

SURVIVAL OF AN OLD LITERARY GENRE: AL-BAĠDĀDĪ'S ACCOUNT OF HIS JOURNEY TO BRAZIL

István Ormos

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

The work *Musalliyat al-ġarīb* (The Stranger's Entertaining Story of Oddities)¹ by ʿAbdarrahmān al-Baġdādī exists in a unique manuscript belonging to the German State Library in Berlin². The manuscript was first mentioned by G. Hazai and the present writer³; the work itself is an account of his journey to Brazil in 1865.

Little is known about the author. His autograph *dīwān*, composed during a visit to India in 1293-94/1876-77, found its way from the private library of aš-Šayḥ Amīn al-Madanī at Medina into the University Library at Leiden⁴. He may have moved to Medina prior to his visit to

¹ In the English translation of the title, account has been taken of the two meanings of the word *ġarīb*, both of which are relevant in the present context: 1/ *extraordinary, wondrous, marvellous*; the description of the *wonders of the world* (*ʿaġāʾib, ġarāʾib*) is the subject of many a geographical work in Islam; 2/ *stranger, foreigner, one far from his home or native country*; this is triply true of our author, who was a stranger in Brazil, and having been born in Baghdad, he was a stranger both in Damascus and Constantinople. Both meanings of the word occur in the text, and the title is explained along these lines, too. (The device of a word occurring in two different meanings simultaneously in a text is called *tawriya* in Arab rhetoric; see August Ferdinand Mehren, *Die Rhetorik der Araber*, Copenhagen-Vienna 1853, p. 133.) The female participle may refer to the words *risāla, hikāya* or *riwāya*.

² Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin - Preussischer Kulturbesitz.

³ Georg Hazai-István Ormos, "Abenteuer eines Irakers in Brasilien". In: *Acta Orientalia Hung.*, 36, 1982, pp. 215-226. See also Georges Hazai, "Aventure d'un arabe iraquien au service de la Marine Ottomane". In: *Revue d'Histoire Maghrebine*, 10, 1983, pp. 219-221.

⁴ See Carlo Landberg, *Catalogue de manuscrits arabes provenant d'une bibliothèque privée à el-Medīna et appartenant à la Maison E. J. Brill*, Leiden 1883, pp. V, 7 (No. 21), [epilogue]; M. J. de Goeje-M. Th. Houtsma, *Catalogus codicum arabicorum Bibliothecae Lugduno-Batavae*, 2nd ed., Vol. I, Leiden 1888, p. 495 (No. DCCLXXVIII., Cod.

India, because in his *dīwān* he styles himself *muhāğir al-Madīna al-Munawwara*. On f.1a of the *dīwān* he is described, in a foreign hand, as *aš-Šayh ‘Abdarrahmān al-Bağdādī nazil al-Madīna al-Munawwara*. He is said to have died at Medina in 1298/1880-1881⁵. He seems to have been a traveller of a certain stature, a late successor of the great Muslim travellers of the Middle Ages. He was born in Baghdad. Then, having spent some time in Damascus (where it seems that he married, because at the end of his journey to Brazil he returned to Damascus to see his family) he moved on to Constantinople. In any event, successfully to have carried out a journey to Brazil and another to India in the second half of the last century was, though not a miracle, yet not an ordinary feat. He seems to have found inner peace in the vicinity of the Prophet at last. His fondness for poetry is attested to not only by the verses with which he adorns his narrative, which is mainly in rhymed prose (*sağ’*), but also by his free use of quotations without explicit reference to their source, quite a widespread practice in Arabic literature.

In 1865 a number of steamers of the Imperial Ottoman Navy were ordered to sail from Istanbul to Basra. Since the Suez Canal was not to open until 1869, this was only possible at the time by circumnavigating Africa. In the Atlantic, however, the ships ran into a storm and were driven off course, landing finally in Brazil instead of Basra. Our author, who was active as an *imām* in the Imperial Ottoman Navy, was on one of the ships. In the present work he first gives an account of all he saw

1756=Amin 21). The present shelf-mark of the MS is Or. 2398 (Ar. 1756); see P. Voorhoeve, *Handlist of Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of the University of Leiden and Other Collections in the Netherlands*, Leiden 1957, p. 62. The present writer is indebted to the staff of the University Library at Leiden for their generosity in supplying him with a microfilm of the MS and allowing him to consult it. See also Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, 2nd supplement volume, Leiden 1938, p. 789 (No. 14). The Leiden MS is probably an autograph: on f.1a we read *Dīwān ‘Abdarrahmān al-Bağdādī nazil al-Madīna al-Munawwara wa-hādihī n-nusha bi-hattihī wa-hiya musawwada*. If we accept this as a fact, then the Berlin MS cannot be an autograph because it seems to stem from a different hand.

