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The wedding of al-Hadhād and al-Ḥarūrā
Glimpses of paganism in Arabia

Abstract

Here is an analysis of the tale of the marriage of al-Hadhād (of the Ḥimiar royal dynasty) with a woman of *jinn* found in Arabic sources dated from the 9th to 12th centuries. In the light of archaeological data and other folklore sources collected by scholars in the last 60 years (Serjeant, Daum, Rodionof), this tale could be interpreted as a foundation myth, with its strong anthropological and political implications, for the community of Maʾrib, the capital city and the main site of Sabaic religiousness in pre-Islamic times. It could also provide some keys of interpretation of a more general religious sensitivity in Arabia encompassing polytheistic or monotheistic creeds.

Keywords

Arabian paganism, Yemenite folklore, Našwān al-Ḥimyarī, Queen of Sheba, Pre-islamic Arabia, Arabic Literature.

1. The tale

The story of the marriage of al-Hadhād b. Šaraḥbīl with a woman of *jinn*s is known in several versions from different sources. The news was already known to al-Ǧāḥiẓ (d. 868 CE), who in his *Kitāb al-biġāl* (chap. 205–206, pp. 131–132) discussed the possibility of the intermingling of humans with *jinn*s; what is remarkable here is not al-Ǧāḥiẓ's biological argumentation – whereby he refuses the possibility of such *jinn*-human generation – but his sources: he speaks of the Yemenite and Qaḥṭānite as well as the books on the *Sīra* (Biography of the Prophet). Among the earliest of those sources indeed we can count: ʿAbīd b. Šariyya's al-Ǧurhumī (d. after 661) who in his *Aḫbār* simply states that al-Hadhād married a *jinn* who gave him Bilqīs[1]; and Abū Muḥammad Ibn

[1] *Tīǧān*, p. 425; ʿAbīd's authority on ancient Yemen, though questioned by his unclear biography, is constantly recognized by Arab-Muslim learned and scholars. Bilqīs is by them retained to be the

Hišām al-Ḥimyarī (d. 833) who in the *Kitāb al-tīǧān* reported a story on the authority of an *isnād* which traces back to [ʿAbdallāh] Ibn ʿAbbās[2].

But the tale I am going to comment on here is only found, as far as I know, in the *Kitāb* w*aṣāyā al-mulūk*[3] and in the commentary on Našwān b. Saʿīd al-Ḥimyarī's (d. 1178) *Qaṣīda ḥimyariyya* (usually shortened as *Ḫulāṣa*), possibly written by Našwān himself[4].

The curious and tortuous fate of this tale in Europe and its previous translations into German and Italian in particular, is worth being reported: in 1866 A. von Kremer translated, or better, gave an abridged German version of the story from the commentary on Našwān's *Qaṣīda ḥimyariyya*[5]. The tale was thence ignored for a long time, even after the Beirut edition of the *Ḫulāṣa* (1985) and the two editions of the *Waṣāyā al-mulūk* (1959 and 1997). Approximately 120 years later, the questionable fantasy-archaeologist E. von Däniken (1987, pp. 13–14) recuperated it (possibly from Kremer's readings) and ascribed that story to the mouth of a poet Semeida ibn Allaf (*sic*); this latter is indeed quoted by Kremer, but as the author of six verses on the king Ifrīqīs one page before the story of al-Hadhād[6]. Anyway D. Magnetti (2000, p. 17) reported that same story as it was found in the Italian translation of von Däniken. No surprise that, with this stunning and feeble *isnād*, the tale continued to be ignored, with the only exception of G. Canova who repeatedly gave a summary of the story as it was found in the *Ḫulāṣa* (1988 p. 111, 2000 p. 27, 2011 p. 216).

The version here introduced is the one found in the Beirut edition of the *Ḫulāṣa*, whose text has been checked also in other manuscripts preserved in European libraries[7].

Queen of Sheba mentioned in Koran (XVII 22–44), after the Bible (*Kings I*, 10 and *Chronicles* 9) and other non biblical literature.

[2] *Tīǧān*, pp. 144–147; here al-Hadhād received as bride a daughter of the king of *jinn*s because he helped one of king's sons to catch a fugitive slave – even though they were in the shape of a white snake and a black snake, respectively, that al-Hadhād saw while he was hunting. In Canova 1988 and 2011 there is a collection of most of the legends concerning the Queen of Sheba, including these stories about her birth.

[3] *Waṣāyā* 1959, pp. 77–80, and *Waṣāyā* 1997, pp. 84–87; "The book of the will of kings", whose first redaction may be dated to the mid 9th century CE, has been credited to al-Aṣmaʿī and al-Ḫuzāʿī, but it should be retained as being anonymous. On this see Mascitelli 2018.

[4] *Mulūk*, pp. 101–104. Ibn al-Aṯīr (*al-Kāmil*, ǧ. I, p. 98) reported the recount in a very shortened way, together with many other news about Bilqīs.

