to describing the events of the year 749/1348–9 which includes factual reports of the plague outbreak in Syria and Damascus, including the types of readings and prayers in which the people participated. The latter includes the famous account, also reported by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa amongst others (GIBB 1956, I: 142–4), of the city-wide three-day fast and of its residents—Muslims, Jews and Christians alike—marching to a mosque known as ‘the Mosque of the Footsteps of Moses’ in an attempt to lift the plague from Damascus (A, fol. 99a–99b). This specific response, and the decision to proceed to the Mosque of the Footsteps of Moses, take on more meaning in light of the use of the story of Moses in the *maqāmas* as a means to reflect on and come to terms with one's situation during this massive mortality event. At no point, however, does Ibn Shākir intimate that Ibn al-Wardī's description of plague travelling and ravaging the world from China to the Mediterranean Sea over the last fifteen years is to be taken literally. He does not even state, for example, that the plague came to Syria from Egypt. Ibn Kathīr, his fellow Shāfi'ī, Damascene historian likewise does not claim that plague came to Syria from Egypt, despite mentioning that there had been reports in 749/1348–9 of plague striking neighbouring regions earlier, and its moving from Crimea to Cyprus before striking Gaza in the beginning of the year (IBN KATHĪR 1990, 18:502–3).

Ibn Shākir also does not suggest that al-Ṣafadī's description of the plague symptoms appearing sequentially should be taken literally, i.e. that the first set of plague-stricken people in Damascus only had buboes behind their ears, followed later by all newly plague-stricken people having buboes under their armpits, etc. He lived through the outbreak in Damascus and could have been trusted to include this odd presentation of the symptoms if it were true. Both Ibn Shākir and Ibn Kathīr record many other unusual events, such as a terrible, dusty windstorm on the afternoon of Monday the twelfth of Rajab 749 (14 October 1348) that turned the sky yellow and then black, and other strange aspects of the outbreak (such as more women dying than men). Neither historian, however, records anything peculiar regarding the sequential emergence of the symptoms (A, fol. 99a–100a; IBN KATHĪR 1990, 18:503–7). We can thus see that Ibn al-Shākir included these *maqāmas* not for their factual description of the plague's causes or path of travel, or the timing of outbreaks, but rather as a way of describing some attributes of the plague in order to make his readers understand the trauma experienced by those who lived through these outbreaks. Even Ibn Abī Ḥajala only includes these *maqāmas* in his final section, in which he brings together poetry and other literary descriptions of plague. He does not include any information from these literary accounts, including Ibn al-Wardī's account of the plague coming from China, in his earlier section on plague chronologies, despite the fact that in that section: (a) he regularly provides accounts of the plague moving across regions sequentially; and (b) he emphasises that the plagues of 749/1348–9 and 449/1057 spread throughout the entire world. Ibn Abī Ḥajala also documents in his plague list that Cairo's outbreak followed that of Damascus by several months (E, fol. 75a–75b; L, fol. 71a–71b).

So: when, where and how did Ibn al-Wardī's literary tale of plague originating in the ‘land of darkness’ and China fifteen years prior and moving swiftly over the vast masses

of Asia become entrenched as a factual account? The culprit here is not Dols per se but in fact ninth/fifteenth-century Mamluk historians, although by accepting their account and enshrining it in a map in his book entitled ‘Transmission of the Black Death: Eurasian Continent, 1338–1349’, Dols gave new lease to this understanding in modern scholarship, since after that Central Asia became a fixture in maps in plague studies (DOLS 1977).³⁰ The literal reading of the *maqāmas* is firmly entrenched in the work of the two most widely read historians from this period, al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī, though it is unclear as yet whether the older al-Maqrīzī was the first to read these literary texts in this way or whether this was one of his teachers. Both al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī present the plague of 749/1348–9 as having started in the East fifteen years prior, from where it moved across Asia following the path described in Ibn al-Wardī’s *Risāla*.³¹ Their accounts replaced ‘the land of darkness’ with the ‘land of the Great Khans’, and then went on to describe in fanciful ways 300 tribes perishing along with their beasts before the plague moved to China and India, and thence to regions nearer to Egypt and Syria (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1934–73, 2:773–74; IBN TAGHRĪBIRDĪ 1949, 10:195–96; DOLS 1977, 41).³² Both also provided new dates for the emergence of plague in Egypt, stating that it started there in Autumn 748/November 1347, although they maintained that it was most intense towards the second half of the year 749/1348, much like earlier chroniclers (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1934–73, 2:772; IBN TAGHRĪBIRDĪ 1949, 10:195). Al-Maqrīzī also provided an oft-quoted account of a ghost ship arriving in Alexandria carrying slaves, almost all of whom had died of plague—Hannah Barker has rightly questioned the authenticity of this report, which is not found in earlier sources (BARKER 2021, 121–22). Their accounts were picked up by mid-eighteenth-century Europeans such as the French historian Abbé (Joseph) de Guignes in his 1756–8 work, *Histoire générale des Huns, des Turcs, des Mongols, &c*, which cites Ibn Taghrībirdī explicitly in its reports about the Black Death starting in the land of the Mongols (DOLS 1977, 39, n. 6).³³

Al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī also read al-Ṣafadī’s reference to the three symptoms of plague literally. The way that al-Ṣafadī’s literary passage outlining the four distinct symptoms of plague is transformed by al-Maqrīzī or one of his teachers into an actual description of the Damascene plague outbreak of 749/1348 is worth quoting here in full:

³⁰ Dols did not include this map in his dissertation. Major plague scholars, including Jean-Noël Biraben, never included Central Asia in their plague transmission maps prior to Dols, and only started doing so thereafter (personal communication from Monica Green). On plague transmission maps, also see GREEN 2025, Lesson 3, 4–5, 8.

³¹ Ibn al-Wardī himself may have been persuaded to include China and India in his *maqāma* based on Ibn Baṭṭūṭa who had just returned from China and was in Aleppo in 749/1348 (FANCY AND GREEN 2021, 174–75).

³² Dols’ criticisms of this account are much more muted in the monograph when compared to his dissertation, in which he had explicitly stated that ‘no evidence’ exists to substantiate the mass mortality event in the land of the Great Khans (DOLS 1971, 33–34). Thanks to Monica Green for this reference.

³³ Dols mistakenly identified the Arab author as al-Maqrīzī when it is in fact Abū l-Maḥāsīn Ibn Taghrībirdī. We would like to thank Monica Green for these references and for piecing together the entrenchment of this specific Arabic narrative of plague’s origins and movements in Western historiography.

When it [i.e. plague] first began in Damascus, there emerged behind the ear of a person a pustule (*bathra*) and they fell down having seizures (*yakhirru šarī'an*). Then there emerged under the armpit of a person a swelling (*kubba*), which did not wait long and killed a person quickly (*fa-lā yalbathu wa-yamūtu sarī'an*). Then there emerged in the people the groin-lump (*khiyāra*), and it killed many people. It stayed like that for a while, and then they spit up blood (*baṣaqū al-dam*). The horror intensified due to the extent of death such that many only lived for five hours after spitting up blood. (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1934–73, 2:775; IBN TAGHRĪBIRDĪ 1949, 10:195)

Notice that not only is the order of the presentation of symptoms lifted from al-Šafadī's text, but so are the terms used for them (*bathra*, *kubba*, *khiyāra*), when *bathra*, *waram* (swelling) and *ṭā'ūn* (bubo) would have been more appropriate from a descriptive perspective for any of them. The use especially of the sexually loaded term *khiyāra* is most telling in that al-Maqrīzī (or one of his teachers) has mistaken al-Šafadī's *maqāma* for a factual reporting of events. And since al-Šafadī's *maqāma* has not been edited or examined before, historians of the Black Death in Europe and the Middle East have been misled into accepting this ninth/fifteenth-century transformation of the *maqāma* depictions into fact.³⁴

Finally, we know that this transformation took shape at the hands of al-Maqrīzī or one of his teachers because his contemporary, Ibn Ḥajar, quotes a different text from al-Šafadī, the *Tadhkira* ('Reminder'), in which he again describes the plague of 749/1348–9 first striking Gaza in Syria, before moving to Beirut, and then all of Syria. In that work, al-Šafadī lists the symptoms of the deadly disease in Damascus. But here, describing the events outside the form of a *maqāma*, al-Šafadī no longer lists them sequentially. Instead, he emphasises that plague killed:

... by the smell, and by virtue of a seed-like pustule (*bi-qadr al-ḥabba*) that emerges in the glandular flesh (*maghābin*), like the armpit and similar parts, and by the pustule (*bathra*) behind the ear, and by virtue of the cucumber-like swelling in the groin. Some of them spat up blood and dropped dead. (IBN ḤAJAR 1991, 382)³⁵

³⁴ In his nineteenth-century account based on the work of al-Suyūfī, von Kremer read the extracts of Ibn al-Wardī's *Risāla* and al-Šafadī's letter to al-Subkī found in al-Suyūfī's work literally, even though he identified Ibn al-Wardī's work correctly as a *maqāma*. Thus, he too insists the plague started in China fifteen years prior to 749 and followed the trajectory as described in Ibn al-Wardī's *Risāla* (VON KREMER 1880, 1:69–156, 82, 136–37). We are grateful to Monica Green for this reference. Dols, putting too much faith in al-Maqrīzī, followed suit and read the extracts of al-Šafadī he found in al-Suyūfī's text literally too, even while classifying it as poetry (DOLS 1977, 75, 80).

³⁵ Alternative translation in IBN ḤAJAR 2023, 211.

Conclusion

The transformation of the plague *maqāmas* of Ibn al-Wardī and al-Ṣafadī into factual accounts by ninth/fifteenth-century Mamluk historians associated with the circle of al-Maqrīzī lies at the heart of the centuries-old narrative of the rapid transit of plague across Asia from China to the Mediterranean in fifteen years.³⁶ This narrative has continued to dominate modern plague studies, including scientific studies that have definitively identified the bacterium, *Yersinia pestis*, in human remains from the Black Death (1347–50). Although the bacterial origins of the Black Death can geographically be traced to Central Asia, the notion that a lineage of this bacterium moved over 3,000 miles overland within a few years, and established itself sufficiently to cause the devastating Black Death of the Middle East and Europe makes little historical or biological sense.³⁷ By demonstrating that Ibn al-Wardī's *Risāla* was one of at least three plague *maqāmas* composed in 749/1348–9 itself, and that its structure and style matched those of other *maqāmas* of this period, anyone committed to the quick transit narrative found in al-Maqrīzī's chronicle would have to find real historical evidence for the sequential movement of plague through these regions in a westward direction. And no such evidence has emerged thus far, since the entire trans-Asian movement of plague and its arrival in Egypt prior to Syria has always been, and continues to be, based upon Ibn al-Wardī's singular *Risāla*, and is unsubstantiated by other contemporary chronicles and even *maqāmas*.³⁸

On a more positive note, there are two advantages to recognising Ibn al-Wardī's *Risāla* for what it is, a *maqāma* brilliantly composed to open up the Islamic archive for people to ponder upon. First, it frees historians up to engage with the significance of earlier plague outbreaks (such as the 656/1258 outbreak in Damascus, or the 1232–3 outbreak in

³⁶ Two Andalusian contemporaries of the 749/1348 outbreaks also place the origin in China: Ibn Khātima and Ibn al-Khaṭīb. In his plague treatise, Ibn Khātima acknowledges that there is a debate about the plague's origins with some Christian traders placing it in Khitai, which Ibn Khātima claims is China in their language. From there it is supposed to have spread to neighbouring regions as far as Iraq and Anatolia, while other Christians reported that it started in Abyssinia and spread to Egypt and Syria. In his own plague tract, Ibn al-Khaṭīb states that the plague started in 734/1333–4 in China, claiming that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa had informed him about great wars in the region at that time that corrupted the air causing the disease to break out and spread. Neither, however, follows the identical trajectory of plague through the regions as reported by Ibn al-Wardī; see al-ANṢĀRĪ 2010, 19–20; MÜLLER 1863, 9. For an analysis of these reports within the context of miasma theory, see FANCY and GREEN 2021, 173–75.

³⁷ For more on this, see GREEN 2020; GREEN 2022; and GREEN and FANCY 2024.

³⁸ There were of course plague outbreaks in Central Asia and Iran between 1333 and 1347, but they do not always match up with the prescribed itinerary based on Ibn al-Wardī's work. For example, Spyrou et al. claim that the lineage found in the graves in Kara-Djigach is ancestral to the Black Death lineages that wreaked havoc over the Middle East and Europe. Since these graves are dated to 1338–9 and 1341–2, the outbreaks in Iran and Western Asia would have to be after that time. However, there are already reports of outbreaks 2,000 miles away in the southwestern Caspian sea regions (Ardabil) between 1336 and 1341 in *Ṣafwat al-ṣafā*, the hagiography of Shaykh Safī al-Dīn Ardabīlī, eponym of the Safavid dynasty, composed by Ibn al-Bazzāz (d. after 759/1358) (GRONKE 1993, 73). We are grateful to Monica Green for these references.

Kaifeng), their impact on those societies, and how experiences in those outbreaks and their memories were recalled and revisited by later scholars. These earlier outbreaks do not agree with the Quick Transit Theory of the second pandemic and thus have been mostly ignored or assumed to not have been plague. Second, it allows historians to conceive of biologically plausible scenarios for the movement of a bacterium and its focalisation into new regions preceding the mass outbreaks.³⁹ This work will inevitably have to be interdisciplinary and will bring in bioarchaeologists, geneticists and climatologists (amongst others) in order to understand what could have caused the difference in scale and scope of the Black Death outbreaks of when compared to earlier ones.

Finally, examining the plague *maqāmas* as a group allows us to see what strategies scholars at this time used to cope with such mass mortalities. What aspects of the Islamic archive did they find most conducive? And did engagements with the archive change across different outbreaks? It also can help us understand how the *badīʿ* creativity displayed in these *maqāmas* may have been a way to exercise some control and served as a coping mechanism at this time of widespread death, in the same way that people developed new culinary skills or artistic skills during the Covid-19 pandemic. In short, the judgment passed by Herdt on Ibn Abī Ḥajala's *Dafʿ* as a whole applies as much to each of these *maqāmas*, namely that each is 'an attempt by a literary Muslim who was directly affected by the plague to put into words the unspeakable mischief that broke out suddenly and then to give a very personal answer in accordance with the means of expression available to him ...' (HERDT 2018, 234–35).

³⁹ For more on this, especially understanding the concept of a prodrome of the pandemic and how to look for its signs in the historical record, see GREEN and FANCY 2024.

Appendix: al-Ṣafadī's *Maqāma* on Plague

Edited by Muhammed Omar and Nahyan Fancy

Manuscripts Used:

Ibn Shākir al-Kutubī, *Uyūn al-tawārīkh*, vol. 24, fol. 93a–94b (A);
Ibn Abī Ḥajala, *Daf' al-niqma bi-l-ṣalāh 'alā nabī al-raḥma*, Laleli MS (L), fol. 75a–76a;
Escorial MS (E), fol. 79a–80a.

A has been used as the base text for the edition, unless otherwise indicated. Variations across the manuscripts have been indicated in the footnotes. We have used modern standard spellings in the edition, so رائحة instead of رائحة. We would also like to thank Kevin Blankinship for his corrections and suggestions on the edition.

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[قال الشيخ صلاح الدين الصفدي في كتاب كتبه إلى الشيخ الإمام العالم بهاء الدين بن سيدنا
ومولانا قاضي القضاة تقي الدين السبكي، من دمشق إلى القاهرة * من جملته: ¹
يا مولانا²، أول ما دَخَلَ هذا الطاعونُ إلى الشام من غَزَّة³ * وأَدْخَلَ إصْبَع كلِّ أَحَدٍ من رَزِيئِهِ
تحت رِزَّة * وَفَعَلَ فيها وفي تلك الناحية ما فَعَلَ * رَمَى⁴، فلم يُخْطِ المقاتلُ كأنما هو رامٍ من
بني ثعل * وما قَطَّ عنها، حتى وَثَبَ إلى قَطِيَا * وبات يَبْرِي سَهَامَه في يَبْرُوتَ بَرِيَا *

1 E: "وكتب أيضًا في الطاعون المذكور سنة تسع وأربعين إلى الشيخ بهاء الدين أبي حامد السبكي رسالة جاء فيها قوله:
يا مولانا... إلخ". وفي L: جاء النص مطابقًا لما جاء في E؛ إلا أن كلمة "بهاء" في E رُيِّمَتْ "بهاي" في L، وكلمة "رسالة"
في E ساقطة في L.

2 أراد المصنف بقوله "يا مولانا" بهاء الدين السبكي.

3 A: أرض غزة "وقد ضُربَ على كلمة "أرض"؛ بينما لم ترد كلمة "أرض" في E ولا L.

4 L, E: "ورمى"، بالواو. ولا يستقيم السياق إلا كما أُثْبِتَ ("رمى" من دون الواو، كما أُثْبِتَ في A)، بأن يكون قوله
"رمى... إلخ" جوابًا للشرط؛ إذ لا تصلح العبارة لأن تكون جوابًا للشرط بإبقاء الواو.

فقال المملوك⁵:

قد قلتُ للطاعون وهو بغزّةٍ | قد جالَ من قَطْياً إلى بيروتِ

أخليتُ أرضَ الشام من سكّانها | وحكمتُ يا طاعون بالطاغوتِ

[L, fol. 75b] ولما دَخَلَ إلى صَفَدٍ ❖ أَخْنَى عليها الذي أَخْنَى على لَبَدٍ ❖ فما ترك منها أحداً من

[A, fol. 93b] الأهل والمعارف ❖ حتى احتَجَفَه سيّله الجارف ❖ فكم صاحب جاءنا عنه ناعيه ❖

ودعاه إلى البلى داعيه ❖

[E, fol. 79b] وقال المملوك:

لما افترستُ صحابي | يا عام تسع وأربعينا

ما كنتُ والله تسعاً | بل كنتُ سبْعاً يقيناً⁶

ثم إنه بعد ذلك⁷ حَلَقَ إلى جِلَقٍ وانْقَضَ ❖ ودَخَلَهَا، فانتثر⁸ عَقْدُ حياة أهلها وارْقَضَ ❖ وكان

يقتلُ بالرائحة ❖ فما دَخَلَ داراً إلا تَحَقَّقَ كُلُّ مَنْ فيها أَنَّ روحه رائحة ❖

وقال المملوك:

5 عَمَد المصنّف في الإشارة إلى نفسه في تضاعيف هذه الرسالة بقوله "قال المملوك".

