

GOLDZIHHER'S ABŪ RĪŠ

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1. In a letter dated on 19 August 1897 Goldziher asked his German colleague, Martin Hartmann to make some enquiries about a popular saint called Abū Rīš during his stay in Egypt. The passage in question is as follows¹: “Auf dem Fahrwege nach dem Pyramiden in Gizeh befindet sich die Kubbe eines populären Heiligen ابو ريش (der Befiederte), dessen Namendoppelgänger auch in der Karâfa begraben sein soll. An Ort und Stelle habe ich mir die Legende des ابو ريش erzählen lassen, warum er diesen Namen führt? Ich habe mir aber während des Rittes die Sachen nicht notiert und dieselbe total vergessen. Vielleicht haben Sie Gelegenheit eine Notiz darüber zu nehmen und die Legende des Abû Rîsch (oder Abû-r-rîsch) der Vergessenheit zu entreissen.”

Hartmann answered Goldziher on 23 August 1897: “Im Einzelnen ist mir Ihr Wunsch betr. ابو ريش da eine willkommene Anregung. Die Kerls, mit denen ich hier arbeitete, waren mit Heiligen- & Wundergeschichten nicht sparsam, und da ich von ihnen auf das Ganze schließen kann, so werde ich übergenug von dieser Sorte zu hören bekommen.”

Then, in a letter of 22 November 1897 Hartmann informed Goldziher that he did not see the tomb. A few weeks later (on 31 December 1897), however, he wrote again to him in a more detailed way: “In diesen Tagen blätterte ich Alī Pāšā Mubāraks Chiṭaṭ... und stieß auf Notizen über den abū rīš von Damanhūr, der an 2 Stellen behandelt wird 8,25 und 11,23. Alī Pāšā scheint nicht beachtet zu haben, daß der ابو الريش und der ابو ريش identisch sind, jedenfalls hätte er nicht verschieden schreiben sollen. Abū rīš ist das allein Gehörte. Nach *Ihrem* abū rīš (bei Gize) habe ich noch nicht gesucht, er wird sich aber wohl finden, denn dieses Buch ist trotz aller seiner sehr großen Mängel ein wahrer Schatz... Welche alte Gottheit mag hinter abū rīš und abū ruwāš (رواش) wenig nördlich von elkirdāsa, stecken? Daß einer dahinter steckt ist mir sehr wahrscheinlich, wie ja ابو صير den Osiris birgt.”

As far as we know this was all that Goldziher could have learned from Hartmann concerning Abū Rīš. The enigma of this unknown saint must have, however, haunted him for a longer period since he asked the same question about Abū Rīš from his compatriot, Max Herz who was “Chief Architect to the Comité de conservation des monuments de l’art arabe” at that time. We know about Goldziher’s inquiry from

¹ For this information I am obliged to Ludmila Hanisch, the editor of the correspondence between Goldziher and Hartmann. For the quoted passages, see Hanisch 2000:78, 80, 84, 91. Hartmann’s letters can be found in the Oriental Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

Herz's letter sent to Goldziher on 24 November 1898 in which he refers to Abū Rīš in this passage: "Du hast recht zu fragen, mein geschätzter Freund, warum man nichts von mir hört, ich gestehe meine Schuld. Der Wille fehlte mir nie dir ein Lebenszeichen zu geben, ich wollte aber zugleich über den ابو ريش das Erwünschte mitteilen und so blieb alles weg"².

It seems that Goldziher did not receive a satisfying answer either from Hartmann or Herz, so we can only guess the way of approach he could have taken to interpret the figure to solve the mystery of Abū Rīš. For him and his fellow scholars a major point in the history of religions was the discovery of the surviving elements (*residua*) of the former religions in the new one³. Within the framework of this idea he discovered the survival of the ancient Egyptian snake cult in connection with the figure of Sheikh Harīdī in Upper Egypt⁴ or the relevance of the popular festival in the ancient Bubastis in the Delta for the understanding of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī's *mūlid* in modern Ṭanta⁵. Hartmann's remark about the identification of Abū Šir and Osiris also suggests a research hypothesis similar to Goldziher's. In recent times Goldziher and his fellow scholars have been exposed to a rather sharp criticism on the part of social anthropologists who blamed them for their historical approach which made them ignore the social aspect of the problems in their researches on the history of religions⁶.

In this paper we try to identify Goldziher's Abū Rīš and to reconstruct the story of a ritual he could have supposedly heard in connection with this name. The relevant material has been collected in Cairo, Rašīd and Damanhūr mainly in 1994 and 1995. Disagreeing with the critical attitude of modern social anthropologists we try to interpret the figure of Abū Rīš and the ritual in a way which could have been acceptable to Goldziher but we also intend to refer to the social dimensions of the subject.

2. Goldziher places the saint's Qubba on the road to the Giza Pyramids. He must have meant a tomb which can be found at the crossing of the former Šārī' al-Ḥalīġ (presently Š. Port Sa'īd) and the Š. 'Alī Pāšā Ibrāhīm, not far from the Sayyida Zaynab Mosque. The topographical explanation for this localisation lies in the fact that in his time the usual way to go to Giza was to take the road at first to Fuṣṭāṭ

² I am grateful to István Ormos for this communication. The letter is in the Oriental Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

³ See e.g. Lang 1995: I, 35f, 250, 270; Tylor 1958: I-II, Index, s.v. "survival", Goldziher 1878:184f; 1881:171-270; 1892:340.

⁴ See Goldziher 1971: II, 310f.

⁵ See Goldziher 1971: II, 307-310.

⁶ See Mayeur-Jaouen 1994:101-106 and Abu-Zahra 1997:8f.

(by riding a donkey or taking the tramway opened in 1896) then to cross the river by ferry to land at the former Egyptian Museum⁷.