⁵ Landberg, l.c.

in Brazil, and subsequently, somewhat more succinctly, relates his impressions of the places he visited on his way back to his home in Damascus. His interest was captivated above all by the black Muslims in Brazil, whose existence itself was a great surprise to him. He was interested above all in their history, their stories, habits, customs and behaviour. It would appear that he mixed directly only with them in the course of his sojourn in Brazil, even staying with them for some time in order to provide them with religious education. This was the reason for his remaining behind when the Ottoman ships set sail for Turkey on their homeward journey, and it was only somewhat later that he left for his home in Damascus, passing through Spain, Tangier, Algiers, Alexandria and Cairo, as well as fulfilling the duty of Pilgrimage *en route*. Everything he writes on the subject of these Muslims is of importance to us, even if his account is not rich in precise details and concrete data, telling us instead more about the author himself and his mentality than about Brazil.

Muslim and Christian Arabs reached the Americas in large numbers in the 2nd half of the 19th c., a result of the *Emigration*, caused by economic, political and religious factors, from the Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and later from Egypt, resulting in the familiar *mahāğir* in North and South America⁶. This was, however, not the first time that Muslims had reached the Americas in large numbers: before this, shiploads of black Muslims from the Sudan (in its broad sense) had been transported to South America as slaves. The modern slave trade from Africa to Portugal started around 1450; the year 1517 is regarded as the official beginning of slave trade to America, and it was around 1570 that Brazil became the destination of large-scale slave traffic. In Brazil slaves were employed first on the sugar cane plantations, then in the gold mines,

⁶ See al-Badawī al-Mulattam (Ya'qūb al-'Awdāt), *an-Nātiqūna bi-d-ḡadā fi Amīrikā al-ğanūbīya*, Beirut 1956, vol. I, pp. 78-115; Nādira Ğamīl Sarrāğ, *Ši'arā' ar-rābita al-ğalamīya. Dirāsāt fi šī'r al-mahğar*, Cairo 1957, pp. 25-66; Philip Khuri Hitti, "Djāliya". In: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, Leiden-London 1960- (henceforth *Et*), Vol. II, col. 403b-404b; 'Abdalkarīm al-Ashtar, "al-Mahđjar". In: *Et*, Vol. V, col. 1253a-1257b.

and later on the coffee plantations. The total number of slaves to reach Brazil in the course of three centuries is usually estimated at between 5 and 18 million. Slavery was abolished in Brazil in 1888⁷.

Many of the slaves transported from Africa to Brazil came from the Sudanese cultural area and were Muslims; they originated from the Sahara and the area between the Sahara and the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa. The Islamization of this area began under the Almoravids in the 11th C., after which Islam spread gradually south towards the Gulf of Guinea. Initially the slave trade from the Sudan went north along the Trans-Saharan route, where salt, weapons and luxury goods were traded for slaves and gold. Later on, however, with the gradual emergence of European merchant colonies and trading settlements (*feitorias* = factories) on the Western coast of Africa and in the Gulf of Guinea in the 15th C., the direction of the slave trade changed gradually, and these settlements on the Western coast of Africa and in the Gulf of Guinea became the new destinations for slave traders. It was through the Gulf of Guinea that Sudanese Muslim slaves reached Brazil, the Portuguese port of Mina playing an important role in this process. The most important ethnic groups represented among them were the Hausa, the Tapa, the Mandingo and the Fulla⁸. They were not Arabs but were

⁷ See Roger Bastide, *Les religions afro-brésiliennes*, Paris 1960, pp. 41-66; id., *Les Amériques noires*, Paris 1967, pp. 11-28; Ernst Gerhard Jacob, *Grundzüge der Geschichte Brasiliens*, Darmstadt 1974, pp. 69-82; Arthur Ramos, *Die Negerkulturen in der Neuen Welt*, transl. Richard Katz, Erlenbach-Zürich n.d., p. 142.