6 E: أُورِدَ الشطر الأول من البيت موردَ النثر.

7 L, E: سقط قوله "بعد ذلك".

8 L, E: جاء محل "فانتثر" كلمةً رُسمت دون نقطٍ، يشبه أن تكون "فابترا" أو "فانبرا". وما أُثبت ("فانتثر"، كما جاء في A) يستقيم به السياق؛ إذ يُعبّرُ انحلال العقد بالانتثار.

دارت من الطاعون كأسُ الفنا | فالنفس من سكرته طافحة⁹

قد خالف الشرع وأحكامه | لأنه يثبت بالرائحة

ثم إنه قتل¹⁰ بذلك جمعًا لا يعلم جملة عدتهم * إلا الذي قدّر به نهاية مدتهم * وظهر بنوع
آخر من الفناء * مبالغته في الحرص والاعتناء * فكان يقتل بظهور حبة * يعزّز نعتها على من
وصف أو شبه *

فقال المملوك:

أسفي على أكناف جلق إذ عدا | الطاعون فيها ذا زناد واري

الموت أرخص ما يكون بحبة | والظلم زاد فصار بالقنطار

وزاد أمره¹¹ وأعزب * فكم¹² من خيل كان فقد خله كلمح البصر أو هو أقرب * وخلت عده
مساكن من سكانها * وأفرط الأمر حتى كادت دمشق تخلوا من أربعة أركانها * وعمت
الوحشة * ومحا الأنس من كل دار نقشه *

فقال المملوك:

أما دمشق فإنها قد أوحشت | من بعد ما شهد البرية أنسها

9 L, E: "طافحة" بدلًا من "طامحة".

10 L, E: "قتل" بدلًا من "قتل".

11 L, E: "مرة" بدلًا من "أمره".

12 L, E: "وكم" بالواو بدلًا من "فكم" بالفاء.

[A, fol. 94a] تاهت بعُجْبٍ زائدٍ حتى لقد | ضَرَبَتْ بطاعونٍ عَظِيمٍ¹³ نفسها

وأقام على ذلك بُزْهَةً يَجُولُ يَمِينًا وَشِمَالًا * وَيَحُوبُ الدِيَارَ بِالْخَرَابِ جَنُوبًا وَشِمَالًا * فَظَهَرَ فَتَكُهُ
بِبُشْرَةٍ تَطْلُعُ¹⁴ خَلْفَ أُذُنِ الْإِنْسَانِ * [E, fol. 80a] فَتَجُرُّهُ إِلَى مَصْرَعِهِ بِمَقَاوِدٍ وَأَرْسَانِ *
فَقَالَ الْمَمْلُوكُ:

تَعَجَّبْتُ مِنْ طَاعُونٍ جَلَّقَ إِذْ غَدَا | وَمَا فَاتَتْ الْآذَانَ وَقَعَةُ طَعْنِهِ

فَكَمْ مُؤْمِنٍ تَلْقَاهُ أَذْعَنَ¹⁵ طَائِعًا | عَلَى أَنَّهُ قَدْ مَاتَ مِنْ خَلْفِ أُذُنِهِ

[L, fol. 76a] وَاسْتَمَرَّ عَلَى ذَلِكَ حِينًا * لَا يُهْمِلُ كِنَاسًا وَلَا يَنْسَى عَرِينًا * حَتَّى جَاءَ بِكُبَّةٍ
تَخْرُجُ¹⁶ تَحْتَ الْإِبْطِ، كَأَنَّهَا عَمَلُهُ السَّارِقِ * أَوْ الْغَرِيمِ النَّكِدِ الَّذِي لَا يَفَارِقُ غَرِيمَهُ أَوْ يَفَارِقُ *
فَقَالَ الْمَمْلُوكُ:

رَعَا الرَّحْمَنُ دَهْرًا قَدْ تَوَلَّى | يُجَازِي بِالسَّلَامَةِ كُلَّ شَرِّطٍ

وَكَانَ النَّاسُ فِي غَفَلَاتٍ أَمْرٍ¹⁷ | فَجَاءَ طَاعُونُهُمْ مِنْ تَحْتِ إِبْطٍ

وَجَرَى عَلَى هَذَا النَّمَطِ مَدَّةً * وَقَاسَا النَّاسُ مِنْهُ أَهْوَالًا وَشَدَّةً * [ثُمَّ إِنَّهُ جَاءَ بِخِيَارَةٍ تَطْلُعُ فِي
الْأُرْبِيَّةِ * مَا كَانَ لِلنَّاسِ مَعَهَا الْخَيْرَةُ * وَلَا نَجَاهُ مِنَ التَّسْلِيمِ وَالْإِنْقِيَادِ، وَلَا التَّشَاوُمِ وَالطَّيْرَةِ *
فَقَالَ الْمَمْلُوكُ:

L, E 13: كلمة "عظيم" ساقطة، ولا يستقيم وزن البيت دونها.

L, E 14: "تظهر" بدلًا من "تطلع".

L, E 15: جاء محل قوله "أذعن" كلمة يُشَبِّه أَنْ تَكُونَ "لا غنى".

L, E 16: سقط قوله "تخرج".

E 17: "أمن" بدلًا من "أمر".

ثَلَّ هذا الطاعونُ عرشَ دمشقٍ | بقضاءٍ من ربنا سبحانه

فلکم مات بالخياره شخصٌ | كان يبدوا كأنه رجانه

واستصحب الحال في ذلك زماناً ❊ ولم يجد الأنام منه أماناً ❊¹⁸ ثم إنه جاء بالطامة الكبرى
❊ والمصيبة التي جعلت كل عينٍ منها عبئاً ❊ فمن بصق دماً مات ❊ وحلَّت به الآفاتُ
وفات ❊

فقال المملوك: [A, fol. 95b]

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يا رحمتا لدمشق من طاعونها | فالكَلَّ مغتَبِقٌ به أو مُضْطَبِح

كم هالكٍ¹⁹ نَفَثَ الدِّمَا من حَلَقِهِ | أو ما تراه بغير سكينٍ ذُبِح

وقلتُ أيضاً:

مصيبَةُ الطاعون قد أصبحت | لم تخلُ منها في الورى بُفْعَة

تدخلُ في المنزل لو أنه | مدينةٌ أخلَّتْهُ في جُمعة

ومن عجائبه التي لا تُحصى ❊ أنَّ الوصي يموتُ قبل مَنْ أوصى ❊ وليس لأحدٍ في هذا الأمر
حيلة ❊ ولا له إلى من قدَّره غير التسليم لقضائه وسيلة ❊

L, E 18: سقط قوله "ثم إنه جاء بخياره" إلى قوله "كأنه رجانه". والذي يظهر، أن سقوطها كان سبقَ نظير من الناسخ؛ إذ سبق نظره إلى العبارة التي تليها، وذلك أن كلاهما بُدِئتا بـ "ثم إنه جاء".

L, E 19: "كم من هالك" بدلاً من "كم هالك"؛ ولا يستقيم بذلك الوزن إلا كما أُثبت.

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Mamluk Maqāmas on the Black Death

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How to (Try to) Tame a Disaster? Annotating Approaches to the Integration of Politics and Power Strategies into the Creation of a Disasters Database in Classical Arabic Sources

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Abstract

The Disasters Corpus in Classical Arabic Sources (DiCCAS)¹ was conceived as a resource that would encompass a diverse range of materials, including the Qur'an and the *ḥadīth* collections *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, as well as several significant historical works, such as al-Ṭabarī's *Kitāb Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* and Ibn Taghrībirdī's *Kitāb al-Nujūm al-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira*. The corpus also incorporates *adab* texts by al-Jāhiz, notably his *Rasā'il*, and Ibn al-Jawzī's *al-Mudhish*. DiCCAS is designed to allow historians to compare different accounts and narratives of disasters in a variety of classical sources. While the breadth of this corpus is essential to fulfil the objectives of the 'Environmental Anomalies & Political Legitimacy in Global Eurasia, 12th–14th Century' project, it presents a formidable challenge for the digital humanist whose job is developing a structure capable of accommodating a variety of text types and their respective idiosyncrasies. This paper discusses the validity of the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) as an encoding language, on the basis that its inherent flexibility and adaptability make it an optimal tool for a project of such scope, and seeks to outline the methodological hurdles encountered in the creation of a historical corpus. Finally, it explores the potential for integrating contemporary technological tools with classical sources. In doing so, it aims to assess how these tools can facilitate the comparative analysis of multiple sources, allowing researchers to understand the political and power strategies employed during and after a disaster.

Keywords: Arabic corpora linguistics, corpus linguistics, Arabic history, Arabic text encoding, TEI, Islamicate history.

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1. Introduction

Creating a digitised corpus is a complex undertaking and involves significant challenges in methodology and resource acquisition. Generally speaking, the process of corpus construction entails different key steps: (i) the identification of relevant sources; (ii) the selection of an encoding language; (iii) the compilation of the corpus; and (iv) the annotation of the text. While several Arabic corpora have been created during the last decades (AHMED et al. 2022; ATWELL et al. 2004; ALRABIAH et al. 2013), some of which deal with the Islamicate world (PADILLO SAOUD 2019), very few corpora have been created on a specific topic (See CICOLA 2018), the Disasters Corpus in Classical Arabic Sources (DiCCAS), which was created by the Bologna Unit of the ‘Environmental Anomalies & Political Legitimacy in Global Eurasia, 12th–14th century’ project, being one of these. In fact, in order to fulfil the project’s needs, the team had to create a corpus that gathers texts related to disasters, covering a wide range of both time and genre, in order to enhance and sustain subsequent scholarly investigation. The notion of ‘disaster’ the team decided to utilise is not only limited to physical disasters such as floods (*fayaḍān*, *sayl*) or drought (*qaḥṭ*, *jafāf*), but a broad definition that includes plagues (sing. *ṭāʿūn*), pestilence (*wabāʾ*) and divine scourges reported in the Qurʾan and, more generally, in theological texts, as will be discussed in §4.3.1.

With an emphasis on how various textual traditions organise and communicate reactions to catastrophic occurrences, the corpus was created to enable historians conduct comparative studies of disaster narratives and it provides a starting point for investigating genre and temporal and narrative framing issues in Classical Arabic sources.

2. Corpus Composition

McEnery and Wilson (MCENERY and WILSON 2022) state that four core features have to be present in a corpus: (i) sampling and representativeness; (ii) finite size; (iii) machine-readable form; and (iv) status as standard reference. In order to fulfil these fundamental requirements, a wide range of texts has been included in the corpus:

1. Religious texts:

- a) *Qurʾān*
- b) *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*
- c) *Saḥīḥ Muslim*
- d) al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr*

2. Historical texts:

- a) al-Ṭabarī’s *Kitāb Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*;
- b) Ibn Taghrībirdī’s *Kitāb al-Nujūm al-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira*
- c) al-Maqrīzī’s *al-Sulūk fī maʿrifat duwal al-mulūk*
- d) al-Dhahabī’s *Tārīkh al-Islām al-kabīr*

3. *Adab* texts:

- a) al-Jāhiz, *Rasā'il*
- b) Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Mudhish*

The project team selected these texts aiming at both textual representativeness and historical variety. In fact, we have included historical texts from the fourth/tenth century (2a), and sixth/twelfth to ninth/fifteenth centuries (2b, 2c and 2d), as well as religious texts and *adab* texts from the previous centuries (1a, 1b, 1c, 1d and 3a). Such a corpus provided a solid ground, in terms of both variety and solidity, for the research we were about to embark on, however, we are aware that a plethora of other texts might be included in the corpus to further expand and deepen the study. Given this, ability to expand the corpus in the future was one of the main issues that had to be taken into consideration while assessing the building methodology of DICCAS, so as to make it expandable and interoperable with other Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools, as will be discussed below.

3. Methodological Challenges

In recent years, the digitisation of Arabic texts has gained momentum, leading to the use of a wide range of approaches and to the creation of several tools (ATWELL et al 2004; ALFAIFI and ATWELL 2016). It was important for the success of the project to find a suitable markup language that could, on the one hand, accurately represent the complex linguistic and textual features of Classical Arabic sources, and on the other hand, be as interoperable as possible. Of the available options, the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI; see TEI CONSORTIUM 2025) has emerged as the most used standard in the digital humanities, offering a structured and flexible framework for text annotation.²

In fact, TEI is used for encoding a wide variety of text types, including linguistic corpora and scholarly editions, precisely because it has a number of distinguishing aspects that set it apart from the other markup languages. Four particular features of TEI are fundamental for the approach we are taking in the DiCCAS project.

² The Open Islamicate Text Initiative (OpenITI) markup language, developed in the frame of the KITAB Project led by Professor Sarah Bowen Savant, at the Aga Khan University, could have been another option. The International OpenITI 'aims to provide the essential textual infrastructure in Persian and Arabic for new forms of macro textual analysis and digital scholarship. In the process, OpenITI will enable new synergies between Digital Humanities and the inter-related Islamicate fields of Islamic, Persian, and Arabic Studies' (retrieved from <https://alraqmiyyat.github.io/OpenITI/> on June, 14th 2025). This markup language, as stated above, is not viable for our aims and purposes, because of its inherent nature, which is geared more towards the essential text infrastructure and the metadata relevant to the digital scholarship and, possibly, edition of the text. To further investigate, see <https://maximromanov.github.io/mARkdown/>. – Another alternative would have been to develop a custom XML schema tailored specifically to our corpus structure and content. However, this 'tag-and-type' approach would likely have introduced a dangerous degree of uncertainty and inconsistency, as the absence of a standardised model could lead to excessive flexibility in the encoding process, ultimately undermining the internal coherence, long-term sustainability and interoperability of the digital edition.

- (i) Rich text representation: titles, subtitles, chapters, paragraphs, footnotes and annotations can all be encoded, allowing the annotator to establish styles for the digital edition of both published and manuscriptal texts.
 - (ii) Interoperability: the fact that TEI is well known and widely used by the scientific community guarantees a good level of consistency and facilitates data sharing between projects and future research parties.
 - (iii) Extensibility: especially the use of ODD (One Document Does-it-all) to define project-specific schemas that can be manipulated and changed over the course of the project to fit the needs of the encoder or annotator; moreover, the ODD is a fundamental document for the digital edition, because it constitutes the skeleton of the TEI document, which means that it can be interpreted by, for example, the TEI-Publisher.³
 - (iv) Preservation and reusability: the structured format ensures that the texts remain accessible over time and can be modified and worked on again by other scholars over the course of different projects, moreover XML files are relatively light, allowing for minimal server space requirements.
- However, the application of TEI to Classical Arabic presents both opportunities and challenges that must be carefully evaluated within the broader methodological context of corpus creation.

3.1 Resource Acquisition, Data Standardisation, Textual Diversity and Structural Variability: Taming The Four-Headed Monster

Developing the DiCCAS corpus presented various challenges, from gathering the sources to compilation and annotation, given the variety of textual types and their respective complexities, as mentioned above. Gathering the sources for the DiCCAS was a relatively unproblematic task, given the extensive collection of classical texts available online on repositories and platforms such as Shamela Library,⁴ altafsir.com,⁵ [Quran.com](http://quran.com)⁶ and Sunnah.com.⁷

-
- 3 TEI Publisher is a framework for producing digital scholarly editions from a single TEI source, supporting multiple output formats and devices with the use of minimal custom code. It uses the TEI Processing Model to define presentation directly in XML. For more insight, see <https://teipublisher.com/exist/apps/tei-publisher-home/index.html#>.
 - 4 The Shamela Library is a comprehensive digital repository of Islamic texts, primarily in Arabic, encompassing a wide range of classical and premodern works across fields such as theology, jurisprudence, history and literature. It aggregates material from printed editions and public domain sources. See <https://shamela.ws/>.
 - 5 AlTafsir.com is a digital platform providing access to a wide range of classical and modern Qur'anic commentaries (*tafsirs*), primarily in Arabic, with some translations into other languages. It offers searchable, full-text editions of major exegetical works. See <https://www.altafsir.com/>.
 - 6 Quran.com is an online platform offering access to the text of the Qur'an in Arabic alongside a range of translations in multiple languages. See <https://quran.com/>.
 - 7 Sunnah.com is an online repository providing access to English translations of major Sunni *ḥadīth* collections. See <https://sunnah.com/>.

Initial identification of the accessible sources formed the first part of the project, together with the analysis of their textual peculiarities. This step was fundamental in order to understand how to operate with different structures and ensure data standardisation so as to guarantee the interoperability, comparability and long-term usability of datasets.

As previously mentioned, the textual variety of this corpus is both testament to its richness and presents one of the most challenging aspects of the project. As one can imagine, the various historical, theological and literary sources do not share the same structural conformation: *āyas* ('Qur'anic verses') are numbered paragraphs of a numbered sura (i.e. chapter); *ḥadīths* ('traditions', 'narrations' share with *āyas* their numbered format, but are constituted of a two-part text (of an *isnād* or 'chain of transmitters', and a *maṭn*, or 'text'), and might be part of a sub-chapter included in a longer chapter; and historical excerpts are, again, paragraphs, but they might be part of sub-sub-chapters; while *adab* (roughly, 'literature') texts might comprise several text typologies. This constitutes a challenge that has to be addressed by data standardisation, so as to allow systematic analysis and cross-textual comparison. This process involves two steps: (i) harmonising metadata and (ii) applying consistent structural markup, so as to later facilitate digital scholarship and allow texts to be searched, aligned and analysed within and across corpora while preserving their distinct properties, as will be discussed in detail later.

4. TEI as an Encoding Solution

4.1 General Metadata

To be able to render the metadata that refers to the text included in the corpus, the schema depicted in Fig. 1 overleaf has been applied. In preparing the TEI header for this corpus, we focused on providing clear metadata to document both the editorial work involved and the origins of the material. The <fileDesc> element includes the title of the corpus and credits the author as the editor responsible for its compilation and encoding. The <publicationStmt> identifies the Università di Bologna as the publisher and indicates that the corpus is freely available as an open access resource. Within the <sourceDesc>, a <msDesc> element is used, in some measure unconventionally, to describe the digital version of the Qur'an sourced from the Quran.com site. The physical description has been kept minimal, only noting the 'online' format of the source, while a <ref> element within <additional> provides a direct link to the digital source. In <msDesc> an attribute 'n' is added to reference to the position of the book in the actual corpus. The same apparatus has been replicated for the other books included in the corpus.