The present building (Photo 1) erected in Mamlūk style bears the following inscription above its door: ١٣٢٥ مقام سيدي محمد السدي الشهير بابو الريش "The shrine of Sīdī Muḥammad as-Saddī known as Abū Riš 1325". Accordingly, this edifice which could not have been seen by Goldziher was built in 1907. The name of the nearby as-Sadd al-Barrānī street, like the toponymic reference as-Saddī in the saint's name refers to the one-time dam which separated the former canal in the place of the present day Port Said Street from the Nile. The whole neighbourhood together with a children's hospital is known as Abū Riš.

The well preserved building encloses the saint's tomb covered by a green covering (*kiswa*) and surrounded by a railing (*maqṣūra*) which was donated by a Ḥāḡḡ Farḥāt Aḥmad Ḥasanayn, son of the builder, Aḥmad (related to the saint on the maternal line whose family looks after the *maqām* presently.) The son of this Ḥāḡḡ Farḥāt, Muḥammad Farḥāt is the present servant (*ḥādīm*) of the tomb and he is also the head (*nā'ib*) of the Sayyida Zaynab branch of the Rifā'iyya Ṣūfī order, while the daily care of the *maqām* is undertaken by his mother who is in her late sixties. Apart from the tomb with the railing, the *mihṛāb* and the iron box for the alms (*nudūr*), the black banner of the Rifā'iyya order and the processional drums can be seen inside the building.

Among the inscriptions, a longer invocation deserves to be mentioned. It contains the usual Qur'ānic reference to the *awliyā'* (Q 10,62), a benediction on Abū Riš and the People of the House of the Messenger of God, the praise of God for having blessed Egypt with the presence of *Ahl al-Bayt* and the Pious (*aṣ-Ṣāliḥūn*). The closing formula referring to a *ḥadīṭ* expresses the wish for the ability to visit their tombs permanently and the hope of joining them on the Day of Resurrection. ("Whosoever loves the people will be resurrected together with them even if he did not do their work.") As it turns out, this inscription (or perhaps the whole decoration) was the present from "those who love *Ahl al-Bayt*", a certain as-Sayyid Ḥilmī and Ramaḍān Muḥammad Qāsim. Apart from this invocation, Q 4,103, Q 13,28, Q 26,62, Q 67,1 and Q 68,4 can also be seen on the walls.

People in the neighbourhood of the *maqām* seem to know nothing special characteristic about this Abū Riš but agree that he came to Egypt with the Companions (*Ṣaḥāba*). The importance of the saint can, however, be realized from the fact that his *mūlid* can be compared to the most popular *mūlids* in Cairo as far as the number of participants is concerned. It is organised in connection with the *mūlid* of Sayyida Zaynab and its "Great Night" (*al-layla al-kabīra*) is always held on the Sunday preced-

⁷ See Baedeker 1898:27, 75. For an account of the trip to Giza by an earlier eye-witness, see Lane 2000:160.

ing the *layla kabīra* of Sayyida Zaynab's *mūlid* which falls regularly on the Tuesday nearest to the middle of the month of Raġab. The significance of the event is further enhanced by the procession (*zaffā*) which starts at Sayyida Zaynab's Mosque (the procession of ar-Rifā'ī's *mūlid* also takes its starting point from here) where the head of the Rifā'ī order for the Sayyida Zaynab branch performs the afternoon prayer (*‘asr*), then rides on a horse to the *maqām* inside of which benedictions are recited on the Prophet. After this, a *dīker* session starts in a tent pitched at the *maqām* and lasts until late night to celebrate Abū Riš (frequently referred to as *Ṣāhib al-Farah*, "the owner of the wedding feast") to the tunes of Šūfī music and chanting. (See the text of an invitation to the *mūlid*, Appendices 1 & 2.)

Concluding the review of reports on Abū Riš we cannot omit the reference to a moving short story by Yūsuf as-Sibā'ī (1987:9-18). It is about a man who became the servant of the *maqām* almost against his will but finally found the purpose of his life in alleviating the sorrow and the grief of the needy by entertaining them with a puppet-show inside the shrine.

3. As a sign of the elusive personality of Abū Riš we have to mention another Rifā'ī saint called also Sīdī Muḥammad known as Abū Riš who lived in Rašid. The city has a mosque (dated to the 18th century) named after him and a city gate also bears the name Bawwābat Abū Riš (‘Inānī 1987:185, 200f). My informant (a university graduate in his forties working at the city council) related the following opinions about the Abū Riš of Rašid who remained unknown for both Goldziher and Hartmann:

- he came to Egypt with the Companions like his Cairene namesake,
- he worked as a tax collector in Ottoman times and used to stick feathers used for writing into his turban and that is how he received his nickname,
- he was a dervish in Ottoman times who stuck feathers into his turban to make himself look taller,
- he was well-known for his care shown towards children,
- he has not his own feast because it is celebrated during the Prophet's Birthday.

A third Abū Riš, and again a Rifā'ī but a more concrete person than the first two, is the one from Damanhūr⁸ mentioned in Hartmann's letter. He was called ‘Aṭīyya and earned the nickname Abū Riš since he had an allergy from wool and because of this he stuffed his pillow and blanket with feathers.

These explanations seem to contain a kind of popular reasoning but we shall try to show that the origin of the appellation can rather be attributed to a single cause, the proliferation of a basic motif closely connected to the notion of children.

⁸ In Hanisch' edition Damanhūr was misread as "Damaskus" (Hanisch 2000:91). For ‘Aṭīyya, see Māhir 1972:285-288.

4. In relation to the name Abū Rīš, Goldziher could have heard about a popular custom which has been practised to protect small children from early death. It was first described by an Egyptian doctor, ʿAbdarrahmān Effendi Ismāʿīl in his *Tibb ar-Rukka* published in Cairo in 1892-94. The English translation of the work by John Walker renders the relevant passage like this:

“THE FATHER OF FEATHERS” (ABŪ RĪSH)

“Oh Father of Feathers, please God, you will live.”