[5] Kremer 1866, pp. 65–66.

[6] Kremer 1866, p. 64, and *Mulūk*, p. 99, where the correct name (Sumaydaʿ b. ʿAmr b. ʿAlaq) is reported.

[7] Ms. Vat. Ar. 1150 and Vat. Ar. 1120 in the Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana; ms. C 29 ar. and C 117 ar. from the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan; ms. Or. 363 from the Library of Accademia dei Lincei (Fond. Caetani) in Rome. Most of many variants occurring in manuscripts do not affect the substantial reading of the tale.

The wedding of al-Hadhād and Ḥarūrā

Al-Hadhād was a great king, but he had no male children, nor other offspring than Bilqīs, whose mother was a *jinn*, and Šams, whose mother was an Arab: as for Bilqīs, she ruled after her father, while Šams stood by Yāsir Yunʿim, the author of the *musnad* inscription at the Sands River (*wādī al-raml*).

The reason why al-Hadhād b. Šaraḥ b. Šaraḥbīl married a *jinn* lady traces back to when he went out for a hunt with a band of his servants. Thence he saw a wolf hunting a gazelle and forcing this one to take shelter in a narrowness from where she could find no way out or safety. Thus al-Hadhād attacked the wolf and drove it out from the gazelle, then he stood looking at the gazelle to see where she would go and kept following her footsteps, leaving his fellows. In this, a huge city arose in front of him, in which everything that could be called by name was, like sheep, cattle, horses, camels, palm-trees, fields and fruits[8]. He stopped next to that, amazed at what had appeared, and while he was in that situation, a man from the appeared city came toward him greeting and welcoming him, then said: «O king, I see you are amazed of what appeared to you today».

And al-Hadhād answered: «I feel as you said. What is this city and who dwells in it?».

«This is Maʾrib, named after your people's country, but it is a city where a community (*ḥayy*) of *jinn*s, who are its dwellers, is crowded together. And I am al-Yalab b. Ṣaʿb, their king and commander».

So he spoke, and in that very moment a woman passed by, none ever saw a more beautiful face, nor a more perfect shape, nor a brighter prettiness, nor a more fragrant scent [than hers], so that al-Hadhād was soon attracted by her. He revealed to the king of *jinn*s that he had already fallen in love with her and wanted her, and that one said: «O king, are you really in love with her? Well she is my daughter and I will marry her to you».

Al-Hadhād thanked him for his words and said: «Where did all this come to me from?»

And the *jinn* answered: «I proposed to marry her to you and join her to you in the happiest condition, for I am her tutor (*zaʿīm*). Did you ever know her [before]?».

«I have never seen her before today» al-Hadhād said.

«She is the gazelle you saved from the wolf» the *jinn* said «The best gift she may donate to you would never compare to the good deed you did, God Almighty and His angels would be witnesses [of your marriage]. Thus if you wish, come by us with the noble people of your house and the kings of your folk, so that they would see her estates and attend her banquet: your date [is scheduled] next month».

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[8] This version, confirmed by *Waṣāyā* (but *Waṣāyā* 1997, p. 84 has: "everything God called by name") as well as other manuscripts, is reported as variant in *Mulūk* p. 101, note 1; the main text has: "everything that was called by name by women".

So al-Hadhād went away [waiting] for the date. Suddenly the city disappeared and there his fellows were around him asking: «Where have you been? We have been looking for you since you separated, but even having turned everything in this place upside down in search of you, we did not find you there». So al-Hadhād said to them: «Actually I did not move far away nor was I wandering», then he continued in verses:

Marvels of the wonders of time never fade out,
the man will be never deprived of wonder as long as he is alive.
I did not take account that earth was inhabited
by else than non-Arabs and Arabs in its horizons,
I was learned about the hidden *jinn*s, but
I used to regard their stories as just [coming from] lies.
Until I saw the impressing palaces
the *jinn*s have, surrounded by doorways and gates,
Fields enclosed them, waters encircled them,
with blooming palm-trees and vines,
In between these were horses, both inherited or acquired,
and there was the best of luxury and wealth,
As well as every white thing [i.e. unsown field?] to whom the sun talked smiling,
and [every] slender wood [of trees] described by the Arabs (?).
After [the month of] Ǧumādā has passed, comes Rağab,
and the meeting hour of Rağab will come,
To accomplish the goods of the *jinn* from ʿArim,
I mean the son of Ṣaʿab known as al-Yalab:
We will look by him, who is the host [with] the guests who are with him,
for junction, kinship and family tie.