This encoding excerpt demonstrates an adaptation of the <msDesc> element to a digital alternate, thus balancing TEI formalism with practical documentation requirements for virtual sources.

```

1 <teiHeader>
2   <fileDesc>
3     <titleStm>
4       <title>DiCCAS Disaster Corpus in Classical Arabic Sources</title>
5     <editor>
6       <persName>Ilaria Cicola</persName>
7     </editor>
8   </titleStm>
9   <publicationStm>
10    <publisher>University of Bologna</publisher>
11    <date>2025</date>
12    <availability>
13      <licence>open access</licence>
14    </availability>
15  </publicationStm>
16  <sourceDesc>
17    <msDesc n="1">
18      <head>The Qur'ân</head>
19      <physDesc>
20        <objectDesc>
21          <p>online version from quran.com</p>
22        </objectDesc>
23      </physDesc>
24      <additional>
25        <listBibl>
26          <head>
27            <bibl>
28              <ref target="https://quran.com/"></ref>
29            </bibl>
30          </head>
31        </listBibl>
32      </additional>
33    </msDesc>

```

Fig.1: Metadata Schema for DiCCAS

4.2 Digital Edition: Structural Markup Strategy

4.2.1 The TEI Element <div>

As mentioned above, one of the aims of this work is to make this corpus accessible to the public, with a structured and well-formed output that is able to render the original form of the text, but also give some information about the disaster lexicon found in the corpus (see §4.3.1).

```

1 <div type="book" n="1">
2   <head type="title" rendition="r-center">
3     <title>The Noble Qur'ân</title></head>
4   <div type="sura" n="2">
5     <head type="subtitle" rendition="r-center">
6       <title>2. al-Baqara</title>
7     </head>
8     <p rendition="r-right" n="1" ana="ayyat"> 156. أَتَيْنَ إِذْ أَكْمَلْنَاهُمْ. <term type="catastrophe" translation="calamity">
9       <hi rendition="bold">سَمِيحَةً</hi></term> وَإِنْ إِلَهُهُ رُحْمُونَ
10     <lb rend="empty"/>
11     <gloss rend="italic" ana="translation" xml:Lang="en">Who say, when struck by a disaster,
12       "Surely to Allah we belong and to Him we will 'all' return."</gloss>
13   </p>

```

Fig. 2: Encoding Excerpt Demonstrating the Structural Markup of the Qur'an

As we can see from this example, the encoding structure was built using the TEI schema markup so as to model both the hierarchical organisation and the semantic features of the source text. In the example in fig. 2 we have shown the nested division structure of the Qur'an (<div type="book">, <div1 type="sura">). This type of organisation preserves the canonical segmentation of the original text, as well as enabling computationally tractable access to its internal structure. Moreover, titles and headings are encoded using <head> and <title> elements with attributes for type (title or subtitle) and visual rendition (centred), thus making certain that a clear distinction between structural and typographic information is maintained.

Here is the same excerpt in its online edition on TEI Publisher:

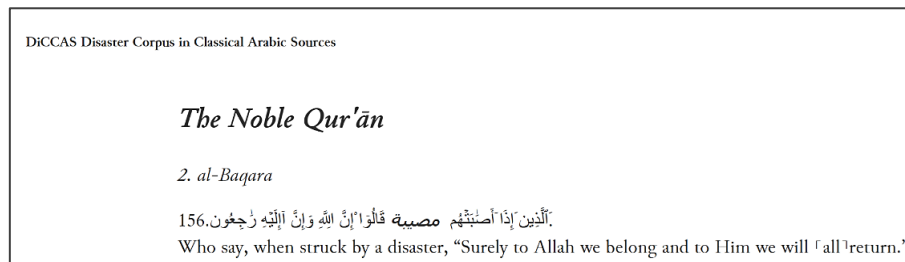


Fig. 3: TEI Publisher Edition of the Excerpt in Fig. 2

For other sources we had to further expand the schema, as in the following excerpts from *Sahih Muslim* (fig. 4) and *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* (fig. 5).

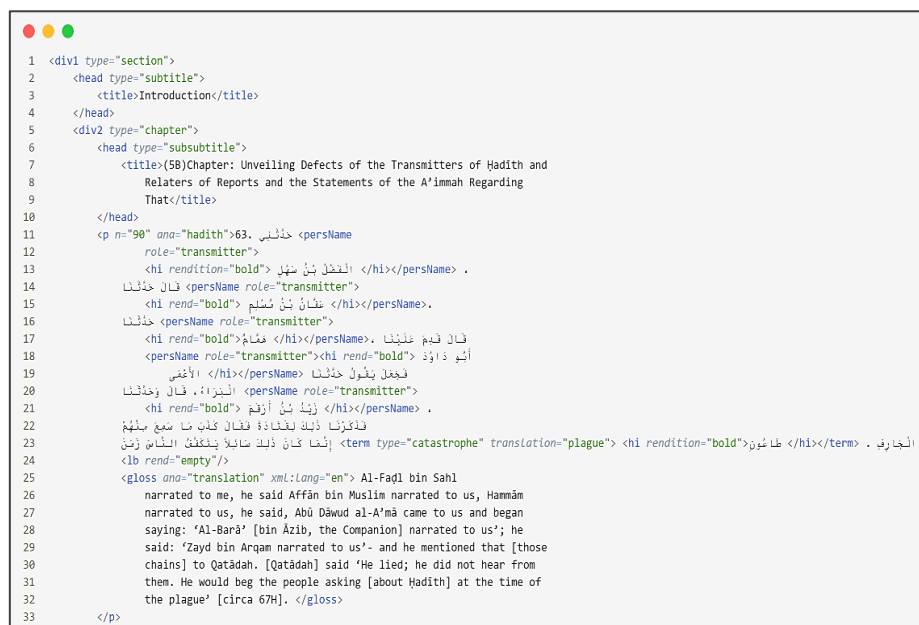


Fig. 4: Encoding Excerpt from the Structural Markup of *Sahih Muslim*

```

1 <div1 type="section" n="1">
2   <head type="subtitle">
3     <title>الفصل الأول</title>
4   </head>
5   <div2 type="chapter">
6     <head type="subsubtitle">
7       <title>القول في ابتداء الخلق ما كان أوله</title></head>
8     <div3 type="sub-chapter">
9       <head type="subsubsubtitle">
10        <title>القول في الليل والنهار أيهما خلق قبل صاحبه</title>
11      </head>
12      <p rend="#normal" n="136" type="paragraph">
13        <pb n="74"/>
14        <lb n="8"/>فإذا نفخ في الصور، وقامت الساعة، وميز الله بين أهل الجنة
15        <lb n="9"/>وأهل النار ولما يدخلوهما بعد، إذ يدعو الله عز وجل بالشمس
16        <term type="calamity">والقمر، فيجاء بهما أسودين مكورين قد وقعا في</term>
17        <translation="earthquake">
18        <hi rendition="bold">زلزال</hi></term> من
19        <lb n="10"/>إذا كانا حيال العرش <lb n="10"/>مول ذلك اليوم ومخافة الرحمن، حتى
20        <lb n="11"/>خرا لله ساجدين، فيقولان: إلهنا قد علمت طاعتنا ودهـ وبنا في عبادتك
21        <lb n="11"/>والدنيا، فلا تعذبنا بعبادة<lb n="11"/>وسرعتنا للتمضي في أمرك أيام
22        <lb n="11"/>المشركين إيانا، فإننا لم ندع إلى عبادتنا، ولم نذهل عن عبادتك
23        <?gloss rend="blank" type="translation" xml:lang="en"> to insert </gloss?>
24      </p>
25    </div3>
26  </div2>

```

Fig. 5: Encoding Excerpt from the Structural Markup of *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*

These examples show how the <div> elements in the encoding of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, the Qur'an and *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* share the same objective of representing hierarchical textual organisation while still acknowledging the differences in the three sources. In all cases, the outermost element <div type="book"> serves to group major textual units. Nonetheless, the *Ṣaḥīḥ* and the *Tārīkh* have been encoded with a deeper nested structure with two sub-units: <div1 type="section"> and <div2 type="chapter"> for the first (this structure help reflect the internal segmentation expected of *ḥadīth* compilations, in which multiple layers of categorisation such as thematic chapters and narrational units are essential for scholarly reference); and <div1 type="section">, <div2 type="chapter"> and <div3 type="sub-chapter"> for the latter, where the organisation of an historical text has to be rendered in order to ensure precision of reference. In fact, we can also note the use of <pb> (page beginning) and <lb> (line beginning) to further specify the texts reference (see §4.2.2).

The use of <head> and <title> within these divisions is consistent across all examples, as shown in the TEI Publisher version of the second (fig. 6) and third (fig. 7) excerpts. With these examples, we aim to illustrate how the <div> structure in TEI provides a flexible framework for digitally representing different textual traditions while preserving their structural features. TEI is always able to accommodate such variations with both precision and efficiency (OLIVIERI et al. 2016).

Sahib Muslim*Introduction*

(5B) Chapter: Unveiling Defects of the Transmitters of Ḥadīth and Relaters of Reports and the Statements of the A'immah Regarding That

خَدَّثَنِي الْقُضْلُ بْنُ سَهْلٍ ، قَالَ خَدَّثَنَا عَقَابُ بْنُ مُسْلِمٍ ، خَدَّثَنَا هَمَّامٌ ، قَالَ قَدِمَ عَلَيْنَا أَبُو دَاوُدَ الْأَعْمَى فَجَعَلَ يَقُولُ خَدَّثَنَا الزَّهَّاءُ ، قَالَ 63. وَخَدَّثَنَا زَيْدُ بْنُ أَرْقَمٍ . فَذَكَرْنَا ذَلِكَ لِقَتَادَةَ فَقَالَ كَذَبَ مَا سَمِعَ مِنْهُمْ إِمَّا كَانَ ذَلِكَ سَائِلًا يَتَكَفَّفُ النَّاسُ زَمَنَ طَاعُونِ الْجَارِبِ .

Al-Faql bin Sahl narrated to me, he said Affān bin Muslim narrated to us, Hammām narrated to us, he said, Abū Dāwud al-A'mā came to us and began saying: 'Al-Barā' [bin Āzib, the Companion] narrated to us'; he said: 'Zayd bin Arqam narrated to us'- and he mentioned that [those chains] to Qatādah. [Qatādah] said 'He lied; he did not hear from them. He would beg the people asking [about Ḥadīth] at the time of the plague' [circa 67H].

Fig. 6: TEI Publisher Edition of the Same Excerpt as Fig. 4

الفصل الأول**القول في ابتداء الخلق ما كان اوله****القول في الليل والنهار أيهما خلق قبل صاحبه**

[Page 74]

فإذا نفخ في الصور، وقامت الساعة، وميز الله بين أهل الجنة وأهل النار ولما يدخلوهما بعد، إذ يدعو الله عز وجل بالشمس والقمر، فيجاء بهما أسودين مكورين قد وقعا في زلزال ولبال، ترعد فرائصهما من هول ذلك اليوم ومخافة الرحمن، حتى إذا كاتا حيال العرش خرا الله ساجدين، فيقولان: إلهنا قد علمت طاعتنا ودعونا في عبادتك، وسرعتنا للمضي في أمرك أيام الدنيا، فلا نعذبنا بعبادة المشركين إيانا، فإننا لم ندع إلى عبادتنا، ولم نذهل عن عبادتك

Fig. 7: TEI Publisher Edition of the Same Excerpt as Fig. 5

4.2.2 The TEI Elements <p>, <pb> and <lb>

The <p> element in the TEI encoding of the corpus functions as the primary unit of prose segmentation, roughly equivalent to a paragraph in the modern editorial sense. It groups thematically and syntactically coherent sentences. In TEI, the <p> element represents a unit of meaning rather than merely a visual text block, and can therefore include other block-level structures such as lists or quotations. This sets it apart from the HTML <p>, which functions primarily as a stylistic block, and from the TEI <ab> (anonymous block), which serves as a flexible container for textual chunks not necessarily organised by semantic coherence (TEI CONSORTIUM 2025).

Figs 8 and 9 overleaf provide some examples of the use of <p> in different sources. It is interesting to underline that TEI does not impose a fixed definition of paragraphicity across historical texts, so the use of <p> in DiCCAS reflects a logical division we introduced in order to make the file more suited for digital readability and more adapted for scholarly analysis.

```

1 <p rend="#normal" n="8" ana="ayyat">78. أَتَيْنَا تَحْوِيًّا يُذَكِّرُكُمْ
2 أَلْقُوْهُ وَلَوْ كُنْتُمْ فِي بُرُوجٍ مُّشْنَدَةٍ وَإِنْ لَّمْ يَنْصُرْكُمْ
3 حَسْبُكُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ وَإِنْ لَّمْ يَنْصُرْكُمْ
4 سَيِّئَةٌ يَقُولُوا هَذِهِ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ قُلْ كُلٌّ مِنْ عِنْدِ
5 اللَّهِ فَمَالِ هَؤُلَاءِ الْقَوْمِ لَا يَكَادُونَ يَتْقَنُونَ
6 حَدِيثًا <lb rend="empty"/>
7 <gloss rend="italic" ana="translation" xml:lang="en">Wherever you may
8 be, death will overcome you—even if you were in fortified towers."
9 When something good befalls them, they say, "This is from Allah,"
10 but when something evil befalls them, they say, "This is from you."
11 Say, 'O Prophet, ' "Both have been destined by Allah." So what is the
12 matter with these people? They can hardly comprehend anything!
13 </gloss>
14 </p>

```

Fig. 8: Example of the Use of the <p> Element in the Qur'an

```

1 <p rend="#normal" n="136" type="paragraph">
2 <pb n="74"/>
3 <lb n="8"/>فَإِذَا نَفَخَ فِي الصُّورِ، وَقَامَتِ السَّاعَةُ، وَمِيزَ اللَّهُ بَيْنَ أَهْلِ الْجَنَّةِ
4 <lb n="9">وَإِذَا كَانَ حِيَالُ الْعَرْشِ <lb n="9">وَأَهْلُ النَّارِ وَلَمَّا يَدْخُلُوهُمَا بَعْدَ، إِذْ يَدْعُو اللَّهُ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ بِالشَّمْسِ
5 /> وَالْقَمَرِ، فَيَجَاءُ بِهِمَا أَسُودَيْنِ مُكَوَّرَيْنِ قَدْ وَقَعَا فِي
6 translation="earthquake">
7 <hi rendition="bold">زَلْزَالٍ </hi></term> من
8 وِبَلْبَالٍ، تَرَعَدُ فَرَائِصُهُمَا مِنْ <lb n="10"/> هَوْلِ ذَلِكَ الْيَوْمِ وَمَخَافَةِ الرَّحْمَنِ، حَتَّى
9 إِذَا كَانَا حِيَالِ الْعَرْشِ <lb n="10"/> هَوْلِ ذَلِكَ الْيَوْمِ وَمَخَافَةِ الرَّحْمَنِ، حَتَّى
10 خَرَا لَّهُ سَاجِدِينَ، فَيَقُولَانِ: إِلَهِنَا قَدْ عَلِمْتَ طَاعَتَنَا وَدَّعَا فِي عِبَادَتِكَ
11 الدُّنْيَا، فَلَا تَعَذِّبْنَا بِعِبَادَةِ <lb n="11"/> وَسَرَعَتْنَا لِلْعُصَى فِي أَمْرِكَ أَيَّامَ
12 الْعَشْرِكَيْنِ إِيَّانَا، فَإِنَّا لَمْ نَدَعْ إِلَى عِبَادَتِنَا، وَلَمْ نَذَلَّ عَنْ عِبَادَتِكَ
13 <?gloss rend="blank" type="translation" xml:lang="en"> to insert </gloss?>
14 </p>

```

Fig. 9: Example of the Use of the <p> Element in the *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*

Fig. 10 also includes the elements <pb> and <lb>; these elements in TEI mark, respectively, the beginning of a page or of a line within a paginated or formatted textual source. These are 'milestone' elements—non-structural markers used to indicate transitions within a reference system, such as a change in pagination or layout that, like physical milestones along a road, divide the text into segments without carrying content themselves. The global @n attribute specifies the identifier (e.g. page or line number) for each unit. Milestone elements are particularly useful for representing competing textual organisations, and are frequently used in encoding early printed works, where page breaks or part divisions do not align with units such as chapters, enabling the coexistence of multiple structural readings within a single digital edition (TEI CONSORTIUM 2025).

4.3 Semantic Encoding

4.3.1 Calamities

A central component of the project involved the semantic encoding of terms denoting calamities within the corpus. The research team first established a predetermined lexical core for these terms, which was then gradually expanded by analysing the texts that were added to the corpus and by adding other pertinent expressions that were found while investigating

the sources. This iterative process allowed for a more complete representation of the disaster vocabulary present in our sources, taking us down several paths we had not initially planned to follow. The terms annotated across the corpus include the following:

Arabic Term	English Translation	Arabic Term	English Translation
مصيبة	Calamity, disaster	سوط	Scourge
نكبة	Calamity, disaster	عذاب	Punishment
شدة	Hardship, severity	ضر	Adversity
محنة	Tribulation, trial, ordeal	سيل	Flood
بلاء	Affliction, trial	ريح	Wind
كرب	Distress, affliction	برد	Hail
زلزال/زلزلة	Earthquake	وباء	Epidemic
زلزلت	Shook	طاعون	Plague
رُجَّتْ	Shook	جارف	Devastating
عصار	Hurricane, cyclone	جاف	Heat
فيضان	Flood	حر	Heat
جفاف	Drought	حرارة	Heat
موجة	Wave	جفاف	Drought
صيحة	Great cry, explosion	قحط / قحوط	Drought
حاصب	Violent storm	جوع	Hunger
رجفة	Earthquake	مسغبة	Famine
قارعة	Catastrophe	سغابة	Famine
طامة	Overwhelming calamity	مجاعة	Famine
نحس	Misfortune, calamity, disaster	رمادة	Ashen, famine
طائف	Tragedy	عدوى	Contagion

As is clear from this list, it was decided to include some words drawn from the Qur'an, such *ṣayḥa*, and more general words like *miḥna*, as well as a number that relate to various physical disasters (i.e. *sayl*, *bard*, *ḥayḍān*, *qaḥṭ*), and finally some terminology that pertains to disease (i.e. *ṭā'ūn*, *wabā'*, *'adwa*).