(*Yā Abū rīsh in shāllāh taʿīsh*)

“The sorceress bids her [the mother] dress the child, who she fears will die, in a great peaked cap [*tartūr*], decorated with feathers from a goose or common hen or turkey, and to gird it with a black shawl, and thereafter set it on a black she-ass, with its back to the front. Then the boys and girls of the village, or city, gather around him, and call out with one voice, ‘Oh Father of Feathers’. They go around the village in this way three times, or even four to make it sure” (Walker 1934:48).

The ritual – a common everyday event until not long ago – has not attracted too much attention from researchers. ʿAbdalmunʿim Šamīs gives a similar description of the custom (called as *raqwat al-wahīd*, “the incantation of the single”) but adds that before the procession starts and after it, a Sheikha incenses the child (who has reached the age of five) seven times in the house while she recites the *Basmala* over his head seven times⁹.

Another modern author describes the rite on the basis of a book published in 1894¹⁰. In this version the husband advises his wife to “expose” the child (*ġarrisī hādā ṣ-ṣaġīr*). To fulfil this, they dye the child’s face with minium and put a head-dress (*tartūr*) made from green and red paper and decorated with chicken feathers on his head. Then the child is mounted on a donkey in a reversed position with his face to its tail and is led around in the neighbourhood accompanied by the chanting children. The procedure is supposed to take place in the hottest hour of the day (*az-zuhr al-aḥmar*).

The author refers to a custom of the *ġāhiliyya* according to which a person bitten by a poisonous animal was also mounted on a donkey in a similar position. As an explanation he accepts the idea that this reversed position makes the affliction move from the patient to the animal (al-Basyūnī 1993:218).

To complete the different elements in the description of the whole ritual we can add some other details collected from different informants:

⁹ Šamīs 1970:48. ʿAbdalḥamīd Ḥawāṣṣ termed the rite as a kind of *tahwīta*, “encircling” (somebody for the sake of protection). (Oral communication.)

¹⁰ al-Basyūnī 1993:217f. The author refers also to other rites practised by women in the Arab world to guarantee the survival of their future children.

APPENDIX 3

S
G
N
T

yā būr - riš

S
G
N
T

yā būr - riš šal - lah tik-bar šal-lah ta - riš

yā būr - riš yā būr - riš

S
G
N
T

yā būr - riš yā būr - riš šal - lah tik - bar

šal-lah tik-bar šal - lah ta - riš

S tib-qa'a-ris

G yā būr - riš yā būr - riš šal-lah tik - bar tib-qa'a-ris

N

T

S yā būr-riš yā būr - riš šal-lah tik - bar šal - lah ta - 'iš

G yā būr - riš

N

T

S

G yā būr - riš šal - lah tik - bar tib-qa'a-ris

N

T

The Preparation

The mother goes to consult a sheikh (called *‘arrāf*, “wise man” or *munağğim*, “astrologer”) to seek advice from him. She is supposed to leave her shawl (*mandīl*) with the sheikh as an *atr*, a magical material. Next morning he may order the woman to slaughter a brown chicken or a red cock, then to eat a part of it and distribute the rest. Afterwards she has to use the feathers of the animal to make a crown from them for her son. (Oral communication from Muḥammad ‘Umrān who collected it in the region of Rašīd.)

The Time

The preferred time to perform the ritual is Friday, after the main prayer in the afternoon. (Oral communication from an informant in Rašīd.)

The Child

He is dressed in a dirty, ragged garment, *ğallābiyya*. His face is smeared with a substance, e.g. a black material or flour. A girl can also take the place of the boy. (The opinion of only one informant.)

The Aim

- To make the figure disgusting (*tašwīh*) and repellent for the evil eye.
- To make the figure and the whole scene look ridiculous to incite the laughter of onlookers for the sake of neutralising the evil intentions.

Mounting the Donkey

If the child is too young to ride the donkey alone, a sheikh decorated with the feather crown may also mount the animal taking the child on his lap. The child dressed also with the crown may hold a *qirṣ ғilla* (a circular, loaf-like disk made by peasants from animal dung and straw and used as fuel) into which feathers are fastened.

Variants of the Songs to Abū Riš

(۲)	(۱)
يا بو الريش ان شالله تعيش وتجيب لامك قدحين ديش (وتجيب لامك شلقين حشيش)	يا بو الريش يا بو الريش شله تكبر شله تعيش يا بو الريش يا بو الريش شله تكبر تبقى عريس يا بو الريش يا بو الريش شله تكبر شله تعيش

yā būr-rī - š in šal -la t - 'iš

(٤)

يا بو الريش ان شالله تعيش
تاكل وتشرب ونديك البقشيش

(٣)

يا بو الريش
ان شالله تعيش
ابن اربعة ربعوه
وان ما قعدش كسحوه



Translation:

1.

O Abū Rīš,
O Abū Rīš, God willing, you grow up, God willing, you live
O Abū Rīš, O Abū Rīš, God willing, you grow up,
you will be bridegroom,
O Abū Rīš, O Abū Rīš, God willing, you grow up, God willing, you live
(From Tiberiu Alexandru's *Anthology* 1967, Ġarbiyya Governorate, see Appendix
3; Transcription: M. Tóth, Text: R. Berzsák, Cairo, 1994)

2.

O Abū Rīš,
God willing you live
and you give your mother two measures of *dišš* (a dish made of mashed or
pounded bean or grain)
(and you give your mother two bundles of grass *i.e.* clover)
(Muḥammad 'Umrān & Sāmiya Diyāb, 1994, Buḥayra Governorate)

3.

O Abū Rīš
God willing you live,
Son of four [*i.e.* 2 feet + 2 hands], make him sit cross-legged
and if he does not sit [like this], make him crippled.
(Muḥammad 'Umrān, 1994, Ġarbiyya Governorate)

4.