⁸ See Jacob, *Grundzüge...*, p. 71; Ramos, *Die Negerkulturen...*, pp. 147f.; Gilberto Freyre, *Casa-grande e senzala*, 21st ed., Rio de Janeiro 1981, pp. 299-314. An interesting proof for the origin of (at least some of) the Muslims al-Bağdādī met in Brazil is supplied by the word *alfā*, which occurs three times in our text (9b11 *fā* and 10b13 *alfā* twice: the wrong form *fā* is no doubt due to a misinterpretation of the first part of the word as the Arabic article!). In Etienne's interpretation this word was used to denote Muslim theologians ("priests"), and this is the usage attested in our text, too: "Les Alufas sont les théologiens de la secte en question"; see L'abbé Ignace Etienne, "La secte musulmane des Malès du Brésil et leur révolte en 1835". In: *Anthropos* 4, 1909, p. 99. Ramos says it is one of the names of the Muslims in Rio de Janeiro; see Ramos, *Die Negerkulturen...*, p. 170. It is in fact a Fula word of African origin its meaning being "scholar", "educated person", "a per-

Arabized in their culture. According to contemporary sources, as late as the beginning of the 19th C. the level of culture of these Sudanese slaves was much higher than that of the great majority of whites in Brazil: most of the participants in the great Muslim insurrection of 1835 in Bahía could read and write Arabic⁹. They had priests who taught them to read and write; they had Muhammadan schools and prayer-houses. Meanwhile most whites were still illiterate. These well-educated Muslim slaves have since died out, leaving no trace beyond what can be attributed to their influence in popular Christian religiosity, for example amulets and rites for the commemoration of the dead¹⁰. It was these Muslims that ‘Abdarrahmān al-Baġdādī met in 1865. At the time they knew only a few words of Arabic, nothing of reading or writing, and, as our author expressly indicates, as a result of the “war” between Muslims and Christians, by which in all probability he means the 1835 Muslim insurrection of Bahía, they were extremely anxious to hide their true religious affiliation. They knew little of the rites of Islam: our author was horrified to see that they prayed just as they wanted to,

son well-versed in the precepts of religion”, “master”, but it also means a certain rank and is used as an honorific title before names, too. See Semyon Yakovlevič Kozlov, *Ful’be Futa-Džallona. Očerki etničeskoj, političeskoj i social’noj istorii*, Moscow 1976, p. 15; Tirmiziou Diallo, *Der theokratische Fulbe-Staat ‘Futa-Jaloo’. Beitrag zur Theorie der Staatenbildung in Westafrika des 17. bis 19. Jahrhunderts*, Diss. Berlin 1979, p. 138; G. V. Zubko, *Fula-russko-francuzskij slovar’*, Moscow 1980, p. 24 (*Alfaa* - 1. titre donné aux lettrés; 2. homme lettré; 3. seigneur); Viktor Alekseevič Vinogradov-Antonina Ivanovna Koval’-Viktor Yakovlevič Porhomovskiy, *Socio-lingvističeskaya tipologiya: Zapadnaya Afrika*, Moscow 1984, pp. 106-110. For the grammatical form, see August Klingenberg, *Die Sprache der Ful (Dialekt von Adamana)*, Hamburg 1963, pp. 159-161 (“Kurzform”). The word is originally a loan-word from Arabic (*halifa*); see Heinrich Barth, *Sammlung und Bearbeitung Central-Afrikanischer Vokabularien*, Gotha 1862-1866, pp. 230f. (No. 14).

⁹ Etienne, *La secte...*; Freyre, *Casa-grande...*, pp. 299, 310. For a modern assessment of the 1835 Bahía insurrection, see Dennis Walker, “Black Islamic slave revolts of South America. A little-known chapter of Islam’s sphere of influence”. In: *The Islamic Review and Arab Affairs* 58, 1970, Nos. 10-11, pp. 9ff.

¹⁰ Etienne, *La secte...*, pp. 99-105, 404-415; Freyre, *Casa-grande...*, pp. 310-312; Ramos, *Die Negerkulturen...*, pp. 171ff.

fasted in Ša^cbān, did not follow the laws of inheritance, their wives did not wear veils, and they were buried in Christian cemeteries according to Christian customs. In this respect, our text is an important historical source even if its data are rather scanty and vague, since in general we have few sources on the history of Islam in Brazil¹¹. This aspect apart, as far as the rest of the data is concerned, our text is devoid of historical, geographical, etc. importance for the modern researcher.