Fig. 10 provides an example of a passage with several terms relating to disasters tagged in the corpus:



Fig. 10: Excerpt Showing the Semantic Tagging of Several Terms in a Passage from the *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* by al-Ṭabarī.

This is an encoded passage from al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* which narrates the divine punishment of the people of 'Ād. As one can see, the encoding is structured to support both textual fidelity to the source material and semantic analysis. The use of <term> elements, annotated with the attribute <type="catastrophe"> and accompanied by English translation (attribute <translation>), allows for the systematic identification of disaster-related vocabulary (e.g. *rīḥ*, *adhāb*, *qaḥṭ*) across the corpus. Moreover, we decided to further emphasise these using <hi rendition="bold"> tag, so as to indicate their rhetorical significance and enhance their visibility in the rendered digital edition (fig. 9).

4.3.2 Personal Names and Toponyms

The use of the <persName> and <placename> elements in the TEI encoding of DiCCAS plays a critical role in integrating political dynamics and power structures into the analysis of our sources. Fig. 11 provides an example, using the famous passage in Ibn Taghrībirdī's *Kitāb al-Nujūm al-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira* that reports the thankful attitude of the Abbasids towards the end of a plague outbreak, somewhat hinting at the idea that their rise to power contributed to the conclusion of the Black Death (al-TAGHRĪBIRDĪ n.d, 1:313):

By tagging personal names and place names, the systematic extraction and cross-referencing of actors and locations associated with catastrophic events becomes a lot easier for the researcher. Moreover, in our opinion, this tagging should facilitate the reconstruction of geopolitical contexts, possibly giving us a new and more complete view of the historical events represented in the corpus. It might also help to reveal patterns of authority and highlight the role of rulers, religious figures or eyewitnesses in shaping the discourse surrounding disasters, or, even, understanding how they were perceived by their contemporaries.

How to (Try to) Tame a Disaster?



Fig. 11: Excerpt from Ibn Taghribird's *Kitāb al-Nujūm al-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira*

The same tag has also been used to render the chain of transmitters of an *ḥadīth*, as one can see in the following example:



Fig. 12: Tagging of Transmitters of an *ḥadīth*

In this passage, the use of the `<persName>` element with the "roler" attribute was introduced in order to formally encode the structural dynamics of *ḥadīth* transmission. Individuals are tagged with specific roles—such as "transmitter" and "actor"—to distinguish between those participating in the *isnād* and those mentioned within the content of the *matn*. This distinction is important for both historical and philological analysis, as it lets the corpus retain the layered nature of *ḥadīth* discourse, where multiple narrative voices and temporal layers often coexist within a single report.

4.3.3 Glosses

The use of glosses in the DiCCAS corpus, particularly within the Qur'anic section, serves two functions: as an explanation and as a translation. Glosses are tagged using the `<gloss>` tag, styled in `rend="italic"` and annotated with `ana="translation"`, an attribute that offers an English rendering that closely follows the semantic and rhetorical contours of the original text, with a `"resp"` (responsibility) attribute that acknowledges the author of the translation. These glosses are not meant to be mere literal translations; rather, they aim to convey the layered meanings and theological meaning of key terms within their own narrative context, thus giving the researcher a broader point of view on a case-to-case basis.

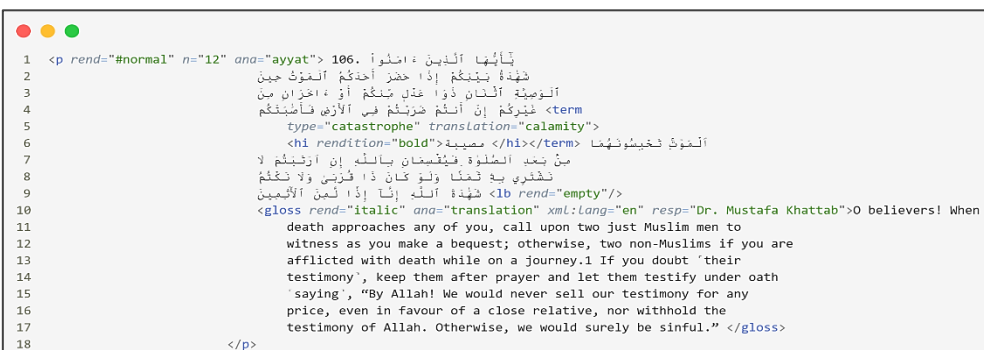


Fig. 13: An Example of the `<gloss>` Tag in the Qur'an

The encoding we have created ultimately reflects our attempt to use an integrated approach to digital philology, in which we have tried to include both semantic tagging and structural markup in order to support multilingual interpretation, computational querying and scholarly presentation. TEI, as demonstrated here, is capable of adapting to the specific demands of different historical and religious texts, while maintaining profound analytical rigor and editorial transparency.

5. Technological Integration in Historical Analysis

5.1 Sketch Engine

Arabic NLP, although quite a challenging field, has evolved steadily over the past twenty years,⁸ with the creation of increasingly sophisticated resources for lexical analysis⁹—ranging from morphological analysers and part-of-speech taggers to large-scale lemmatisers and lexical databases—designed to address Arabic's complex inflectional system and rich

⁸ For an introduction to the topic, see the foundational work by Nizar Y. Habash (HABASH 2010).

⁹ The innovative works of Mohamed Boudchiche and his team, who created the AlKhalil Morphosys, have been a strong basis for evolution in the field. We now have a lot of new tools and suites to process Arabic, such as CAMEL, Farasa and MADAMIRA.

derivational morphology. One of the most useful tools we have nowadays for corpus analysis is Sketch Engine (KILGARRIFF et al 2014). We decided to adopt this as a primary platform for corpus exploration and lexical analysis, a choice driven by the tool's robust capacity to manage large-scale, morphologically rich languages such as Arabic, and by its support for user-defined XML-encoded corpora, in addition to the specific evaluation provided by Alfaifi and Atwell (ALFAIFI and ATWELL 2016), who rated several tools for Arabic and consider it a 'strong competitor' in their ranking, complying to seven out of eight of their evaluation criteria: (i) reading Arabic UTF-8 files, (ii) reading Arabic Unicode files, (iii) displaying Arabic diacritics, (iv) displaying Arabic text in a right-to-left direction, (v) normalising diacritics, (vi) normalising *hamza*, and (vii) enabling Arabic personal corpus, failing only in not providing an Arabic interface.

Given the complexity of Classical Arabic—particularly in the semantic and grammatical fields associated with catastrophe discourse—Sketch Engine offered a practical and methodologically rigorous environment in which to extract concordances, analyse collocational behaviour and generate word sketches grounded in actual usage patterns. Its ability to interface with custom TEI-encoded data allowed for the preservation of our linguistic annotations (e.g. <term>, <persName>, <gloss>) while enabling flexible and reproducible querying. Moreover, the availability of pre-existing Arabic corpora (such as ArTenTen [Arts et al. 2014] and KSUCCA [ALRABIAH et al. 2013]) within the same environment made comparative analysis easier, allowing DiCCAS to be situated within broader patterns of Classical Arabic usage.

5.1.1 Some Applications of Sketch Engine

We have conducted some preliminary research using Sketch Engine, and it has proved to be quite useful. We will show here some of the analysis that can be conducted on the corpus with this tool, in particular: (i) a frequency list; (ii) a list of N-grams; (iii) a list of concordances; and (iv) a word sketch. These, of course, are not all the applications that Sketch Engine provides, but merely comprise introductory analytic work on our corpus used here to show how we can use Digital Humanities (DH) tools on DiCCAS.

The following table provides a frequency list of the first hundred words created by Sketch Engine on DiCCAS:

#	Item	Frequency
1	من	346
2	في	240
3	بن	171
4	الله	165
5	علي	164
6	قَالَ	143
7	عَنْ	128
8	اللَّهُ	119

#	Item	Frequency
51	قال	33
52	فيه	33
53	الطاعون	31
54	الملك	31
55	إلا	31
56	أيضا	31
57	ثم	31
58	فيها	30

#	Item	Frequency
9	في	116
10	إلى	115
11	عليه	104
12	ثم	93
13	بُنْ	91
14	حَدَّثَنَا	85
15	صلى	78
16	وسلم	76
17	بُنْ	75
18	ما	70
19	يوم	70
20	سنة	67
21	وفيها	66
22	كان	66
23	عبد	63
24	ذلك	61
25	حتى	60
26	في	59
27	فَقَالَ	57
28	مِنْ	57
29	هذا	55
30	الناس	54
31	أن	51
32	وكان	50
33	مصر	49
34	عن	49
35	على	46
36	الدين	45
37	السنة	45
38	بعد	44
39	أبي	44

#	Item	Frequency
59	عشر	30
60	فلم	29
61	فَلَا	29
62	رَسُولَ	29
63	الله	29
64	له	28
65	وقع	28
66	هذه	28
67	ابن	28
68	ذكر	27
70	أَوْ	27
71	أَبُو	27
72	ولم	27
73	عشرة	26
74	بها	25
75	عَلَيْهِ	25
76	الأمير	25
77	ألف	24
78	ولا	24
79	ولاية	24
80	الأموات	24
81	به	24
82	بِأَرْضِ	24
83	عَبْدُ	24
84	قد	24
85	لم	23
86	عنه	23
87	واحد	23
88	وقد	23
89	عَنْ	23
90	عَدَّة	23

#	Item	Frequency
40	السلطان	41
41	عَبْدٍ	40
42	مات	40
43	الوباء	39
44	مَا	38
45	أهل	37
46	كَانَ	37
47	أَنَّ	36
48	منهم	35
49	لا	35
50	إِلَى	34

#	Item	Frequency
91	لَهُ	23
92	مروان	23
93	هَذَا	22
94	وَلَا	22
95	شهر	21
96	ومات	20
97	آلاف	20
98	وقيل	20
99	عمر	20
100	ثُمَّ	20

When one puts aside the most frequently occurring words at the top of the list, which consist of prepositions or discourse markers like *qāla* or *ḥaddathanā*, we can note some interesting occurrences in the relevant words of our corpus:

- i) *sanat* at #20 and *al-sanat* at #37 with a total of 112 occurrences;
- ii) *Miṣr* at #33 with 49 occurrences;
- iii) *al-sulṭān* at #40 with 41 occurrences, *al-malik* at #54 with 31 occurrences, *al-amīr* at #76 with 25 occurrences and *wilāya* at #79 with 24 occurrences;
- iv) *māta* at #42, *wa-māta* at #96 and *amuāt* at #80 with a total of 84 occurrences;
- v) *wabā'* at #43 with 39 occurrences and *ṭā'ūn* at #53 with 31 occurrences.

This demonstrates that the corpus correctly identifies information about time (i), place (ii), power (iii) and disasters (iv and v).

To further investigate, we decided to perform a N-gram searchy with *wilāya* as the first word of a three to six word N-gram, to see if it could acknowledge for the different regents present in the corpus, so to facilitate the work of the team on the historical references:

N-gram	Frequency ?
1 ولاية عبد العزيز بن مروان على	7 ...
2 ولاية مسلمة بن مخلد على مصر	2 ...
3 ولاية قرة بن شريك على مصر	2 ...
4 ولاية عبد الله بن عبد الملك	2 ...

Fig. 14: N-gram of the word *wilāya*

Sketch Engine also provides a ‘focus corpus’ on every item in the list it created, which can be accessed by clicking on the three dots on the right, as we can see in the following image:

	Details	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	 doc#4	خامس طاعون مشهور في الإسلام.	ذكر ولاية عبد العزيز بن مروان على مصر السنة الرابعة من ولاية عبد العزيز بن مروان	
2	 doc#4	عبد العزيز بن مروان على مصر السنة الرابعة من ولاية عبد العزيز بن مروان على مصر وهي سنة تسع وستين 182	p. <s></s> ف	
3	 doc#4	الحميري من ولده.	<s></s> السنة الخامسة من ولاية عبد العزيز بن مروان على مصر وهي سنة سبعين 185	p. <s></s> فيها
4	 doc#4	يز الأموي لأمه.	<s></s> السنة الرابعة عشرة من ولاية عبد العزيز بن مروان على مصر وهي سنة تسع وسبعين 199	p. <s></s>
5	 doc#4	سبعين 199	p. <s></s> السنة الرابعة عشرة من ولاية عبد العزيز بن مروان على مصر وهي سنة تسع وسبعين - فيها استولى الد	
6	 doc#4	عشر أصعباً.	<s></s> السنة الخامسة عشرة من ولاية عبد العزيز بن مروان على مصر وهي سنة ثمانين - فيها كان سيل الجحاف	
7	 doc#4	بي سفيان إفريقية.	<s></s> السنة العشرون من ولاية عبد العزيز بن مروان على مصر وهي سنة خمس وثمانين 209	<s></s> د.

Fig. 15: Concordances of the First N-gram from Fig. 14

This allows the researcher to perform in depth analysis not only of a single word, as we will see in the next application we will analyse, but of a group of selected words. The third application for which Sketch Engine was used was the creation of a list of concordances, in this case of the word *ṭāʿūn*, as shown in the screenshot in fig. 16. We can appreciate, from this image, some relevant information about concordances as used in this tool: on the left, we can see that every sentence is traced back to its original document (doc#0), the icon on the left allows us to copy the sentence, and we can also download the full set in various formats (xml and xsl), and also create a pdf print of the page we are looking at. We also have some information on the top left about the query (e.g. 85 hits total).

CONCORDANCE				
DICCAS				
simple 85 3,859.25 per million tokens • 0.39%				
	Details	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	 doc#0	"Chapter" 140 60	<s></s> " الشَّاهِدُونَ شَهَادَةً لِّكُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ "	لِلَّهِ - رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ - عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ " الشَّاهِدُونَ
2	 doc#0	" الشَّاهِدُونَ	فَقَالَ أَشَاطَةُ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ " الشَّاهِدُونَ	رَبِّهِ مَاذَا سَمِعْتُمْ مِنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فِي الشَّاهِدُونَ
3	 doc#0	رَجُلٌ أُرْسِلَ عَلَى طَائِفَةٍ مِنْ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ أَوْ عَلَى مَنْ كَانَ ذ	" الشَّاهِدُونَ	عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ " الشَّاهِدُونَ
4	 doc#0	" أَنَّهُ عَذَابٌ يَنْعَقُهُ اللَّهُ عَلَى مَنْ يَشَاءُ، وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ ج	" فَأَخْبَرَنِي " الشَّاهِدُونَ	يَه وَسَلَّمَ قَالَتْ سَأَلْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ عَنِ الشَّاهِدُونَ
5	 doc#0	مَا كَر	فَيَمُوتُ فِي بَلَدِهِ صَابِرًا مُحْتَسِبًا، يَعْلَمُ أَنَّهُ لَا يُصِيبُهُ إِلَّا مَا كَر	نَ يَشَاءُ، وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ جَعَلَ رَحْمَةً لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ، لَيْسَ مِنْ أَحَدٍ يَقَعُ الشَّاهِدُونَ
6	 doc#0	مَا	إِذَا سَمِعْتُمْ بِالشَّاهِدُونَ بِأَرْضٍ فَلَا تَدْخُلُوهَا، وَإِذَا وَقَعَ بِأَرْضٍ وَأَنْتُمْ بِهَا فَلَا تَخْرُجُوا مِنْهَا	ثُ سَعْدًا عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ " إِذَا سَمِعْتُمْ بِالشَّاهِدُونَ
7	 doc#0	"	<s></s> 47. <s></s> " الشَّاهِدُونَ	لِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ " لَا يَدْخُلُ الْمَدِينَةُ الْمَسِيحُ وَلَا الشَّاهِدُونَ
8	 doc#0	" الشَّاهِدُونَ	<s></s> قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ " الشَّاهِدُونَ	لِ أَنَسٍ بْنُ مَالِكٍ - رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ - يَخْبِي بِمَا مَاتَ قُلْتُ مِنَ الشَّاهِدُونَ
9	 doc#0	"	<s></s> 48. <s></s> " الشَّاهِدُونَ شَهَادَةً لِّكُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ "	أَعُونَ. <s></s> قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ " الشَّاهِدُونَ
10	 doc#0	" أَنَّهُ كَانَ عَذَابًا يَنْعَقُهُ	فَأَخْبَرَهَا نَبِيُّ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ " أَنَّهُ كَانَ عَذَابًا يَنْعَقُهُ	أَنَّهَا أَخْبَرْتَنَا أَنَّهَا سَأَلَتْ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ عَنِ الشَّاهِدُونَ
11	 doc#0	اللَّهُ	فَيَمُوتُ فِي بَلَدِهِ صَابِرًا، يَعْلَمُ أَنَّهُ لَنْ يُصِيبَهُ إِلَّا مَا كَتَبَ اللَّهُ	مَنْ يَشَاءُ، فَجَعَلَ اللَّهُ رَحْمَةً لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ، فَلَيْسَ مِنْ عَذَابٍ يَقَعُ الشَّاهِدُونَ
12	 doc#0	رَحْ	" كَانَ عَذَابًا يَنْعَقُهُ اللَّهُ عَلَى مَنْ يَشَاءُ، فَجَعَلَ اللَّهُ رَحْ	بَا - أَخْبَرْتَهَا أَنَّهَا سَأَلَتْ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ عَنِ الشَّاهِدُونَ
13	 doc#0	"	<s></s> 81. <s></s> " الشَّاهِدُونَ وَلَا الدَّجَالُ "	لِ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ " عَلَى أَنْقَابِ الْمَدِينَةِ فَلَا يَكْتُمُ، لَا يَدْخُلُهَا الشَّاهِدُونَ

Fig.16: An Excerpt of the Concordances for the Word *ṭāʿūn*

We can also perform a deeper analysis on the word we are investigating, by looking at its collocations. The following list provides the first ten: Interestingly enough, we not only find verbs or preposition introducing the plague (e.g. *kāna*, *wa-fihā*) but one particular adjective stands out: *‘aẓīm* (great). We will next look into this further using another application, which creates word sketches.

Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
وسلم	13	العظيم	5
كان	10	وفيها	8
وهذا	6	عليه	10
في	13	ولا	5
وقع	7		

The creation of word sketches might not appear to be the most interesting aspect of Sketch Engine, however it can actually be a useful resource: as they say, ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’:

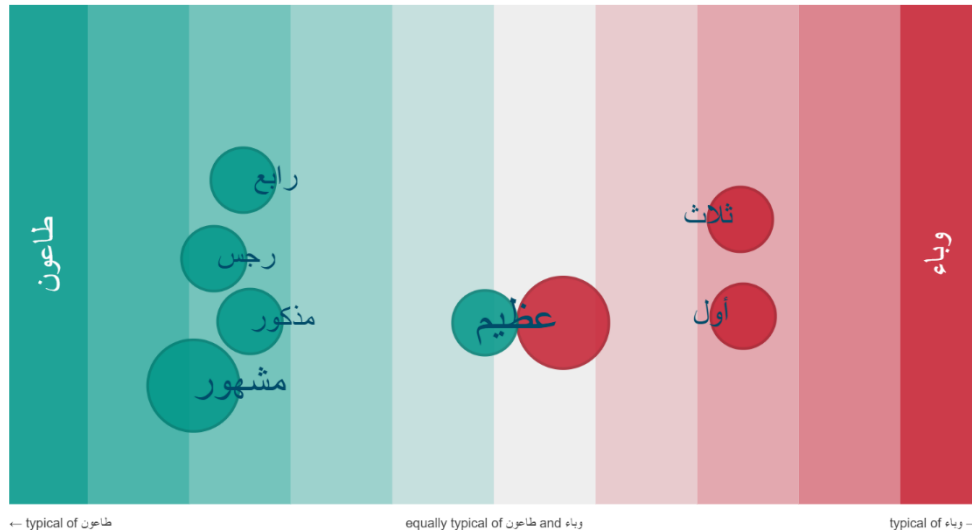


Fig. 17: A Word Sketch of the Terms *wabā'* and *ṭā'ūn*

It is interesting how, in the image in fig. 17, both *wabā'* and *ṭā'ūn* have one adjective in common, *‘aẓīm*, while the other adjectives they occur with differ: both are associated with a numeral reference (*awwal*, ‘first’; *thalāth*, ‘three’; and *rābi*, ‘fourth’), but *ṭā'ūn* also has other descriptive attributes: *mashhūr* (famous), *madhkūr* (mentioned) and *rajis* (dirty, filthy). This might corroborate the study by Conrad (CONRAD 1982) in which he argues that a temporal distinction between the use of the two terms is in place, demonstrating that the spread of the

bacillus probably ceased after the year 131/749, after which *tā'ūn* ceased to be used in favour of the more generic term *wabā'*. The use of these adjectives might hint that *tā'ūn* refers to something deeply rooted in general knowledge, whilst the numerals associated with *wabā'* might be used to refer to the various waves of the disease throughout the centuries.¹⁰

Of course, a deeper and more thorough research project has to be put in place in order for this theory to be proven, but this very brief digression shows how DH tools are fundamental in shedding new light onto the academic pursuit of knowledge, by giving access to wider corpora and more precise means of analysis.

6. Conclusion and Future Directions

This first version of the DiCCAS corpus is just a starting point—an essential and necessarily selective foundation that reflects the scope of the original project and the methodological choices made to ensure consistency and sustainability in its design. But the work of corpus-building is, by its own inherent nature, open-ended.¹¹ One of the next steps will be to broaden the corpus by adding new texts and translation witnesses. This includes bringing in additional books relevant to other domains, such as medical treatises like Ibn Sīnā's *Kitāb al-Qānūn fī l-ṭibb* and al-Rāzī's *Kitāb al-Hāwī fī l-ṭibb* as well as juridical sources like Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī's *Badhl al-mā'ūn fī faṣl al-tā'ūn* and *adab* texts like al-Suyūṭī's *al-Maqāma al-tā'ūniyya*. Moreover, where possible, for the Qur'an and the *ḥadīths* first and foremost, we could add new witnesses translations. These additions will strengthen the philological backbone of the project and will allow the researchers to perform a more refined comparison of how disaster narratives evolve across textual traditions.

Another important implementation to further refine the semantic and referential accuracy of the corpus could be linking the names of historical figures—already tagged using <persName> in the corpus—to authority records such as the Virtual International Authority File (VIAF) (LOESCH 2011).¹² This integration would help in several tasks, including the

¹⁰ This might also be confirmed by the following passage in al-Maqrīzī (emphasis added): '*wa-kāna al-mawt bi-l-tā'ūn yabṣuqu al-insān daman thumma yaṣīḥu wa-yamūtu, wa-'amma ma'a dhālika al-ghalā' al-dunyā jamī'ahā. wa-lam yakun hādhā al-wabā' kamā 'uhida fī iqlīm dūn iqlīm, bal 'amma aqālim al-arḍ sharqan wa-gharbān wa-shamālan wa-janūban, jamī' ajnās banī Ādam wa-ghayrahum, hattā hīṭān al-baḥr wa-ṭayr al-samā' wa-waḥsh al-barr,*' in which we see the use of both terms, but in different context, in which *tā'ūn* refers to a particular kind of death, while *wabā'* occurs as a more general, non-defined term, introduced by the demonstrative *hādhā*, and not by the definite article, hinting at its broader, perhaps more ambiguous, nature as a phenomenon (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1418/1997, 4:82).

¹¹ The intention is to deposit the corpus in a CLARIN repository to ensure long-term accessibility and compliance with FAIR data principles. Upon publication, it will be openly available to the research community.

¹² This tool has also proven to be useful in other projects the author is involved in, for example the digitisation of indexes of names and toponyms in the historical italian journal *Oriente Moderno*, a MUR financed project (Storia, lingue e culture dei paesi asiatici e africani: ricerca scientifica, promozione e divulgazione CUP B85F21002660001; 1a-a 'Studi di st. premod., mod., contemp. paesi islam./Etiopia; 1a-c 'Studi di lett. Class., mod. e contemp. (araba, persiana, turca, amarica/ge'ez): 5b 'Indicizz. onomast./toponomast. di Oriente Moderno') of the Istituto Per l'Oriente (IPO) C.A. Nallino of Rome.

disambiguation of individuals, and might open the door to more interconnected historical and biographical research.

Finally, one other road we might consider exploring is the inclusion of disaster-related materials in other languages, for example Persian, Syriac, Greek, Armenian and Latin, so as to broaden the geographical horizons of the project and in order to develop cross-references between traditions, within a Eurasian framework.

Moreover, the extension of the corpus to include Arabic texts from Christian and Jewish traditions could be considered, including both sacred texts and historiographical works, in order to assess possible lexical and semantic variations related to the vocabulary of ‘disasters’. These could include, for example, in the Jewish context, the Arabic version of the Bible by Saadia Gaon (fl. fourth/tenth century), and the historical work of Joseph ben Isaac Sambari (fl. eleventh/seventeenth century), as well as the Arabic texts of Maimonides. In the Christian context, in addition to medieval Christian-Arabic versions of the Bible, notable additions might be the great historical work of Makin al-Dīn Girgis b. al-‘Amīd (fl. seventh/thirteenth century), which has been known in Europe since the eleventh/seventeenth century. Given the complexity of relations between religious communities and the richness of lexical specificities, an ‘Arabic’ corpus that explicitly engages with the dimension of religious plurality would more fully reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Arabic tradition—beyond a solely ‘Arabic-Islamic’ framework.

These expansions are already technically feasible thanks to the flexibility of the TEI which has been extensively presented in this article, and they align with ongoing protocols in the digital humanities about interoperability and reusability. More importantly, these enhancements will deepen the corpus’s historical and analytical potential, especially in terms of exploring how disaster narratives have been tied to questions of political power and legitimacy across different cultural settings.

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Natural Disasters and Political Catastrophes: Entangled Feelings and Landscapes in al-Andalus and Beyond

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Abstract

In the year 456/1064, during a campaign described by historians as a proto-Crusade, a Christian coalition conquered the city of Barbastro, a Muslim frontier stronghold in the northern Iberian Peninsula. In his account of the event, the Andalusī historian Ibn Ḥayyān wrote that when news of the defeat reached Córdoba, the entire territory of al-Andalus trembled. A few decades later, in 548/1153, an earthquake struck Syria. The Egyptian chronicler Ibn Ruzzik interpreted this natural disaster as divine punishment, linking it to the loss of Jerusalem to the Crusaders. This contribution focuses on the relationship between natural phenomena, especially natural disasters, and sociopolitical events such as military defeat and territorial dispossession. It seeks to examine why and how these two realms—natural and political—are intertwined in the historical thought, discourse, and imagination of medieval Islamic authors. Thus, I examine how processes of territorial loss—and the emotions and traumas they engender—are represented in historical sources through references to natural disasters, whether real or imagined. I also explore how and why the natural environment functions as a medium for generating and expressing emotional responses. In particular, I study how one form of response to territorial loss was articulated through a natural or ‘environmental’ imaginary, including the construction of an idealised landscape that stood in contrast to the catastrophic landscapes used to represent both natural calamities and military defeats.

Keywords: Natural disasters, feelings, landscape, eschatological fear, territorial loss, al-Andalus

In 455/1063, in the context of the advance of the Christian kingdoms after the disintegration of the Umayyad caliphate, Pope Alexander II preached a holy war against Barbastro, a Muslim town in the northeast of the Iberian Peninsula that was under the control of Ibn Hūd al-Muẓaffar (d. 474–5/1082–3).¹ Military contingents from various regions responded to the call to arms, including Franks, Normans, Burgundians, Aragonese and forces from the County of Urgell.² According to the fifth/eleventh century Andalusī historian Ibn Ḥayyān,

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² The source that provides the most detailed information about the Normans who took part in the attack on Barbastro is the *History of the Normans (Historia Normannorum)* by Amatus of Montecassino, a Benedictine monk writing in the late eleventh century whose chronicle offers one of the earliest narrative accounts of Norman activity in southern Italy and beyond (AMATO DI MONTECASSINO 1935, 13–15. See also BOUQUET 1904, 216–21; WACE 2004, 164).

the Christian host was under the command of the ‘captain of the cavalry of Rome’ (IBN BASSĀM 1979, 3/1:179–90).³ Meanwhile, the eighth/fourteenth century Maghribī historian Ibn ‘Idhārī refers to the *al-ardāmāniyūn*, a term that has been traditionally interpreted as denoting the Normans (IBN ‘IDHĀRĪ 2009, 3:224). The city was conquered in Sha‘bān 456/August 1064, after forty days of siege (LALIENA and SÉNAC 2018).

Our knowledge of certain details of the siege of Barbastro derives from the accounts of several contemporary Muslim chroniclers, among them Ibn Ḥayyān, whose narrative is preserved both by Ibn Bassām (d. 542/1147) and Ibn ‘Idhārī (IBN BASSĀM 1979, 3/1:179–90; IBN ‘IDHĀRĪ 2009, 3:224 ff. See also ÁLVAREZ MASALIAS and CINGOLANI 2012, 86). Following the start of the siege, the attackers seized control of the suburbs, into which more than 5,000 knights entered. The defenders fortified themselves within the city, but thirst soon became a critical issue, compelling them to negotiate a surrender, which was accepted by the Christian forces. Resistance, however, persisted for several days within the citadel, although the remaining defenders eventually capitulated as well. The shortage of water appears to have been caused by a traitor, who revealed to the besiegers the location of the aqueduct supplying the city which they subsequently blocked. Ultimately, the population of the city was massacred. Barbastro thus fell under the control of Sancho Ramírez, King of Aragon (d. 1094), who appears to have entrusted the city to his brother-in-law, Ermengol III of Urgell (d. 1065) (UBIETO 1981, 53–67; FERREIRO 1983).

The fall of Barbastro provoked a profound sense of vulnerability within the Andalusī world. For Ibn Ḥayyān, it represented ‘the most grievous of the calamities to have afflicted this peninsula’. Upon the arrival of a messenger in Cordoba bearing news of the defeat, ‘the land of al-Andalus trembled (*zalzala al-ard al-Andalusī*)’, a phrase conveying the widespread shock and dismay that reverberated across the region (IBN ‘IDHĀRĪ 2009, 3:224).

This paper constitutes a first approach within broader, ongoing research into the various discursive responses—particularly those articulated through memory—to the gradual loss of al-Andalus (See, for example, GARCÍA-SANJUÁN 2024; LAPIEDRA 2018; DENARO 2020; ALBARRÁN 2024a). It focuses on the relationship between natural phenomena, especially natural disasters, and sociopolitical events such as military defeat and territorial dispossession in al-Andalus and the Islamic West, drawing primarily, though not exclusively, on historiographical sources.⁴ The study will also incorporate comparative examples from

³ See also ‘Les Normands en Espagne’, in DOZY 1860, 357–68.

⁴ On the relationship between natural disasters and political events, see, for example, RAPHAEL 2013; TRAVIS 2024. On the historical study of various aspects related to natural disasters and the environment in the Mediterranean and Islamic context, see, for example, AKASOY 2007; AKASOY 2008; AMBRASEYS 2009; CHALYAN-DAFFNER 2012; HANSKA 2015; ISSAR and ZOHAR 2004; POIRIER and TAHER 1995; RASSI 2011; SCHENK 2014; TUCKER 1981; TUCKER 1999. For the specific Andalusī case, see, for example, FORLIN et al. 2024; GHOURIGATE 2011; MAZZOLI-GUINTARD 2011; OLIVERA SERRANO 1995. Regarding the interest of medieval Islamic historians towards natural disasters, it should be noted that several Muslim historians wrote specialised books dealing with disasters (natural or otherwise), such as al-Maqrīzī’s (d. 845/1441) *Ighāthat al-umma bi-kashf al-ghumma*, known as ‘The History of Famines in Egypt’ (al-MAQRĪZĪ 2022). Similarly, the historian al-Suyūfī (d. 910/1505) dealt with a different type of disaster in his book *Kashf al-šalsala ‘an wasf al-zalzala* (‘The Unveiling of the Chain Regarding the Description of the Earthquake’ (al-SUYŪFĪ 1985). Likewise, the *Šifāt al-maṭar wa-l-saḥāb* (‘Description of Rain and Clouds’) by Ibn Durayd (d. 321/933) focuses on the lexicon and poetic imagery associated

other regions of the medieval Islamic world, as well as from different religious traditions, with the aim of approaching the subject from a transcultural perspective. It seeks to examine why and how these two realms—the natural and the political—are intertwined in the historical thought, discourse and imagination of medieval Islamic authors. In particular, it will explore how one form of response to territorial loss was articulated through a natural or environmental imaginary, that included the construction of an idealised landscape which stood in contrast to the catastrophic landscapes used to represent both natural calamities and military defeats.

Connecting Natural and Political Disasters

Medieval Islamic sources, particularly historiographical ones, are replete with examples in which various natural phenomena—especially, though not exclusively, disasters—understood as sudden, unforeseen events that bring about significant changes in the circumstances of those affected,⁵ are closely linked to sociopolitical events. In some instances, these phenomena are presented as the cause or more or less direct antecedents of political occurrences. For example, the eighth/fourteenth century chronicler of Fez, Ibn Abī Zarʿ, notes that in the year 471/1078–9, a solar eclipse occurred unlike any seen before, coinciding with the year in which King Alfonso of Castile seized Coria, a city in West Iberia (IBN ABĪ ZARʿ 1972, 168). Similarly, Ibn ʿIdhārī, a chronicler from Marrakesh, recounts that toward the end of the sixth/twelfth century, a great flood occurred in Seville which contributed to an escalation of Christian attacks (IBN ʿIDHĀRĪ 2009, 4:212). On the other side of the Mediterranean, the Mamluk historian Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir (d. 692/1293) records the capture of the tower of Latakia from the Crusaders in 686/1287: an earthquake destroyed half of the tower, facilitating the Islamic conquest. According to the chronicler, the Franks were convinced that the Muslims were aided by both an angel and the earthquake (Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir, in AMBRASEYS 2009, 352). Another earthquake, according to the chronicle of the Byzantine monk Theophanes the Confessor (d. c. 817), predicted the Islamic conquest of Palestine in the year 634:

At the same time an earthquake occurred in Palestine. And a sign appeared in the sky at midday, like a beam, foretelling the victory of the Arabs. It remained for thirty days, stretching from the middle of the sky to the Great Bear. It was in the shape of a sword. (THEOPHANES THE CONFESSOR 1997, 336)

with meteorological phenomena in Classical Arabic (IBN DURAYD 1981).

- 5 See, for example, RASSI 2011; SCHENK 2014. This definition corresponds to the Arabic concept of *kāritha* (plural: *kawārith*), derived from the root *karatha*, which means ‘to oppress someone’, ‘to grieve’, or ‘to worry about something’. The term *kāritha* thus refers to something that causes distress or sorrow. Another Arabic word that conveys a similar meaning—such as ‘accident’, ‘misfortune’, ‘calamity’, or ‘disaster’—is *al-muṣība*, which originates from the verb *aṣāba*, meaning ‘to descend’, ‘to strike’, or ‘to fall’. The sources also use the word *mashaqqqa*, which can be translated as ‘disaster’ or ‘calamity’. On concepts of disasters, see also BÜSSOW-SCHMITZ 2017; SENIGUER and BELHAJ 2023.

On the other hand, there are natural phenomena that are described in conjunction with political events, or which played a role in resolving political matters. For instance, in his work on earthquakes, the Egyptian historian al-Suyūṭī recounts that in 553/1158, Ibn Ruzzīk (d. 557/1161), ruler of Egypt, dispatched an army to halt the advance of the Franks. At this moment, a terrifying earthquake struck, leading to the defeat of the Crusaders, who fled (RAZANI 1972, 28). Similarly, the Andalusī poet and historian Ibn ‘Amīra narrates that after the Christian conquest of Mallorca in 628/1231, a group of surviving Muslims sought refuge in the mountains, turning their backs on the rest of the community (MAS I FORNERS 2013; ROSER 2018; ROSSELLÓ 2009). For this reason, God sent a storm that alleviated their suffering (IBN ‘AMĪRA 2007, 143).