O Abū Riš,
 God willing, you live,
 you eat and drink and we give you baqšiš.
 (Ḥasan Šāliḥ, Cairo, 1994)

“Offerings” Mentioned in the Songs

- *dišiš*
- grass (clover)
- money (baqšiš)
- *qirṣ ḡilla* (not mentioned but practically “offered” by the boy holding it in his hands)

As a variant for *dišiš*, the expression *kaḥk wa-qarāqīš* (“cookies” prepared for feasts and “dry biscuit”) may also occur as informants told me.

5. If we want to interpret the whole rite we can state that from the anthropological aspect and in view of its aim, it can be compared to the rain prayer rituals (*istisqā'*) similarly to them, it is performed occasionally and the main idea underlying the procedure is to express the hope of the community (or in our case, of an individual) that affliction (the repeated deaths of the newborn boys) will be turned into the opposite¹¹. In other words, it is meant to divine the positive change after misfortunes. This expectation is supposed to be expressed symbolically by seating the child on the donkey with his back turned to its head and dressing him his garment in a reversed way, with his right arm in the left sleeve and with his left in the right sleeve.

The reversal of the dress can be traced back to pre-Islamic times. It constituted an essential part of the rain prayer rituals (*istisqā'*) practised by the Prophet himself as different traditions relate it¹². According to these, he reversed his garment by changing the sleeves while praying for rain and those present followed suit. A *ḥadīth* claims that Muḥammad performed the reversal because he considered it as a good omen (*tafā'ulan*) which was supposed to indicate the change for the opposite in the momentary state of affairs. It is also mentioned that he wore a black cloak during the rogational prayer for rain. This act of reversal does not necessarily mean the changing of the sleeves since a 19th century report mentions that participants in an *istisqā'* ceremony in Tunis turned their burnouses inside out (Wellhausen 1928:197).

This idea of transition from one state to another (the opposite) is further confirmed by rites in which the practitioner (a woman wishing to become pregnant) performs a symbolical “crossing”: she is expected to step over an ancient Egyptian amulet, a bone (Blackman 2000:97f) or simply to cross the Nile (Ammar 1998:88).

¹¹ For the interpretation of the *istisqā'* as a rite of reversal, see Abu-Zahra 1997:4ff, 9, 16, 25, 32, 71ff.

¹² In addition to Abu-Zahra 1997:16f, see also Goldziher 1906:40 and al-Qaṣṭallānī, *Irsād* II, 238f.

6. No matter how much this approach may seem acceptable and convincing, the examination of the composing elements of the ritual as characteristic parts of a complete magical procedure together with references to the historical parallels for the sake of comparison cannot be dispensed with.

First of all, the prelude to the whole performance, according to which the unfortunate mother whose babies die after one another is supposed to go to see a "specialist" who is reputed to be involved in magical activities or dealing with spirits, is a typical element in Arabic magic in Egypt, at least on the "popular" level. It is intended to find the diagnosis given (or rather "divined") by the magician after a dream vision received with the help of the magical material (*atr*) left with him or her. This element is completely missing from the written or printed magical handbooks which contain the working copies of magical recipes and as such, can rightly be characterised as the representatives of "scientific" or "official" magic.

Performers of the ritual wish to ridicule misfortune consciously as the term "exposure" (*tağrīs*) suggests it. The scene of the Abū Rīš procession itself with the boy dressed in a dirty *ğallābiyya* and riding a donkey, reminds us of other, more "solemn" processions like the one organised on the occasion of a boy's circumcision when the boy clad in his best clothes rides a horse. The best parallel, however, is offered by the procession (*zaffa*) on the Great Night (*al-layla al-kabīra*) of a saint's *mūlid* when the head of the local branch of a Šūfī order (or his representative), beautifully attired and sometimes accompanied by a small boy, rides a horse (which is occasionally white as in the case of ar-Rifā'ī's *mūlid*)¹³.

The "counter-procession" character of the Abū Rīš ritual is emphasised by changing the robe into a ragged *ğallābiyya* and the (white) horse into a (black) she-ass. The reversal of the boy's *ğallābiyya* fits well into the concept of the "counter-procession" and from the anthropologists' point of view may symbolize the hope in the change of things into the better, but basically it is a magical act. Similar prescriptions occur also in Arabic magical recipes (aṭ-Ṭūhī, *Siḥr* 18, 66, 147). An informant (Yaḥyā, an attendant over 60 in the Folklore Studies Centre in Cairo) claimed that the reversed dress is thought to cast back the glance of the evil eye to its owner. My informant in Rašīd also stressed that seating the child in a reversed position served to ward off the envy of the evil eye.

¹³ McPherson 1998:111, 313; Abu-Zahra 1997:217. To show the importance of a reversed act as a marked sign of ridiculousness it is worth mentioning that in medieval Europe and even in later times anti-Jewish propaganda frequently represented Jews as riding backwards on a sow (Schachar 1974: Pls. 30, 41abc, 56a).

As another kind of “counter-procession” we can also refer to a custom in medieval Egypt where it was a common form of punishment for criminals to be paraded through the streets of the town¹⁴.

Turning to the examination of other elements in the procedure in the light of a historical background, the blackness of the donkey, in addition to its being the opposite of the white colour of the horse ridden in the *mūlid* procession, also deserves to be mentioned since “black” is generally a preferred colour in magical transactions¹⁵.

The child’s face daubed with a material of black or other colour can of course be paralleled with the covering of the boy’s face with a shawl in the procession of the circumcision to protect him from the evil eye¹⁶.

The *qirṣ ḡilla* (dung cake) held by the boy can be interpreted as a “counter” votive offering compared to the usual presents which visitors leave in saints’ shrines. This time, of course, it is not a sign of devotion but serves to emphasise the mocking character of the ritual and to ridicule evil.