On the other hand, the present text is very interesting as a fairly late illustration of a well-known and popular genre of Arabic and Islamic literatures: *rihla* (= travel) and *‘ağā’ib* (= mirabilia)¹². Our author is extremely interested in all the miraculous elements and phenomena he encounters on his journey, and makes every effort to register them one by one: in this respect he is a late but true follower of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġarnāṭī, who in the 12th C. gave an account of his journey to Russia, Hungary and the Volga Bulgars¹³. Abū Ḥāmid can be regarded as the founder of this literary genre, if we forget al-^cUḍrī of Andalusia, whose works have not survived: we know only that he was one of the main sources of al-Qazwīnī¹⁴. Now, if we compare Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġarnāṭī and ‘Abdarrahmān al-Baġdādī, we find that there is absolutely no difference between the two as concerns their literary technique, their relationship to the world and their treatment of geographical facts. Their style, their lack of critical sense (in the modern meaning of the

¹¹ Cf. Rolf Reichert, "El ocaso del Islam entre los negros brasileños". In: XXXVI Congreso Internacional de Americanistas, España 1964, *Actas y Memorias*. Vol. 3, Sevilla 1966, pp. 621-625; *Os documentos árabes do Arquivo Publico do Estado da Bahia*, ed. Rolf Reichert, Rio de Janeiro 1970.

¹² See César E. Dubler, "‘Adjā’ib". In: *EP*, Vol. I, col. 203b-204a.

¹³ See Gabriel Ferrand, "Le Tuḥfat al-albāb de Abū Ḥāmid al-Andalusī al-Ġarnāṭī". In: *Journal Asiatique* 207, 1925, pp. 1-148, 193-304; César E. Dubler, *Abū Ḥāmid el-granadino y su relación de viaje por tierras eurasiáticas*, Madrid 1953. Cf. also O. G. Bol’šakov-A. L. Mongayt, *Putešestviye Abu Hamida al-Garnati v Vostočnuyu i Central’nyuyu Evropu (1131-1153 gg)*, Moscow 1971.

¹⁴ Ignatij Yulianovič Kračkovskij, *Arabskaya geografičeskaya literatura. (= Izbrannijye sočineniya, IV)*, Moscow-Leningrad 1957, pp. 273ff., 365.

word) and their view of the world are the same in every respect, although more than 600 years separate the two. This esteem of tradition and the survival of the popularity of old literary genres are not unknown in Islam; in the field of geographical literature we have a particular illustration of these two parallel phenomena: in 1906 in Cairo, Aḥmad Amīn aš-Šinqīṭī reprinted Yāqūt's (died 626/1229) *Geographical Dictionary* with minor emendations, and Muḥammad Amīn al-Ḥāṅḡī supplemented this edition with two volumes of later data relating to Europe, America and Australia under the title *Manḡam al-'umrān fī l-mustadrak 'alā Mu'ḡam al-buldān*. This supplement is devoid of any scientific value, but proves that the traditional literary genre corresponded perfectly to the needs and expectations of contemporary readers at the beginning of the 20th C.¹⁵ The same can also be said in our case: a Turkish translation of our text was published in 1288/1871-1872 under the auspices of the Great Council of Public Instruction in Turkey¹⁶.

In conclusion, 'Abdarrahmān al-Baḡdādī's work *Musalliyat al-ḡarīb* can be regarded as a traditional if late representant of *riḥla/aḡā'ib* literature, which, however, belongs in Dubler's classification to the earlier type in which the *mirabilia* were correctly situated geographically, as opposed to the later type wherein data had lost their precision and reference to exact geographical location¹⁷.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 333.

¹⁶ *Tercüme-i Seyahatname-i Brezilya*, eser-i Şerif efendi, mükafat-i saniye, biikrar-i Meclis-i Kebir-i Maarif, Constantinople 1288. Cf. also M. Belin, "Bibliographie ottomane ou notice des livres turcs imprimés à Constantinople durant les années 1288-1289 de l'hégire". In: *Journal Asiatique*, VII. série, 1873, tome I, p. 535 (n. 43). (In this latter article the title of the work is given erroneously as *Brezilya Seyahatnamesi*).

¹⁷ See Dubler, *'Adjā'ib*.