In his description of the Battle of Ager Sanguinis, which took place in Shawwāl 513/June 1119 between the forces of the Principality of Antioch, led by Roger of Salerno, and those of Il-Ghāzī, the Artuqid sultan (see MORTON 2018), the crusader historian and archbishop William of Tyre (d. 1185) explains how a tornado that formed in the centre of the battlefield precipitated the Islamic victory:

A terrible whirlwind came forth out of the north. Before the eyes of all, it clung to the in the very center of the battleground. As it writhed along, it swept with it such clouds of dust that men of both armies were blinded and could not fight. Then it soared aloft in circles, bearing a close resemblance to a huge jar ablaze with sulphureous flames. Because of this unlikely occurrence the enemy won the victory. The Christians were defeated, and nearly all of our soldiers fell by the sword. (WILLIAM OF TYRE 1943, 1/12:530)

And, of course, there are also natural disasters understood as consequences of political events. For instance, the Fatimid Ibn Ruzzīk asserted that the earthquake of 548/1153 in Syria ‘occurred because Islam had lost Jerusalem, the centre of revelation before the descent of God’s messenger [...] Pigs and wine dwell in it, and the cross and the bell reign there. If Christ saw it, he would not tolerate the deeds and sayings that they (the Crusaders) attribute to him’ (IBN RUZZĪK 1964, 63. See also DAJANI-SHAKEEL 1976). Similarly, the destruction of Baghdad by the Mongols led to fires, floods and earthquakes in the Hijaz (HASSAN 2017). Likewise, according to the Egyptian polymath al-Maqrīzī, a major earthquake occurred in Granada in 835/1431 as a consequence of the arrival of the former sultan Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Aysar, who sought to reclaim the throne by besieging the city (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1934–72, 4/2:856; GUIDOBONI and COMASTRI 2005, 594).

Further to these examples, in Constantinople in 557/1162, celebrations were held to welcome the Seljuk sultan Kilij Arslan II, an event that angered God:

Together with the sultan, Manuel entered Constantinople. There he proclaimed a magnificent triumph resplendent with exquisite and precious robes and diverse adornment cunningly wrought. But as the emperor, with members of the bodyguard, the nobility, the imperial retinue, and the sultan, was about to make his appearance before the citizens to receive their applause, God annulled the splendors of that day. The earth shook, and many splendid dwellings collapsed, the atmospheric conditions were violent and unstable and other such terrors took place so that one could not pay

heed to the triumph, and the mind swooned. (Nicetas Choniates Acominatus, *Chroniki Diigisis*, in AMBRASEYS 2009, 316)

A Manifestation of Divine Power

In this sense, behind this worldview, in which events are interconnected in a manner that appears to follow a divine plan, lies the belief that God is the cause behind every action (AKASOY 2007; HANSKA 2015).⁶ As the Damascene historian Ibn al-Qalānīsī (d. 556/1160) stated in his *Dhayl tārikh Dimashq*, an earthquake was a tangible manifestation of divine power (IBN al-QALĀNISĪ 1932, 326). In this providential view of history, which has its roots in the Old Testament, natural catastrophes and military defeats were primarily understood as divine punishments. Premodern societies often regarded calamities as expressions of a justified divine wrath, serving as corrective measures for human sins.⁷ For instance, the *Muqtabis* of the Cordoban historian Ibn Ḥayyān—written in the fifth/eleventh century and arguably the most important source for the study of Umayyad Andalus—includes a letter sent by the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III (d. 350/961) to the governors of his provinces instructing them to offer prayers for rain in response to a severe drought. In the letter, the caliph exhorts them to repent for their misdeeds and beseech divine mercy, calling upon them to pray ‘humbly submitting to His glory and persistently pleading for what He withholds [the rain], with repentance for the sins that have provoked His wrath, drawn down His vengeance, and veiled the face of His favour—exalted be His purpose’ (IBN ḤAYYĀN 1979, 165).

Similarly, the Andalusī scholar al-Turtūshī, in his *Mirror for Princes* (*Sirāj al-mulūk*), composed in Egypt in the early sixth/twelfth century after fleeing al-Andalus due to the advancing Christian forces, records a Prophetic tradition that conveys the same theological orientation: ‘Reptiles will die exhausted by the sins of men’. Al-Turtūshī explains: ‘When many transgressions are committed by humans against the Lord on earth, the heavens withhold rain, the earth ceases to yield vegetation, and insects, vermin and reptiles perish’ (al-TURTŪSHĪ 1990, 208). Likewise, according to al-Suyūṭī, the first earthquake in human history was caused by Cain’s murder of Abel (RAZANI 1972, 1).⁸ The sacred history shared by the Abrahamic traditions and its providential conception of causality also helps explain why numerous natural disasters were believed to last forty days in both Christian and Islamic

⁶ On the Islamic theology of catastrophes see SENIGUER and BELHAJ 2023.

⁷ This perception could lead to the dilemma of punishing the innocent for the sins of the guilty. To address this, the Islamic doctrine of martyrdom included as martyrs those who died as victims ‘of diseases such as pleurisy and dysentery, drowning, fires, or collapsed buildings ...’ (COOK 2007, 28–29). See also AKASOY 2007.

⁸ Al-Suyūṭī’s *Kashf al-salsala ‘an wasf al-zalzala* contains a collection of Islamic fables and stories related to the causes of earthquakes in which increased sinning and usury are blamed as the main causes. Nevertheless, al-Suyūṭī also gives a more ‘scientific’ explanation: earthquakes are a result of large movements of steam collected below the surface of the earth because of the heat produced by the sun. The trapped steam cannot be turned into water or dissolved. Thus, when the steam tries to break through the surface, the result is the shaking of the earth. On al-Suyūṭī’s work on earthquakes, see, for example, AKASOY 2007.

sources; for instance, the flood of Noah is said to have lasted ‘forty days and forty nights’ (TOTTOLI 2002, 22–23). In this regard, the Syrian scholar Ibn Kathīr (d. 775/1373) offers the following account of an earthquake that struck Mahdiyya in 370/981:

In that year, in Ifrīqiya, there was a volcanic eruption that cast a light like flames to the east and north. People rushed outdoors to supplicate God. This terrifying earthquake lasted for forty days. The inhabitants abandoned their homes and left behind their possessions. (IBN KATHĪR 1932–39, 11:277; IBN al-ATHĪR 1851–76, 8:647)

It is also worth noting that, according to Muslim chroniclers, the Christian siege of Barbastro—mentioned earlier—likewise lasted forty days.⁹

The *Annales Pisani* by Bernardo Maragone (d. c. 1186) follows the same pattern when he refers to an earthquake in Sicily that occurred in 564/1169, comparing it to the divine destruction of Sodom and Gomorra:

In the year of Our Lord 1169, incredible and amazing prodigies occurred in the island of Sicily, such as had not been seen since the time of Sodom and Gomorra. For the day before the Nones of February [4 February], the eve of the feast of St. Agatha, the city of Catania was shaken to its foundations by an earthquake, and neither man nor woman was left [alive] there. Lentini was suddenly enclosed between two mountains and part of the city of Syracuse was destroyed by the earthquake, and from the said city of Catania as far as Plassa [Piazza Armerina] eleven castles, fortified settlements and other villages were destroyed, along with many people who were caught by the earthquake in the fields or streets. (BERNARDO MARAGONE 1936, 47; GUIDOBONI and COMASTRI 2005, 183)

William of Tyre also explains the calamities afflicting the kingdom of Jerusalem from this perspective:

In the same year, 1120 of the incarnation of the Lord, the Kingdom of Jerusalem, because of our sins, was afflicted with many troubles. In addition to the injury caused by the enemy (the battle of Ager Sanguinis), swarms of locusts fell upon the land, and a scourge of devouring mice, for four successive years, so completely destroyed the crops that it seemed as if the whole world would lack bread. (WILLIAM OF TYRE 1943, 1/11:535)

In a similar vein, al-Maqrīzī provides a compelling account of the earthquake that struck Egypt in the year 703/1303. He attributes the disaster to the celebrations held for the construction of the new citadel in Cairo, during which numerous sins were committed. Al-Maqrīzī observes that after the earthquake, anyone who saw the city thought that an enemy force had arrived and laid it to waste. According to the Mamluk historian, the event served

⁹ A Christian example can be found in the chronicle of the Armenian Movses Daskhurantsi (tenth century CE), referring to an earthquake in Vayocjor (Valley of Lamentation, in the upper course of the Arpa Çai, in the Siunikh province of Armenia) in the year 735: ‘and an impenetrable darkness came down over the territory of Mozu: the earth shook for forty days’ (MOVSES DASKHURANTSI 1961, 3:17).

as a divine sign to the faithful, who consequently renounced their excesses (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1934–72, 1:942–45; GUIDOBONI and COMASTRI 2005, 354–57).

The analogy drawn by al-Maqrīzī between the destructive impact of the earthquake—understood as a divine act—and that of an enemy attack is far from incidental, as military defeats were likewise frequently interpreted in providential terms, as manifestations of divine intervention. In the medieval tradition, every battle was conceived as a test of souls. That God would permit the defeat of His own could only be explained as punishment for their sins. This providential view of history, encapsulated in the Christian tradition by the formula *peccatis exigentibus* ('because of our sins'), is rooted in the Old Testament and posits a direct correlation between the moral impurity of combatants and their military failure.¹⁰ A comparable logic is also evident in Islamic discursive and ideological frameworks, where battlefield defeats were often explained as divine retribution against sinful believers (ALBARRÁN 2020, 342–49). The battlefield thus became the ideal setting for God to chastise His erring faithful.

Al-Ṭurtūshī, for instance, explicitly states that the Muslims brought about their own defeat by transgressing divine law (al-ṬURTŪSHĪ 1990, 691). Similarly, the epistle composed by the renowned Mālikī jurist Ibn 'Abd al-Barr following the fall of Barbastro (GARULO 1998, 141 ff)—a highly singular text preserved in Ibn Bassām's *Dhakhīra*, intended as a call to *jihād* to reclaim the city—identifies Muslim sinfulness, particularly the state of *fitna* (i.e. the fragmentation of the *umma*),¹¹ as the principal cause of the defeat (IBN BASSĀM 1979, 3/1:173–79; see also MARÍN 1992; GARULO 1998, 141–45; ALBARRÁN 2020, 177–83):

If it weren't for so many faults, His storm would not blow upon us. If we had been in harmony and our people in agreement, if we had been united as the limbs are to the body and the fingers to the hand, our arrows would not have gone astray, our star would not have hidden, our party would not have been humiliated, the edge of our weapons would not have been dulled, our community would not have been terrified, our water sources would not have been polluted, and we would have defeated them forever. (IBN BASSĀM 1979, 3/1:178)

A similar view is expressed by the poet 'Abdallāh b. al-'Assāl (d. 487/1094) in reference to this same event: 'If the Muslims had not committed grave sins, none of which remained hidden, not a single Christian knight would have triumphed over the Muslims: it is the sins that have caused all the harm!' (al-HIMYARĪ, 1938, 40; MARÍN 1992; PÉRÈS 1990, 104–5; LALIENA and SÉNAC 2018, 111–12). Another example is the interpretation of the loss of Jerusalem to the Crusaders in 492/1099 as divine punishment in the *Kitāb al-Jihād*, which

¹⁰ Although, as I have mentioned, similar notions appear in the Old Testament, in the Christian context they were fully present in late patristic thought, particularly in that of Gregory the Great. In the Iberian Peninsula, and with reference to Muslims, the idea already appears in the liturgical hymn *Tempore Belli*, likely contemporary to or shortly after the conquest of al-Andalus, and the formula is first found in Catalan and Aragonese documentation from the eleventh century, due to its significant popularity in the Carolingian world. See SÁNCHEZ SALOR 1982; CINGOLANI 2008; ALVIRA 2012, 132, 365 ff.

¹¹ In this sense, the fear of *fitna* is omnipresent in Islamic sources, and the Qur'an states that '*fitna* is worse than killing' (Q 2:191, BADAWI and ABDEL HALEEM 2008, 693). See, for example, SCALES 1994; TIXIER DU MESNIL 2022, 107–13, 121–26.

was written in 498/1105 by the Damascene scholar ‘Alī b. Ṭāhir al-Sulamī (d. 500/1106). He saw the catastrophe as the result of a broader moral and religious decline among Muslims, particularly due to internal fragmentation (once again, *fitna*) which had emboldened the enemies of Islam to launch their attacks:

The interruption in the performance of *jihād*, combined with the negligence of the Muslims towards the established norms of Islam [...] has inevitably meant that God has made the Muslims rise up against each other, has placed violent hostility and hatred between them, and has incited their enemies to seize their territories. (al-SULAMĪ 2015, 42–43)¹²

Another vivid example can be found in the case of the Almohad siege of Huete (567/1172, Cuenca), part of the Maghribī empire’s expansion into the Iberian Peninsula, where the Muslim defeat was interpreted as the result of a corrupted *niyya* (intention) (IBN ṢĀHIB al-ṢALĀT 1964, 406–8; ALBARRÁN 2020, 343–44). War was thus increasingly portrayed as an ideal setting in which God punished the sins of believers while assisting their adversaries. In this instance, God reportedly answered the prayers of the besieged and thirsty Christians by sending rain. While this event is first recorded by the Almohad historian Ibn Ṣāhib al-Ṣalāt (d. c. 599/1203), its overt providential interpretation appears slightly later, particularly in the work of ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al-Marrākushī (c. 621/1224) (2005, 177–78). Strikingly, a similar perspective is echoed in a near-contemporary Castilian chronicle, the *Anales Toledanos I* (c. 1219) (MARTÍN-CLETO 1993, 144–45). This convergence suggests that it was likely that rainfall did interrupt the Almohad campaign, and that both Christian and Muslim authors, shaped by comparable theological and ideological frameworks, interpreted this as divine intervention: assistance from God in the Christian account, and divine punishment in the Muslim one.

This is not the only occasion on which a Muslim author claims that God answered the prayers of thirsty Christians by sending rain. Al-Ṭurtūshī recounts a similar episode, in which Christian sailors besieging the North African coast turned to their Gospels in search of divine aid and were granted water. The Muslim defenders were both astonished and troubled by this apparent divine favour:

These impious ones, enemies of God and His Prophet, have turned to their Lord with sincere fervour, placed their trust in Him, and asked Him for water to revive their weakened bodies—and He aided them. Yet we are more entitled to raise prayers to the Lord and to address Him with humble supplications, and more deserving of His response. (al-ṬURTŪSHĪ 1990, 664)

Al-Ṭurtūshī notes that the Muslims then began to implore God themselves, offering fervent prayers and supplications, asking to witness a miracle. In response, God ultimately sent a storm that sank the Christian fleet (al-ṬURTŪSHĪ 1990, 663–66).

In this way, divine punishment could also be inflicted upon nonbelievers through natural disasters framed within sacred history. The Damascene chronicler Abū Shāma (d. 665/1267) reports on an earthquake that devastated the region of Shaizar in 565/1170. Although it

¹² See also ALBARRÁN 2024b.

affected Muslims, it was especially destructive for the Crusaders, as it occurred on a feast day when they were gathered in churches, whose roofs collapsed upon them:

The unleashing of violence shook the earth with its inhabitants. It destroyed the solid citadels, justice overcame their [the Franks'] force and they were blasted by fate. All the high buildings were dashed down and the fortresses were razed. God had decided, and so it was accomplished. The polytheists were massacred, and this was a sign for the monotheists. The enemy suffered the same punishment as the people of 'Ād. (ABŪ SHĀMA 1884, 154)¹³

On other occasions, military defeats are represented explicitly as divine judgment, sometimes articulated through the imagery of a major natural catastrophe drawn from the register of sacred history. For example, the fall of Almoravid Saragossa in 512/1118 is described as a literal *ḥukm Allāh* (judgment of God), executed by an Aragonese army depicted as a plague of locusts and ants (IBN ABĪ ZAR' 1972, 163). However, this conception is perhaps most clearly expressed in accounts of the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (608/1212, Jaén), a pivotal confrontation between a coalition of Christian kings led by Alfonso VIII of Castile and the Almohad army, which marked a decisive turning point in the Christian conquest of the Guadalquivir valley (GARCÍA FITZ 2012; ALVIRA 2012). Although the sources assign blame for the defeat to one of Caliph al-Nāṣir's viziers, the loss had already been set in motion during the preceding campaign at the nearby fortress of Salvatierra (607/1211), where the Almohads' original intention of waging a legitimate *jihād* had become corrupted. Accordingly, the battle of 608/1212 is framed as a divine judgment. The Christian army is portrayed in Old Testament terms, as a swarm of locusts. When the outcome of the battle became clear, an Arab soldier is said to have turned to the stunned Almohad caliph and asked: 'How long will you remain seated, O Commander of the Faithful? The judgment of God (*ḥukm Allāh*) has been fulfilled, His will has been accomplished, and the Muslims have perished' (IBN ABĪ ZAR' 1972, 237–39).

As the one ultimately responsible for the conduct of his subjects, the caliph himself becomes the focal point of divine punishment. God is said to have brought about his defeat because the caliph had become arrogant due to the size of his army, had deemed himself invincible, and had come to believe he could achieve victory without the aid of God. Even more strikingly, despite this overwhelming demonstration of divine power, the Almohad sovereign is reported to have persisted in his sinful arrogance, ultimately dying from a cup of poisoned wine—an act interpreted as the culmination of his moral failure (IBN ABĪ ZAR' 1972, 240–41; ALBARRÁN 2020, 344).

Within this cosmological framework, the acknowledgment of sin, acts of repentance, and the performance of pious deeds and communal rituals constituted the only viable path to divine mercy. Since natural catastrophes were understood as signs of a rupture in the relationship between humanity and God, the resolution of such crises could only occur through the reestablishment, via specific cultural and religious practices, of the bond between

¹³ The 'Ād were a pre-Islamic people who settled in the eastern part of present-day Yemen and western Oman, and who, according to Islamic tradition, were destroyed by a storm as divine punishment for failing to heed the prophet Hūd.

the afflicted community and the Creator, the sole sovereign of the natural world. For example, when rainfall is withheld due to human sinfulness, al-Turtūshī advises: ‘Seek forgiveness from your Lord, for He is most forgiving; He will send you abundant rain from the heavens and increase your wealth and the number of your children’ (al-TURTŪSHĪ 1990, 432).¹⁴

Likewise, collective expressions of penitence were considered the most powerful spiritual means of confronting natural disasters. Individual repentance was deemed insufficient; instead, communal forms of devotion—marked by continuous prayer, supplication and mass participation—were necessary to move and placate the Divine (HANSKA 2015, 48).¹⁵ Ibn Abī Zarʿ, for instance, reports that in the year 307/920, violent winds and darkness enveloped Fez. In response, the populace repented, became fearful, filled the mosques and corrected many of their transgressions (IBN ABĪ ZARʿ 1972, 98). A similar account appears in Abū Shāma’s description of a volcanic eruption in Medina in the year 654/1256:

People were all frightened by it, and all rose from their beds, and gathered asking God for forgiveness. They rushed to the mosque and prayed in it [...] People were afraid on account of their sins [...] It became larger and larger so that people rushed to the prophet’s mosque, confessed their sins, and prayed to the Lord, may He be praised. They took refuge by the side of His prophet; may peace be upon him. (SALIBA 2017, 150)

However, communal prayer and ritual alone were not sufficient to appease divine wrath. What was also required was morally upright behaviour—both public and private. Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233) documents a case of civil unrest in his native Mosul during the drought of 575/1179–80, further underscoring the deep connection between natural calamity, moral conduct and divine judgment:

In the year 575 people came forth to pray for rain because of the drought and severe famine and Sayf al-Dīn (Lord of Mosul) also did so, accompanied by his retinue. The people rose against him and targeted him with their protests. They demanded that he order the prohibition of the selling of wine. He agreed, so they entered the city and attacked the houses of the wine sellers. (IBN al-ATHĪR 1965–67, 10:462)¹⁶

In the face of military defeats and political disasters, spiritual renewal was deemed necessary (see ALBARRÁN 2024b). For al-Sulamī, in his *Kitāb al-Jihād*, the lesser *jihād* was of little

¹⁴ On reactions to natural disasters in the medieval Islamic world, see AKASOY 2007; HANSKA 2015.