This element in the procedure leads us to the exposition of its oral part, the songs with their slightly differing texts. First, in addition to such basic functions of life as eating and drinking, they evoke the most important turning points in human life by referring to the boy’s growing up and becoming bridegroom. In this respect, it is difficult to make a real distinction between the song as an expression of their hope in the survival of the boy or his future brothers, and the song as a rather archaic magical incantation which aims at keeping the patient alive by enumerating the characteristic signs of life. In an act which is definitely of magical colouring, *dišiš*, cookies, dry biscuit, clover and money are promised as votive offerings to propitiate malevolent forces conceived of as the evil eye. The mocking character comes also to the fore in the version in which the boy is “menaced” by being made crippled if he does not remain seated. The melodies of the songs are very simple and archaic as dr. Margit Tóth was kind enough to inform me – a fact which is also relevant for our investigation because it indicates the antiquity of the ritual itself.

Neither is the prescription to fumigate incense before and after the procession missing from the procedure. It can be considered in itself as a kind of offering and a permanent element in all magical recipes.

¹⁴ ʿĀšūr 1992:110. I owe this reference to Qāsim ʿAbduh Qāsim.

¹⁵ See e.g. Amīn 1953:57-60.

¹⁶ Lane 1963:58f. In an interesting conformity with the notion of the rite of reversal, Lang interpreted the cleansing of the initiate’s body plastered over with clay or filth in the initiation ceremony as the symbolic sign of a new and purified state (Lang 1995: I, 274ff).

Having reviewed all the constituting elements of the ritual, we may certainly state that the recitation of the *Basmala* over the boy is the only visible Islamic feature in the ceremony which alone was meant to Islamize it in a very superficial way.

7. Unfortunately we do not know of any existing photos taken of the Abū Rīš procession, at least I have never seen one. This is, however, completely understandable since all my informants have agreed that they had seen the event for the last time 30-40 years before. This unanimous statement can, of course, be explained by the fact that roughly from that time on the large scale use of modern methods in sanitation has produced a dramatic drop in infant mortality rates, but on the other hand it has created the probably biggest ever problem facing Egypt: the demographic explosion. Suffice it to cite here only one fact about the high mortality in 19th century Egypt¹⁷: almost half the children died under the age of five. Even in the forties of the 20th century nearly 30 percent of them did not live to reach this age (Ammar 1998:112f).

In recent decades, thanks to the blessings of modern health care, women have not felt obliged to have recourse to magical practices to ensure that their children stay alive since the basic causes of high mortality have disappeared for good. As a once popular feast we may also mention the "Night of the Drop", *Laylat an-Nuqta* which marked the beginning of the inundation of the Nile but went into oblivion with the building of the High Dam. Not surprisingly, however, other traditional and ancient customs have survived, so e.g. concern about male potency or female fertility and related rites have remained as important as ever.

To present some graphic illustration of Abū Rīš we have been fortunate enough to come across figurative representations which can presumably be connected to the figure which incarnated the protagonist of the Abū Rīš ritual.

Prof. Giovanni Canova has most helpfully provided me with a picture (Photo 2) which he had taken in Abū I-Ġūd (Luxor) in 1978: it shows a woman (aged about 45) holding her baby clad in a frock with a hood into which feathers were stuck. The mother explained to Prof. Canova that in case a visitor comes to see them, his glance is expected to fall on the feathers, so the child will be protected against a potentially evil eye¹⁸. (Finally the woman donated the frock to Prof. Canova's wife to use it for the sons to be born in the future.)

A second relic was acquired by myself in Aswān in 1999 (Photo 3). It is a puppet in the form of a flat, manlike figure of two dimensions sewn together from pieces of leather (71 x 45cm) with five feathers (one was actually missing) stuck into the head.

¹⁷ Tucker 1985:115ff. Smallpox, cholera, measles, diphtheria and gastroenteritis were the most dangerous maladies.

¹⁸ Blackman (2000:77) gives an account of the same custom and publishes a photo of this special hooded frock (Fig. 35).

The colour of the leather is dark brown, almost black similarly to the feathers which have been blackened with some material, probably soot – a fact which may allude to an activity performed during the night. The figure is decorated with cowrie shells (the eyes and the mouth are indicated by three shells), beads and coins. Three cowrie shells are hanging underneath as pendants. This stylised cruciform figure with its arms opened wide is reminiscent of the characteristic *figurae magicae* in the magical books. The merchant in the bazaar informed me that such a puppet was supposed to be hung in the room of a woman in childbed for protection against the evil eye. Accordingly, the leather figure with measurements resembling those of a real one year old child partly plays the role of a substitute attracting the inimical influences but at the same time it is thought to act independently by making these forces (particularly the evil eye) harmless.

All these pieces of information point to the conclusion that no matter how much the real personalities of the different saints hiding behind the name Abū Riš can be historically perceived, they share this common name because they have most probably gone through the Abū Riš ritual in their childhood and kept the appellation – a synonym for children – after they became endowed with sainthood, *walāya*. (Actually, this was the opinion of one of my informants, Yaḥyā, the attendant in the Folklore Studies Centre in Cairo.)

8. If we try to follow Goldziher's supposed way of research an effort should be made to identify the ancient Egyptian deity who might probably be hiding behind the figure of Abū Riš. Starting from the physical characteristics of its representations and their prophylactic uses to protect children we must think of the god Bes, one of the most popular Egyptian deities in late antiquity¹⁹. He was usually represented as a small, dwarf-like figure with projecting ears, wearing a crown of five feathers, and sometimes holding a knife in his hand. With the course of time he was transformed into a pantheistic deity represented with several pairs of wings. In most cases he appeared naked but in the later period he occasionally wore a tunic looking like a Roman general²⁰. Due to his grotesque but also fearful appearance which could neutralize evil forces either by ridiculing or frightening them he came to be regarded as the main protector of defenceless people like women in labour, children or anybody who was asleep. This is why his representations are frequent in places of delivery or sleeping rooms. Black colour might have been associated with him because of this nightly activity. He was also connected to music, dancing and singing. (Making a

¹⁹ Hanisch (2000:84, n. 1) suggests the identification of Abū Riš with the god Onuris without any explanation. On Bes in general, see e.g. *LÄ* 1972-76: I, 721-724, s.v. "Bes". For his iconography, see *LIMC* 1986: III/1.98-114 and III/2.74-92, s.v. "Bes" and "Besit". For the winged pantheistic deity, see e.g. Hopfner 1974:511-522, §§ 806f; Philipp 1986: Nos. 176-179; Malaise 1990:717f; Zwierlein-Diehl 1992:18-23, Tafeln 24, 25, 28.

²⁰ See e.g. *LIMC* 1986: III/2, Fig. Bes 38n.

great noise is in itself an efficient prophylactic against demons.) As Ammianus Marcellinus reports, his role as an oracle was well-known in the 4th century AD²¹. The popular character of his cult, devoid of the formalities of the cult of the well-known gods, can best be compared to the devotion shown towards Christian saints (Dunand 1984:25) and going a step further, we may certainly include their Muslim counterparts into this circle of comparison.

The crown of feathers as one of his major insignia characterised also his wife and his son. An interesting representation shows the child sitting with a school-mate while the teacher and another figure (Bes, the philosopher) are shown standing, all of them wearing a crown of feathers (*LIMC* 1986: III/2, Fig. Bes 76). A statue presents Bes with a child seated on his shoulder in the same way as Egyptian women carry their children until this day (Hall 1929: Plate 1). An even more illuminating figure (*LIMC* 1986: III/2, Fig. Besit 15) represents Bes's wife holding two children, one of them clothed in a hooded cloak which is perfectly resembling the one worn by the woman's baby in modern Luxor on Photo 2 mentioned above. The popularity of such a deity is completely understandable in a country where people have always been proverbially fond of children (Perdrizet 1921: I, xviff; Blackman 2000:61, 97).

These representations suggest that children seeking protection united themselves with Bes, their main guardian by taking symbolically his form of appearance. This effort is a well-known feature of magical procedures²².

9. At the first sight, it may seem difficult to bridge the gap which separates Bes and Abū Rīš in time but we have some evidence which can help to surmount this problem. First, an aspect of Bes survived paganism to become a demon who frightened pious Christians (Kákosy 1966:191ff) and Muslims also thought that his statue represented a demon²³. As late as the end of the 19th century, local people in Karnak used to know about a Bes-like evil spirit which haunted the ruins of the ancient temple (Maspero 1914:207). An informant (a graduate of the University of al-Minyā) even told me that parents discipline their disobedient children by menacing them with a wicked man called Abū Rīš who will take them away or snatch their toys.

Secondly, the abundant Arabic magical literature which is closely related to the Greek Magical Papyri of the first centuries AD in both spirit and text²⁴ offers the proof for the possible survival of Bes's other aspect. It must be Bes, the oracle who

²¹ See, e.g. Perdrizet 1919:xix; Puech 1930:422; Dunand 1973: I, 140; DuQuesne 1991:23f. n. 46 with further literature on Bes.

²² See e.g. Puech 1930:416; Goodenough 1953: II, 185.

²³ Winkler 1936:10 (cited by Kákosy 1966:191, n. 29). For the popularity of the figures of the pantheistic deity in Europe, see Stricker 1943.

²⁴ For their relationship, see Fodor 1994 and 1996.

is invoked in a prescription which shows the crude drawing of a small winged figure with projecting ears and wearing a crown. Its rectangular forms, similarly to the shape of other usual *figurae magicae* are reminiscent of the Roman tunic or the dress worn in Coptic Egypt.

This interesting passage can be found in a magical book compiled by at-Ṭūhī (*Hi-dāya* 68-78), the most famous and most prolific modern Egyptian author of magical works. at-Ṭūhī says that he wrote his book from a treatise written by the Sage DRMGŠ on the secrets of the letters and it was dated to the year 1285 AH (1868-69 AD). At first, the text speaks about the creation of twelve servant spirits (literally “assistants”, *awns* or “kings”, *maliks*) using the numerical values of the letters in different names. Then the practitioner is instructed to make the winged magical figure (*šaḥbād*) whose body is composed of a 3 by 3 magical square. This *figura magica* is supposed to be a depository for the magically active names of the spirits. Through the permutation of the numerical values of the names in the square, a further talisman (*tilasm*) – presumably another magical name – should be created and written on the two sides of a spear (*ḥarba*)²⁵.

After this introduction the description of the procedure reads like this:

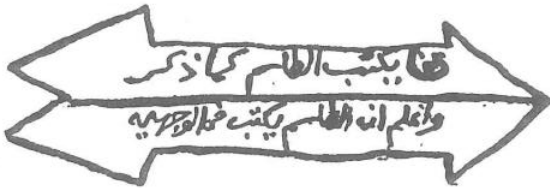
(وأما شروط التلاوة) فهي أن تأخذ لك موضعا نظيفا جدا خالي من الناس وتكون مستحضرا على قطعة من القماش الأبيض بقدر ما يحيطك وتكتب عليها آية الكرسي عددا ٣ مرات على عدد ٣ صفوف وتضرب هذا المنديل حولك ومتوجه إلى جهة الشرق واجعل أمامك سببه من عيدان الرمان هذا وأنت راسم الطابع المذكور في لوح من الفضة الخالصة المطلية بالذهب وترسمه أيضا على رق غزال بالمسك والزعفران وماء الورد وتعلق الرق في فتله من الحرير الأخضر والطابع الفضة من فوقه والحربة المرسوم عليها الطلسم فوق الجميع ثم اسرج قنديلين أحدهما على يمينك والآخر على يسارك داخل المنديل المضروب حولك وتضع الشعبان والطابع والحربة إلى جهة يمينك والجمرة إلى جهة يسارك وبخر بعود مربى بالمسك مع الكندر هذا وأنت صائم سبعة أيام بشروط الرياضة وأنت تتلو أسماء الملائكة على حسب الطريقة السالفة الذكر بعدد الحاكم على الجميع وهو الملك الثاني عشر وأنت تشاور بيدك إلى جهة الشعبان والطابع والحربة فيتصور لك الملك أو العون الذي طلبت خدمته لك في أحسن منظر وليس فيه خوف ولا فزع فاحفظ أيها الطالب قدر ما وصل إليك من هذه الأسرار التي لا توجد في أي سفر من الأسفار وكن بها أيها الطالب ضنينا وعليها حريصا حفظ الروح في الجسد.