¹⁵ For instance, in his work on earthquakes, al-Suyūṭī devotes the second section to the religious duties of a Muslim during and after the occurrence of an earthquake. In this sense, he detailed instructions about special earthquake prayers that any faithful Muslim must perform (SPRENGER 1843).

¹⁶ Responses in the medieval Christian world were similar. For instance, in 1427, a series of earthquakes occurred in Catalonia. On 20 March 1427, the magistrates of Cervera—after four weeks of intermittent tremors—prohibited swearing and blasphemy, as well as, during Lent, the playing of dice. Their counterparts in Manresa adopted an identical decree the following day. On 23 April, in Terrassa, due to the persistence of the tremors, swearing, blasphemy and the playing of dice and cards were prohibited. In early May, the *consellers* of Barcelona additionally banned swearing and all forms of gaming, as well as women’s luxury. On 14 June, the *jurats* of Manresa, after reaffirming the gaming ban, prohibited prostitutes from leaving the brothel, men from keeping concubines and work on holidays (RIERA I MELIS 1999, 699–735; see also BENVENUTI 2010).

value unless it was preceded and accompanied by the greater *jihād*, the personal spiritual striving of each Muslim along the path of God.¹⁷ In this framework, the just and pious actions of the ruling authority, particularly the sultan, could bring about significant benefit. Al-Ṭurṭūshī, for instance, draws an analogy between sovereign power and rainfall, emphasising the dual nature of both:

This [authority] is, indeed, something that God sends, a blessing from the heavens, the life of the earth and all those in it. Yet, with it, it causes great inconvenience to the traveller, damages buildings, brings down lightning and causes torrents to overflow, leading to the death of people and animals, the destruction of supplies and the uproar of the seas, increasing the hardships of those caught in them [...] Nevertheless, this is no obstacle for creatures, when contemplating the signs of divine mercy on the earth that the rain vivifies, how it makes plants grow, how it multiplies fruits and spreads prosperity everywhere, to show deep gratitude for the piety of the Lord and thank Him from the heart, without considering at all the harm that, in some cases, it might have caused to certain people. And you should know that the people yearn for a just king with the same longing with which the people suffering from a prolonged drought long for rain. (al-ṬURTŪSHĪ 1990, 202)¹⁸

A particularly illustrative case is found in the East, during the reign of Nūr al-Dīn, when a prolonged drought afflicted the region of Baalbek. Once the sultan arrived on the scene, the situation reportedly improved, and this was interpreted by contemporaries as a sign of divine mercy:

It happened by the predestined decree and celestial mercy that the heavens opened their fountains with rains, dews, outpourings, and heavy showers lasting from Tuesday, 3rd Dhū l-Ḥijja 544 (4th April) until the following Tuesday [...] The people clamoured with blessings upon Nūr al-Dīn, saying ‘This is due to his blessed influence, his justice, and his upright conduct.’ (IBN al-QALĀNISĪ 1932, 297)

Similarly, in contexts of political fragmentation and decline caused by Muslim sinfulness, such as the Taifa period in fifth/eleventh century al-Andalus, according to contemporary sources, God’s response was to send a righteous ruler as an act of mercy (ALBARRÁN 2024a). Abū Bakr b. al-Jadd, a scholar and secretary in the Taifa kingdom of Seville, described the Almoravid emir Yūsuf b. Tāshufīn as a merciful rain sent by God to al-Andalus (IBN SIMĀK 1979, 46–48). A parallel account appears in the chronicle of Ibn Ṣāḥib al-Ṣalāt, an Almohad historian writing in the late sixth/twelfth century, who narrates the response of the Amīr al-Mu’minīn, portrayed as a salvific rain, to the suffering of the Andalusī population due to the rebellion of Ibn Mardanīsh and his allies:

¹⁷ ‘The interruption in the performance of *jihād*, combined with the negligence of Muslims regarding the established norms of Islam [...] has inevitably meant that God has caused Muslims to rise against one another, has instilled violent hostility and hatred among them, and has incited their enemies to seize their territories’ (al-SULAMĪ 2015, 206).

¹⁸ The notion of the ‘rain of compassion’ is also often used to describe Muḥammad’s intercessory capacity. See SCHIMMEL 1985, 81.

Seville was encircled by uprisings; its inhabitants felt suffocated, trembling at the fear of being seized if they moved about, and they awaited divine relief and the reinforcements requested by letter, praying for abundant rain so that God might avert the harm [...] until God granted them the arrival of the response from the Amīr al-Mu'minīn, from the tent of his victorious camp near Constantine, dated to Rabī' al-Awwal of the year 555 [March–April 1160], in which he communicated the certainty of his return and the dispatch of the cavalry of God to that region, and the defence of those territories [of al-Andalus]. (IBN ṢĀḤIB al-ṢALĀT 1964, 77)¹⁹

The death of a rebel, according to medieval chroniclers, could prompt divine mercy in the form of rain, thereby alleviating periods of drought. Such was the case in the year 314/926, when the body of Sulaymān, son of the rebel 'Umar b. Ḥafṣūn who had posed a serious threat to the Umayyad emirate of Cordoba, was publicly displayed, crucified atop a wooden beam at the Bāb al-Sudda gate of the Cordoban *qaṣr*:

It was a great victory that rejoiced the Muslims and renewed their faith [...] That year, the drought had been severe, and scarcity widespread. The official in charge of prayers called for public supplications [...] On the day when the body of the rebel Sulaymān b. 'Umar b. Ḥafṣūn was hoisted and crucified at the palace gate, a saving rain fell upon Cordoba, about which the poets composed many verses, including the following:

From the clouds flows relentless rain,
And with it, in torrents, the enemy's blood.
Two forms of moisture are constant in their descent,
One impure, the other pure.
One, a liquid the earth itself will not receive;
The other, nourishing, that runs and soaks.
The first defiled the world, now purified
Inwardly and outwardly of its filth. (IBN ḤAYYĀN 1979, 132–33)

Here, the salvific rainfall, triggered by the Umayyad emir's triumph, symbolically purifies the afflicted land, cleansing it not only of drought, but also of the impurity embodied by the rebel.

Shared Images

In this way, the imagery surrounding natural disasters in medieval Islamic sources is closely interwoven with political symbolism. Common *topoi* appear across narratives of both natural

¹⁹ On Ibn Mardaniṣh, see BALBALE 2023. Another Almohad caliph, in this case al-Manṣūr, also brought about rain, this time through his prayers and the presence of his army: 'The Commander of the Faithful ordered his troops to march that day in full armour, and when they passed before him, he was struck by the beauty of their equipment. He rose and performed two units of prayer in gratitude to God, and no sooner had he completed his prayer than a cloud arrived, and a generous rain fell, soaking the people' ('ABD al-WĀḤID al-MARRĀKUSHĪ 2005, 211).

and political catastrophes. One particularly relevant motif is the dishonouring of women, a rhetorical device employed to personify and dramatise the perceived collapse of Islamic society (FIERRO 2015; BARTON 2015). In an epistle written after the fall of Barbastro, the violation of Muslim women, who are left unprotected and publicly exposed, is portrayed as the epitome of the community's humiliation:

They encircled us as a necklace encircles the neck, subjecting us to the harshest punishments through various forms of warfare and assault, day and night, hurling their bolts upon us, striking calamities. Woe to what our eyes witnessed: the looting of treasured possessions, the dishonouring of veiled wives and well-guarded daughters, everything that modesty had concealed laid bare to public view. (IBN BASSĀM 1979, 3/1:175)²⁰

Ibn al-ʿAssāl states: 'How many maidens kept in the harem were taken out of their dwelling without being able to hide!' (al-ḤIMYARI 1975, 90–91). Similarly, a recurring motif in the description of natural disasters such as the great fire in Cairo in 721/1321 or the 703/1303 earthquake, is that women were compelled to appear in public without veiling themselves (VON HEES 2017). Al-Maqrīzī recounts that women emerged with their faces uncovered and that pregnant women gave birth prematurely; an anonymous source adds that women went into the streets unveiled, and since the people believed that the hour of the death of the living and the resurrection of the dead had arrived, they began to pray. As a result, God showed His mercy and stopped the earthquake (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1934–72, 1:942–45; GUIDOBONI and COMASTRI 2005, 349, 354–57).

In these narratives, women assume a central role, and are often portrayed as sexualised and passive victims of infidel conquest, or as the figures through whom the devastating and unexpected impact of a natural disaster upon the Islamic community is rendered visible. Women thus function as a powerful vehicle for expressing fear which is deeply connected to notions of honour, shame and authority. Violated women appear as an anonymous and desecrated collective whose inviolability has been breached; they are, therefore, emblematic of social disintegration and harbingers of impending catastrophe.²¹

Fear itself is another common *topos* shared by accounts of both natural and political disasters.²² Ibn ʿIdhārī writes:

²⁰ In another passage, which also highlights the abandonment of women and their lack of protection, the blood spilled by the infidels is compared to rainfall: 'If you had seen, Oh Muslims, your fellow believers, their wealth and families seized; the swords unleashed, and death reigned over them. Their bodies were covered in wounds as the tips of spears played upon them. The cries, moans and laments grew louder; blood ran down their legs as rain runs along the roads. They lost their reason, their hearts seemed to leap from their chests—there was no one to help them, no protector. Deaf were the ears to the cries of the young men, the laments of the women and the weeping of the children.'

²¹ Much has been written about honour in the Mediterranean, from F.G. Baily's classic (BAILY 1971), to more recent studies such as BARTON 2001.

²² On fear in the premodern world and beyond, see BOURKE 2005; DELUMEAU 1978; FORONDA 2013; LAFFAN and WEISS 2012; MCCANN and MCKECHNIE-MASON 2018; MEYERSON, THIERRY and FALK 2004; PLAMPER and LAZIER 2012; SADAUNE 2013.

In that year [332 AH], on the night of Monday, the 9th of Dhū l-Qa'da [2 July 944], there was a violent earthquake in Cordoba, the like of which had never been seen or heard before. It occurred in the evening and lasted for an hour. The people of Córdoba were terrified and rushed to the mosques, weeping and praying. [God] came to their aid and turned the quake away from them. (IBN 'IDHĀRĪ 2009, 2:227)

Likewise, after mentioning strange phenomena in the sky that terrified the population, Ibn al-Athīr reports a period of seismic activity that forced the residents of Mahdiyya to abandon their homes: 'In that year [367 AH/19 August 977 – 8 August 978 CE] the sky took on a fiery red colour between East and North like flames, and people poured into the streets invoking the name of God. There was a dreadful earthquake at Mahdiya which lasted for forty days'.²³

When it came to political disasters, such as the fear experienced by besieged populations, fear became intertwined with anxieties about death, social change and religious beliefs—both their own and those of others. These reactions are regularly documented in Andalusī and Maghribī sources.²⁴ For instance, when in 658/1260 the Muslim population of Saleh observed a Castilian fleet approaching by sea, 'the people were shaken'. Subsequently, after the city's assault, its inhabitants panicked and thronged at the city gate to escape, exacerbating the tragedy as 'a number of them were crushed to death, known only to the Listener and Knower [i.e. God]' (IBN 'IDHĀRĪ 2009, 4:489 ff.).

The anxiety, fear and terror of the population, which led them to invoke God, frequently feature in these accounts, often localised in the heart. For example, Ibn al-Qalānisī states that an earthquake that struck Damascus in 551/1156 'terrified people's hearts' (IBN 'IDHĀRĪ 2009, 4:489 ff.). Similarly, Ibn Abī Zar' reports that, at the Portuguese conquest of Alcácer do Sal, 'the hearts of the Muslims filled with terror' (IBN ABĪ ZAR' 1972, 242–43), and Ibn al-'Assāl states in his account of the loss of al-Andalus that 'The Muslim hearts were terrified, and their best defenders showed cowardice when they fought battles' (al-ĤIMYARĪ 1975, 90–91). In these emotional narratives, the heart plays a very important role, in both the Islamic and Christian sources. The 'feeling heart' is a transcultural iconic symbol in the medieval world, a key conceptual device related to emotions and emotional practices (see, e.g. BARCLAY and REDDAN 2019). And, of course, when the disaster came to an end, the heart was comforted. Thus, Ibn al-Qalānisī says the following about an earthquake that occurred in Syria in the year 507/1114: 'The earth shook with it, and the people were anxious, but as the tremors ceased, their souls were restored from palpitation and distress to tranquillity, and their hearts were comforted after disquiet and fear' (IBN al-QALĀNISĪ 1932, 149).

Fear of both natural disasters and enemies is depicted in medieval sources in similar ways, often intertwining the two. Sometimes, terrifying Christian armies are even portrayed using

²³ Again, the earthquake lasted forty days. See IBN al-ATHĪR 1851–76, 8:510; IBN 'IDHĀRĪ 2009, 1:247.

²⁴ For a history of emotions in the Middle Ages and beyond, see BODDICE 2018; BOQUET and NAGY 2015; FREVERT 2011; REDDY 2001; ROSENWEIN 2018; SILLERAS FERNÁNDEZ 2024. In the case of medieval Islamic studies, the history of emotions has been developing in recent years (e.g. RIZVI 2017; TEKGÜL 2023), although there is still a lot of work to be done. See, for example, the special issue of *Cultural History* on 'Arabic Emotions: From the Qur'an to the Popular Epic' (BLATHERWICK and BRAY 2019), or the recent edited volume *Emociones nazaries* (JREIS NAVARRO 2025). On fear in the battlefield, see RÓŻYCKI 2021, 61 ff.

imagery associated with natural disasters. For instance, Ibn al-Kardabūs describes the army of Alfonso VI of Castile during the Battle of Zallaqa (478/1086) as a formidable force, whose banners resembled black clouds flowing over the land (IBN al-KARDABŪS 1971, 92). Similarly, the *Tārīkh Mayūrqa* likens the Aragonese army that conquered Mallorca to a deluge, as if replicating the account of the prophet Noah (IBN ‘AMĪRA 2007, 106). In this narrative, the providential vision is omnipresent: despite Mallorca’s wealth and favourable location, God had decreed its fall (IBN ‘AMĪRA 2007, 66–67):²⁵ ‘In this way and by decree of Allāh, the greatest of cruelties was conceived’ (IBN ‘AMĪRA 2007, 132).

Eschatological Terror

In his definition of fear, Jean Delumeau pointed out its dual biological and emotional nature in that, strictly speaking, fear is an emotion-shock, often preceded by surprise, provoked by the awareness of a present and overwhelming danger which, one believes, threatens one’s self-preservation. In a state of alert, the hypothalamus reacts by means of a global mobilisation of the body, which triggers various types of somatic behaviours causing endocrine modifications. Like any emotion, fear provokes different effects depending on the individuals and circumstances, including alternative reactions in the same person (DELUMEAU 1978). Fear generates physical and physiological reactions in those who suffer from it, but it undoubtedly also has an important social component, and is a feature of wider, collective socio-cultural experiences undergone by members of specific societies at particular times. Fear is, thus, a dimension of human social life (SCRUTON 1986). In this sense, emotions like fear—and the ways that they are expressed—are the result of particular experiences (both individual or collective) that are articulated and embedded in a given historical and social context and make sense in terms of specific affective norms and within the framework of a particular ‘emotional community’, as defined by Barbara Rosenwein (ROSENWEIN 2006). In this regard, one of the most recurrent sources of anxiety during the Middle Ages, resulting from its dominant socio-religious systems, was fear of sin and the eternal condemnation that could ensue upon one’s death (see DELUMEAU 1990); that is, what Fudgé has called ‘eschatological terror’, describing a state in which the anxieties of religion spawned fear of apocalypse, damnation, hell and the uncertain fate and suffering of sinners in the afterlife (FUDGÉ 2017).²⁶ Because of this facet of fear as a social emotion, different communities create different intelligible conceptual frameworks through which to express their anxiety. In the Middle Ages, in both Europe and the Islamic world, and due to this ‘eschatological terror’, the apocalyptic imagination constituted a conceptual framework through which to narrate—or provoke—fear (COOK 2002; KUBERSKI 2013; see also FINGAROVA 2022). In the cases of both natural and political catastrophes, medieval sources often interpreted events through an

²⁵ The future recovery of Mallorca was also part of this providentialist vision and depended exclusively on the will of God. Thus, when Ibn Abī Zar’ gives news of the fall of the island, he adds ‘God will return it to Islam’ (IBN ABĪ ZAR’ 1972, 275). On the idea of the recovery and reconquest of al-Andalus in the Islamic sources, see ALBARRÁN 2019.

²⁶ Kathleen E. Ebbs has called this the ‘emotional regime of Hell’ (EBBS 2022).

eschatological lens, reflecting the pervasive influence of religious beliefs on emotional responses (on this issue see, for example, LERNER 1981; HANSKA 2015, 112 ff.). These interpretations highlight how fear was not only a personal experience but also a collective one, and was deeply embedded in the social and religious fabric of medieval communities.