²⁵ As a matter of fact, a very similar figure in *PGM VIII*, 105-110 is described as a “sword” held by Bes in his right hand (Betz 1986:147f).

وهذه صورة الشعبان المشار إليه



وهذه صورة الحربة التي تكتب عليها الطلسم من الوجهين كما ترى



In translation:

“(As for the conditions of the recitation) they are as follows: you should choose a very pure place for yourself which should be abandoned by people. You should place yourself on a piece of white linen so that it could cover you. You should write the Throne Verse [Q 2,255] on it 3 times in 3 lines and you should pitch this *mandal* around yourself facing the direction of the East. Place a tripod made from the branches of a pomegranate tree in front of you. Then you should draw the above-mentioned seal on a lamella of pure silver plated with gold. You should also draw it on parchment with musk, saffron and rose-water. You should hang the parchment [on the tripod] with a thread of green silk. A silver seal should be [placed] above it and the spear with the talisman drawn upon it should be above the whole. Then light two lamps, one of them should be on your right and the other on your left, inside

the *mandal* pitched around yourself. You should place the magical figure (*šā' bād*), the seal and the spear to the direction of your right and the censer to the direction of your left. Fumigate with aloes-wood mixed with musk together with hemp. Furthermore, you should be fasting for seven days according the conditions of the ascetic discipline (*riyāda*) and you should recite the names of the angels in accordance with the above-mentioned method and corresponding to the numerical value of the ruler over them, *i.e.* the twelfth king. In the meantime you should point with your hand into the direction of the magical figure (*šā' bād*), the seal and the spear. Then the king or the assistant whose service you have requested for yourself will appear to you in the most beautiful shape and there will be nothing in him [that causes] fear or fright. Preserve, o seeker [of knowledge], as far as possible everything that has reached you from these secrets which cannot be found in any other book and keep them away [from the uninitiated] o seeker and guard them as the soul is preserved in the body.

And this is the figure of the above-mentioned magical figure (*šā' bād*).

And this is the figure of the spear on which you should write the talisman (*tilasm*) on its both sides as you see."

The procedure seemingly aims to bring about an encounter with a spirit whose assistance is requested for the petitioner. It is also evident that the magical figure as the supposedly potential form of manifestation for the adjured demon is a basic element. The presence of the lamps may indicate that the ritual was supposed to take place during the night and its primary purpose was to get an oracular answer²⁶.

10. Parallels to the instructions of this magical recipe which is absolutely non-Islamic in its character apart from the reference to the Throne Verse and the use of the 3 by 3 magical square are offered by the Greek Magical Papyri²⁷. In *PGM VIII*. 64-110 which contains a request for a dream oracle of Besa the practitioner is ordered to draw the magical figure of Besa (that is Bes) in a form similar to the drawing of the Arabic text (Betz 1986:147f). In another spell for sending dreams (*PGM XII*. 121-43), a figure should be drawn on a clean linen cloth "which is manlike in appearance but has four wings, having the left arm outstretched along with the two left wings...". The other characteristics reveal that the deity is Bes-Pantheos in his usual outward form. The practitioner is further advised to take a lamp and light it when invoking the god with the help of his different magical names (Betz 1986:157f). The presence of the figure of the dwarf god seems to be also essential in a love spell as *PGM XXXIX*. 1-21 attests to it (Betz 1986:279).

As for the general setting of the Arabic recipe the so called "Eighth Book of Moses" in *PGM XIII* offers the most interesting material for comparison. Its main

²⁶ Recipes for lamp or bowl divination could be very similar since both of them contained oil used in divinatory procedures (Cunen 1960:65f).

²⁷ For their translation, see Betz 1986.

aim is to invoke the supreme deity for divinatory purposes. The passages which contain the relevant parts in the description of the procedure and its requisites are the following:

PGM XIII. 1-130: [The preparations]: "Remain pure 41 days.... Have a house on ground level, in which no one died during the past year. The door should face west. Now set up in the middle of the house an earthen altar and have ready cypress wood, ten pine cones full of seed, two white roosters uninjured and without blemish, and two lamps... Have the table prepared with these following kinds of incense... Next, for the all-important meeting, have a square of natron on which you will write the great name... .. draw on the first part of the natron a falcon-faced crocodile... a snake biting its tail" (Betz 1986:172f). [After invoking the deity]: "Have a tablet in which you will write what he says to you and a two-edged knife, all of iron, so that clean from all [impurities], you may kill the sacrifices, and a libation (a jug of wine and a flask full of honey) that you may pour. Have all these ready nearby you. And you be in clean linens, crowned with an olive wreath. Prepare the canopy thus: taking a clean sheet, write on the border [the names of] the 365 gods, and make it a tent under which you go to be initiated.... And have also the Apollo who will help you, carved from a root of laurel, with tripod standing beside him... Carve around the Apollo the great name... Accordingly, as I said before, when you have purified yourself in advance /through the last/ seven days while the moon is waning..." (Betz 1986:174f).

A second version of the ritual contains also this order (*PGM XIII*. 564-67): "When the god comes in, look down and write the things said and whatever name he may give you for himself. And do not go out from under your canopy until he also tells you the things that concern you" (Betz 1986:186).

The third version gives the following warning familiar from the Arabic text (*PGM XIII*. 740-43): "I have also set out for you the oath that precedes each book, since, when you have learned the power of the book, you are to keep it secret..." (Betz 1986:189).