In both the Qur'an and the *sunna*, natural disasters such as earthquakes were understood as signs of the end of times.²⁷ The sources also provide examples of natural disasters represented as such. For example, al-Suyūfī mentions that in 549/1154–5, there was a strong wind after sunset in Baghdad, and the people were frightened, thinking that the Day of Resurrection had come (RAZANI 1972, 19). Similarly, Ibn al-Athīr mentions how a sandstorm devastated the Iraqi region in 575–6/1179–80:

This year a dark black wind blew in the Jazīra lands, in Iraq and elsewhere. It occurred generally throughout the lands from midday until a quarter of the night had passed. It remained so dark that a man could hardly see anyone he was with. I was in Mosul at that time. We prayed the afternoon, evening and late-night prayers by supposition and guesswork. People turned to submissiveness, repentance and seeking forgiveness. They thought that the Day of Judgement had arrived. (IBN al-ATHĪR 1965–67, 10:460)

There are also numerous instances in which military defeats were interpreted in eschatological terms. For example, in the chronicle of Ibn 'Amīra concerning the loss of Mallorca,²⁸ the entry of the Aragonese forces into the city in 1229 is described in the following terms: 'It was one of the most agonising days for achieving salvation, and its terror most closely resembled the Day of Resurrection' (IBN 'AMĪRA 2007, 130). Anguish, terror and the Resurrection are three elements that are frequently employed to articulate a conceptual framework for expressing fear. Moreover, in this instance the author adds that 'the commotion created was similar to that which will occur during the first moments of Judgment Day' (IBN 'AMĪRA 2007, 132). This eschatological rhetoric, which is marked by images of nursemaids, pregnant women and men acting as if they are drunk, reappears across sources that address such events, including the epistle on the fall of Barbastro mentioned earlier in this article.²⁹ In that text, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr draws explicitly on two Qur'anic verses that refer

27 For example, al-BUKHĀRĪ 1997, n. 1036: 'The Prophet said, 'The Hour (Last Day) will not be established until (religious) knowledge will be taken away (by the death of religious learned men), earthquakes will be very frequent, time will pass quickly, afflictions will appear, murders will increase, and money will overflow amongst you''. In the Qur'an, Q 99, *al-Zalzala* ('The Earthquake'), is interpreted as being associated with the end of times. See SENIGUER AND BELHAJ 2023.

28 On this issue, see MAZZOLI-GUINTARD 2021.

29 'The brother did not care for his brother, nor did the son call upon his father, nor did the father approach his children—"on that day, each man will be concerned only with his own affair." The wet nurse did not protect her suckling child, nor did the wife weep for her bedfellow, as if they were in a day similar to that which the Almighty mentions in the Perfect Revelation: "On the Day when every nursing mother will forget her suckling child, and every pregnant woman will drop her load, and you will see mankind as if they were drunk, yet they will not be drunk." How do you think it was, Oh Muslims? Women and children were taken, some naked, others clothed, from here to there, as animals are led by the halter, sometimes dragged, other times pushed; the elderly were bound with ropes, shackled with chains and manacles, without the slightest consideration. If they asked for compassion, they were not shown mercy; if they asked for food, they were not fed; if they asked for water, they were not given to drink; their reason lost,

to signs of the impending end times, thereby framing the military defeat in apocalyptic terms: ‘On that Day, every man among them will have enough concern of his own to make him indifferent to others’ (Q 80:37) and ‘The Day you see it, every nursing mother will forget her nursling, and every pregnant woman will deliver her burden. And you will see people as if they were intoxicated, though they are not; but the punishment of God is severe’ (Q 22:2).³⁰

These fears had another dimension, one that must be directly linked to the providential discourse through which political and natural disasters were interpreted, and which was closely connected to the notion of sin: fear was considered an emotion of value for the spiritual lessons it could teach (SCOTT and KOSSO 2002, xi-xxxvii). For instance, certain medieval theological treatises maintained that fear of divine judgment stemmed from a lack of spiritual preparation and should be addressed through intensified religious commitment (ATKINSON 1977, 22–28). In this framework, fear of God’s wrath could lead to sincere repentance and the adoption of proper religious conduct through acknowledging a sinful past (RIVERS 2002). As previously noted, repentance for sin is frequently described in the sources as a common response to catastrophe. In the case of the volcanic eruption in Medina in 654/1256, for example, Abū Shāma remarks that ‘people were afraid on account of their sins’ (SALIBA 2017, 150). Similarly, in the face of possible death at the Battle of Alarcos (591/1195), which pitted the Almohads against Alfonso VIII of Castile, a particularly noteworthy ‘ritual’ moment occurred: the Almohad caliph asked the Muslim combatants to forgive one another, perhaps in the hope that they might die at peace, having repented of their faults and sins. He also commanded them to calm their souls and purify their intentions toward God (IBN ‘IDHĀRĪ 2009, 4:289–90).

The Landscape of Fear Versus the Landscape of Consolation

As Jussi Hanska states, it has become customary to separate man-made disasters from natural disasters (HANSKA 2015). This was not the case during the Middle Ages, when it was believed that all tribulations ultimately originated from God. Many medieval sources view wars in the same context as floods, earthquakes and other natural disasters; they were explained and understood as very much similar processes. Natural disasters and defeats, or territorial loss, were part of the same epistemological framework, the same cosmovision, and the same way of understanding existence and history. This is why the sources reflect the construction of a shared landscape of anxiety, terror and distress that encompasses both phenomena—both experiences. It is a landscape of catastrophe and loss, a *locus horribilis*. In this context, ‘landscape’ is understood not merely as the physical environment but as a mode of perception, following the approach of Michael Bintley and Kate Franklin in their volume *Landscapes and Environments of the Middle Ages* (BINTLEY and FRANKLIN 2023). Landscape, in this sense, is not simply the world as seen; it is a culturally constructed way of seeing the world. Landscapes are imaginaries that mediate the experience and interpretation of the physical environment. In the premodern Islamic imaginary, both military defeats and

stunned, their eyes red from weeping, their colour changed’ (IBN BASSĀM 1979, 3/1:176).

30 On the interpretation of these verses, see al-QURṬUBĪ 2005–13, 6:202 and 10:106.

natural disasters belonged to the same symbolic landscape, articulated through a common language. This convergence is evident in a *ḥadīth*, for instance, in which these two threats—feared by the Prophet Muḥammad for his *umma*—are represented together:

Indeed, Allāh gathered the earth for me so that I saw its east and its west. And surely my *umma*'s authority shall reach over all that was shown to me of it. And I have been granted the two treasures; the red and the white. I asked my Lord that my *umma* is not to be destroyed by a universal drought, and that He does not overcome them by enemies outside of them, reaching to their heart of power. My Lord said: 'Oh Muḥammad! When I issue a decree, it is not reversed. I have granted for your *umma* that they shall not be destroyed by universal drought. And that they are not overcome by enemies outside of themselves reaching to their heart of power—even if they gather against them from all the regions'. Or he said: 'Among the regions'. But some of them will destroy others, and some will capture others. (al-TIRMIDHĪ 2007, n. 2176)³¹

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As has been stated, the loss of Saragossa was read by Ibn Abī Zar' as a judgment from God implemented through a Christian army represented as a plague of locusts and ants (IBN ABĪ ZAR' 1972, 163). Similarly, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, in his *Risāla* about the loss of Barbastro, describes the territorial retreat of al-Andalus using images of natural disasters and calls for the defence of the frontier, in this memorable paragraph:

On guard, on guard! This is the first thing to be protected from a volcano whose fiery sparks fly in all directions, from a deluge whose terrible rain falls without rest—one is seldom safe from that fire, or from this flood; awake before they awake you, fight them before they fight you in your houses [...]: look at our frontiers, how they are battered; our regions, how they tear them apart; our booty, how they divide it; our goods, how they tear them from us. Our blood remains without vengeance, and our weapons dull; and you abandon us and forget us in the difficulty, as if we were not part of you, as if we were not the barrier that defends you, the protection that stands before you. (IBN BASSĀM 1979, 3/1:178)

Facing this landscape of catastrophe, loss, and fear, the Andalusī authors, as a form of resistance to the Christian advance, constructed a landscape of consolation, comfort and memory—a landscape in which, primarily through the image of a garden and of Paradise, and also through the remembrance of past victories in contrast to defeats, al-Andalus was idealised. This *locus amoenus*, this 'pleasant place', ultimately derives from Biblical and classical representations of idealised and controlled 'natural' landscapes, particularly the Garden of Eden (BINTLEY and FRANKLIN 2023, 18). This lush environment contains that which delights the human senses. In the conceptualisation of gardens and green spaces within the broader medieval Islamic tradition, a parallel allegorical and symbolic link was made between lush garden spaces full of greenery and flowing water and the landscape of Paradise.

31 A similar perspective appears in the Bible with reference to the events preceding the Apocalypse. 'Then he said to them: "Nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there shall be great earthquakes in diverse places and pestilences and famines and terrors from heaven; and there shall be great signs"' (St Luke 21:10–11).

The garden also formed an important element in the daily life of al-Andalus, and was a metonym for an al-Andalus that has been idealised (See, for example, DICKIE 1968; DICKIE 1992; RUGGLES 2000; RUGGLES 2008; TITO ROJO and CASARES PORCEL 2011; ANDERSON 2013; FORCADA 2019). This can be observed in the depictions of al-Andalus produced particularly after its territorial decline, since gardens not only emerged in the literature as leitmotifs to represent human cultivation of the earth in concert with the divine, but also as defensive boundaries to ward off environmental and cultural violence (PUERTA VÍLCHEZ 2017). One example can be seen in the poetry of Ibn Khafāja from Alcira (d. 533/1138), who describes the Andalusian people as blessed and al-Andalus as Paradise:

Oh people of al-Andalus! You are blessed by God
with your water, shade, rivers, and trees.
There is no Garden of Paradise
except in your dwellings.
If I had to choose, this is where I would stay;
do not think that tomorrow you will enter the eternal fire:
one does not enter hell after living in Paradise. (IBN KHAFĀJA 1960, n. 88)³²

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Another example can be found in the epistle on the fall of Valencia by Ibn ‘Amīra, who refers to the city in the following terms: ‘What has become of those meadows and their rich vegetation, the streams and greenery of their banks, those humid, perfumed refuges; the rivers and their meanders, the zephyrs and their mild caresses, the sunsets and the enervating breezes?’ (al-ḤIMYARĪ 1975, 97 ff.). Regarding Alcira, his hometown, he writes: ‘The place of my birth has since seen its star fall and its misfortune surge because of this cruel affliction. Let us weep over a paradise through which Allāh has caused a river to flow’, a reference to the Qur’anic description of Paradise (Q 2:25; Q 18:31) (al-ḤIMYARĪ 1975, 97 ff.).

In these narratives, memory also provide comfort through the creation of a counter-present as a strategy of rhetorical resistance (ASSMANN 2011, 62 ff.).³³ That is, faced with the problems of the present, memories of a past—usually taking the form of a golden age to be recovered—are evoked. Memories, thus, become expectations. In the same text, and as part of this landscape of consolation in the face of defeat, Ibn ‘Amīra also recalls past victories. He laments that Islam is oppressed and that ‘it is as if one had never heard of the victory of Ibn Nuṣayr, the fruitful advance of Ṭāriq³⁴ [...] As if the Marwanids and their summer expeditions had been forgotten,³⁵ and the hero of Ma‘āfir,³⁶ who put down in the dust

³² Here, the poet takes the paradisiacal metaphor to the extreme, suggesting that life in al-Andalus surpasses that of the promised Paradise—a notion which, according to al-Maqqarī, led the Marinid sultan Abū ‘Inān Fāris (d. 759/1358) to regard the verse as a blatant transgression of religious dogma and to reprimand the individual who recited it to him (al-MAQQARĪ 1988, 680–81).

³³ The concept of ‘counter-present’ has already been applied in some studies of Islamic history. See, for example, HIRSCHLER 2006, 78 ff; ALBARRÁN 2020, 47–51.

³⁴ Mūsā b. Nuṣayr and Ṭāriq b. Ziyād, conquerors of al-Andalus.

³⁵ The Umayyads.

³⁶ Almanzor, Andalusī military leader, chamberlain of Caliph Hishām II, and effectively ruler of al-Andalus until his death in 1002.

those idols and those who worshipped them' (al-ḤIMYARĪ 1975, 97 ff.). In this way, the author points to the possibility of the presence of Islam in al-Andalus being forgotten, so as to remember those past glories—all of them examples of victories against Christians, with Almanzor being regularly cited—thereby offering the comforting existence of an alternative end. This constitutes another particularly fertile sphere for the articulation of historiographical narratives full of emotion: those linking the political community with the territory in which it developed,³⁷ and with its past (ALBARRÁN 2024a).

In this same vein—connecting the socio-political community with the territory in which it developed and its past—emotional narratives, through their use of memories and landscapes to confront the fall of al-Andalus, reflect an attachment to the land. This sentiment intensified due to the traumatic process of loss, the fear of change it entailed, and the need to emigrate, a condition also caused by natural disasters. This awareness was manifested through concepts such as *jamā'at al-Andalus* (the community of al-Andalus), as exemplified by Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) in his epistle in praise of al-Andalus. This text, titled *Risāla fī faḍl al-Andalus wa-rijālihi* ('Epistle on the Excellence of al-Andalus and its Men'), was a genuine work extolling the merits of al-Andalus and is also known as *Faḍā'il al-Andalus*. In it, he does not present a sacred topography of al-Andalus but highlights all its landmarks in various fields of knowledge (WILK 2010; PUERTA VÍLCHEZ 2017). That is, he underscores Andalusī cultural excellence within the broader framework of Islamic history, thereby creating an idealised genealogy and a space to be reclaimed. Undoubtedly, the production of such works is linked to a form of resistance and memory in the face of the territorial setbacks experienced from the fifth/eleventh century onward, akin to the *faḍā'il al-Quds* (merits of Jerusalem) works that were composed in the Holy Land after the arrival of the Crusades.³⁸

Such feelings of dismay and helplessness are evident in the text of Ibn 'Amīra, who observes with resignation the necessity of abandoning both homeland (*waṭan*) and country (*bilādunā*, our country) (al-ḤIMYARĪ 1975, 97 ff.). In the same text, the Andalusī scholar questions the meaning of this catastrophe, asking whether the Day of Judgment has already arrived. From a markedly providentialist perspective, he further reflects on what sin al-Andalus as a whole might have committed to justify such a state of agony. His conclusion, which implicitly challenges the very notion of divine justice, is unequivocal: 'None of that! On the contrary, it has upheld the *sunna* and has served as a bulwark against religious innovations' (al-ḤIMYARĪ 1975, 97 ff.).

³⁷ See GARCÍA-SANJUÁN 2015. For a literature of nostalgia in the medieval Islamic context, particularly in the Islamic West, see, for example, STETKEVYCH 1993; ELINSON 2009; GRANARA 2021; HERMES 2024.

³⁸ Another consequence of the arrival of the Crusaders was the revival of the sanctity of this territory—that is, a re-sacralisation of the Holy Land as a form of resistance. This phenomenon can be observed, for example, in the growing popularity after the Crusades of *faḍā'il al-Quds* texts, a genre that enumerates the various spiritual benefits a pilgrim could attain by visiting the Holy City and the broader Syro-Palestinian region. Although this literary genre predated the period under discussion, its circulation increased significantly following the loss of Quds. See HASSON 1981; ELAD 1995, 6 ff.; MOURAD 2008; LATIFF 2017, 30 ff.

Final Remarks

This study has examined how natural disasters and political catastrophes such as territorial loss and military defeat were not only chronicled together in Islamic historiography but were also emotionally and theologically entangled in the construction of collective memory. Through a close reading of sources from al-Andalus and the broader medieval Islamic world, the article demonstrates that the experience of natural calamities was often interpreted as a divine response to political failure, moral corruption or communal disunity. Earthquakes, floods and other environmental upheavals were thus situated within a providential framework that offered both a diagnosis of crisis and a call for repentance and reform.

The sources analysed reveal a shared narrative strategy: the alignment of cosmic disorder with socio-political decline. Authors mobilised natural imagery not simply as metaphor, but as an affective device capable of generating emotional resonance, moral urgency and a sense of divine accountability. The resulting textual landscapes are not passive reflections of geographical space, but emotionally charged terrains—‘emotional landscapes’—where feelings of loss, fear, nostalgia and hope are spatially and rhetorically encoded. In this sense, two complementary types of landscapes have been identified: the landscape of fear, shaped by images of ruin, trembling earth and divine wrath; and the landscape of consolation, in which the memory of al-Andalus is reimagined through paradisiacal gardens, flowing water and the aesthetic of a lost golden age. These landscapes function as narrative mechanisms through which trauma is articulated and community identity is reconstituted. They also provide a moral geography that situates the righteous, the repentant and the guilty within an emotionally legible spatial order.

Likewise, by placing the Andalusī and Maghribī material in dialogue with Eastern and even Christian traditions, this research reveals a broader Mediterranean pattern of narrating catastrophe as divine pedagogy. The recurrence of themes such as communal punishment or eschatological longing points to a shared medieval epistemology in which the natural, political and moral orders are inseparably linked. The disasters described in these sources are thus not only historical events, but also emotionally encoded episodes of cultural self-reflection, theological commentary and moral imagination, foregrounding the entanglement of emotional experience, environmental perception and historical narration, and inviting us to rethink the ways in which communities process trauma and inscribe meaning onto space and time.

Finally, I would like to conclude by quoting the following excerpts in which the ninth/fifteenth century geographer al-Ḥimyarī describes al-Andalus—a depiction in which many of the elements I have discussed can be discerned, including the paradisiacal image of the Andalusī territory, as well as the looming threat of natural and political disasters:

The name of al-Andalus in Greek is Isbāniya. Al-Andalus is an excellent, fertile territory that produces fruits in abundance. Its natural wealth is permanent [...] Al-Andalus is similar to Syria for its fertility and the purity of its air; like Yemen, for its temperate climate; like India, for its aromas and the fineness of its products; like al-Ahwāz, for the importance of its fiscal revenues; like China, for its mines of precious stones; like Aden, for the benefits obtained from its coastline [...] It is said that the first men to take possession of al-Andalus were the sons of Tubal, Japhet and Noah.

They inhabited this land at the beginning of time. Their kings numbered one hundred and fifty. According to what is told, later, al-Andalus was ruined and impoverished, and its population was forced to emigrate because of a famine that struck it. The land remained deserted for a hundred years [...] Al-Andalus is a territory where one fights for the faith and a place of *ribāṭ*: indeed, various infidel nations surround it to the East, to the North, and partly to the West. (al-ḤIMYARĪ 1975, 32–33)

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