If we compare the appropriate components of the two different sources the manifest correspondences cannot be considered as fortuitous and they certainly testify to a textual continuity in the magical literature of Greco-Roman and Arabic Egypt.

11. Finally, returning to the relationship between Bes and Abū Rīš we must say that a third and perhaps the most important aspect of Bes, his duty of protecting children seems to be concealed in the rites connected to Abū Rīš. As we have seen, the proliferation of the personality of Bes by allowing every child to become himself a Bes may offer a clue for the interpretation of our Abū Rīš figure which behaves and exerts its influence through the same mechanism as the ancient deity. In a perfect harmony with the activity of Bes, later Muslim saints wearing the name Abū Rīš

practically played the role of the Egyptian god when they performed one of their major functions, the protection of children, each of them nicknamed Abū Riš²⁸.

On the other hand, the evidence advanced so far may imply that the Arabic rites can also shed light on Bes. Though there is abundant archaeological material about the popularity of Bes in Greco-Roman Egypt, it does not really disclose the process through which his protection for children was requested or how it was supposed to work. Knowing, however, that such acts as fumigation, presenting offerings (like food) and singing were practically indispensable in the magical practice of ancient Egypt we may even say that the character of the Abū Riš ritual has probably preserved something from the "living" side of a similar ceremony centred upon the god Bes of late antiquity.

This is also to say that no matter how great political changes the Arabic conquest of Egypt might have brought about, some aspects of life like the position of children in society, people's attitude to them, the fear from the danger of their being exposed to premature death (at least until recently) have not changed too much. In other words, the idea of the *residua*, the survivals of ancient religions, one of the favourite guiding principles for Goldziher and his contemporaries in their researches cannot necessarily be dismissed as a reflection of dead and meaningless features. On the contrary, it should rather be treated as part of a working hypothesis which – if supported by anthropological evidence – may have relevance in shedding light on present day and one-time social or religious phenomena.

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²⁸ In connection with the child protecting Bes it is worth mentioning that an intriguing hypothesis was put forward by Barb who, dealing with the Greek Medusa figure, seemed to be in favour of its derivation from the wide-spread representations of Bes. On the other hand, using the theories of famous psychoanalysts (Ferenczi and Freud) he suggested that the Medusa mask could be the emblem of the Primeval Womb, the *Diva Matrix* (Barb 1953:209). This idea could also be introduced into the interpretation of the Arabic Abū Riš whose ritual can ultimately be considered as a means to protect the maternal womb.

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APPENDIX 1

Invitation to attend the Mūlid of Abū Rīṣ

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
 في يوم الجمعة ٢٥ رجب ١٤٢٢ هـ الموافق ١٤
 أكتوبر ٢٠٠١ م

الحمد لله رب العالمين والصلاة والسلام على اشرف الأنبياء والمرسلين سيدنا ومولانا محمد
 النبي الأمي وعلى اله وصحبه اجمعين
 حضرة الفاضل

يتشرف محمد فرحات احمد خادم الضريح بدعوتكم في إحياء

مولد

سيدي محمد السد الشهير بأبو الريش

﴿رضى الله عنه﴾

بتلاوة آي الذكر الحكيم وسماع القصة النبوية الشريفة وإقامة شعائر الدين الحنيف كما جرت

العادة من قديم الزمان على أن يكون ابتداء المولد يوم الجمعة ٢٥ رجب ١٤٢٢ هـ الموافق

١٢ أكتوبر ٢٠٠١ م وستكون الليلة الختامية في مساء الأحد ٢٧ رجب ١٤٢٢ هـ الموافق ١٤

أكتوبر ٢٠٠١ م والموكب والتجمع كالمعتاد سنويا فالأمل حضوركم وجميع الأخوان بالأعلام

في تمام الساعة ٤ مساء التجمع بالسير بالموكب

والله الموفق لما فيه الخير والصلاح العود احمداً.

وكل عام وفضيلتكم بخير،،،

خادم الضريح الداعي

محمد فرحات احمد

APPENDIX 2

Translation of the Invitation

“In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful!

Praise be to God, Lord of the Human Beings! Blessing and Peace be on the Noblest of the Prophets and Messengers, our Master and Protector, Muḥammad, the Illiterate Prophet and on His Family and on all of His Companions!

The Distinguished Mr.

Muḥammad Farḥāt Aḥmad, the Servant of the Shrine has the honour to invite you to revive the

Mūlid
of

Sīdī Muḥammad as-Sadd known as Abū r-Rīš
(May God be pleased with him!)

By reciting the verses of the Wise Dikr, listening to the Noble Prophetic Story and performing the rites of the True Religion as has been customary from old times on the condition that the beginning of the Mūlid should be on Friday, 25 Raḡab 1422 AH corresponding to 14 October 2001 AD and the procession and the gathering should be as usual annually. It is hoped that you and all the notified brethren will be present at 4 o'clock sharp on the evening of the gathering to take part in the procession.

God is giving success to that in which there is blessing and piety perpetually. Repeating /the attendance/ is most laudable.

Wishing you all the best,

The Servant of the Shrine, the Inviter
Muḥammad Farḥāt Aḥmad”

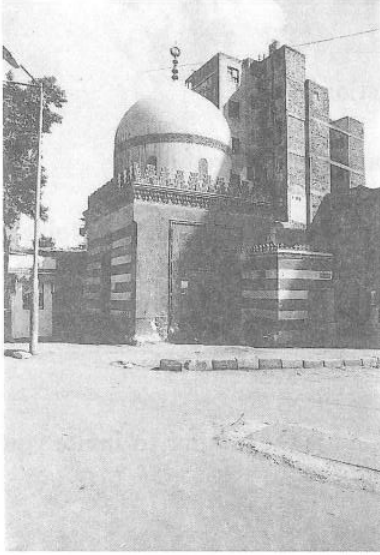


Photo 1



Photo 3



Photo 2