Some remember that al-Hadhād went, together with the nobles of his folk and his servants, to the date to join in kinship and accomplish them, and found a castle the *jinn* built [specially] for them in a glade (*falā*) enclosed by palm-groove, vineyards and every kind of grown fields and fruit trees, crossed by water-flows. People were very amazed looking at that great realm, and spent the night with him in the castle upon beds, they never saw such [beautiful] beds. Then they were served trays (*mawāʾid*) laid with the most delicious and colored food, as good and tasty and sharply spicy as they never tasted before, and quenched their thirst with drinks as delicious, digestive, energetic and light as they never drank before. They spent with him three days and nights, then to al-Hadhād was introduced his woman, al-Ḫarūrā[9] the daughter of al-Yalab b. Ṣaʿb al-ʿArimī, so al-Hadād gave to his cousins and the nobles of his family

[9] Called al-Ḥarūr in *Waṣāyā* (p. 86) but Rawāḥa or Rīḥana in ʿAbīd b. Šariyya's *Aḫbār* (*Tīǧān* p. 425), where this tale of al-Hadhād wedding lacks.

permission to go back to their places, while that castle became the seat of his kingdom.

Some say that he stood with al-Ḥarūrā bt. al-Yalab for a time, then she bore to him Bilqīs, who grew up as the most clever woman ever heard in those times. He preferred her opinion indeed, her wisdom (*ḥilm*) and administration and knowledge. She was the counselor of her father, until the whole Ḥimyar recognized this about her.

2. Comments

> In spite of the enormous number of texts from ancient Yemen that have come down to us, none of them seems to deal with mythology [– except for one, a difficult (and rhymed, at that) inscription from the great temple in Mārib].[10]

> One of the characteristics of Arab paganism as it has come down to us is the absence of a mythology, narratives that might serve to explain the origin or history of the gods.[11]

These are just two of the innumerable statements of this kind: scholars in facts, and I have been among them in the past, often groaned because no mythology, cosmogony, sagas or other genres of literature of pre-Islamic Arab religion has come down to us, either in epigraphic sources nor in Muslim Tradition, apart from few and scanty exceptions. As a consequence of this lack, reconstructions of pre-Islamic religion are generally based on archaeological remains (temples, shrines, graves, objects, etc.), god's names, rituals, even clerical figures, but no mythology. Nothing comparable to the great epic of Babylonian literature or the legends and myths of Egyptian or even Ugaritic texts, let alone the huge fantastic Greek literature about deities and semi-deities or the Jewish biblical and non-biblical narrative.

Investigating archaeological and epigraphical data to extract religious mythology has been a hard challenge for many who, starting from the same points, moved towards different directions and traced interesting models, sometimes rather summarized and sometimes amazing, but all filling the large *lacunae* left by insufficient literary consistence of the evidences with speculative representations quite often based on comparisons with other societies of the Near East[12].

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[10] Daum 2016, p. 57.

[11] Peters 2003, p. 45.

[12] From the pioneering works of A. f. L. Beeston (1948) and G. Ryckmans (1951) to more recent works, as for example McCorrisotn (2011) or Maraqten (2015), large bibliography has been published on both single cases or more general view.

On the other hand, those who dug into Arab Muslim literature in search of non-Islamic mythology (from Wellhausen onward) often blamed, for the poor quality of the information, on a suspected zealous censorship operated by pious Muslim writers on their informants.

Some other scholars turned their attention to present day ethnological and anthropological observations as well as the folklore connected with popular religion. And they were, in my view, substantially right both in their approach and in most of their conclusions.

The investigations of R. Serjeant and W. Daum, for example, mainly focused on visiting pilgrimages (*ziyāra*) to local sanctuaries in south-western Arabia (Ḥaḍramawt and Tihāma specifically), alleged to be graves of Muslim saints or prophets, in order to establish a sort of continuity between ancient South Arabian rites and present day rites, by-passing or encompassing Islam and its overwhelming and uniforming vision – exactly as it happened in most of the societies when their polytheism or paganism was turned into a monotheistic creed and system.

These kind of *ziyāra* (or whatever term is used to refer to them) share some essential features which are recognizable as specific of an (ancient) Arab religious sensibility. In a summarized scheme their paradigm runs as follows: a *seasonal gathering* to a *remote shrine*, located in a certain *physical landscape* and *built in a peculiar way*[13], for a no less than *three days long feast* in the mid of a *springtime month* concluding with *offers to the tender of the shrine* in *tithes* and *animals to be sacrificed* and then *shared as a meal in a banquet*.

There is no need to remark that many of the elements here stressed in italics are part of the Muslim *ḥağğ* and *ʿumra* to Mecca, and the differences are sometimes at least as enlightening as the similarities.

W. Daum collected enough evidence to show that such pilgrimages or seasonal feasts reflect a very old rite representing a prayer for rain or water in general, a sacred marriage (hierogamy) and a ritual hunt – traces of all these rites can be found in ancient South Arabian epigraphic sources[14].

He has also been able to record several recounts of the "foundation myth" of those sanctuaries, a myth that basically reproduces the following pattern:

> The ʿAfrīt [a kind of evil *jinn*, n. o. r.] is a mighty water-demon. [...] A bride is offered to this demon, once a year […] in order to ensure the arrival of the

[13] For example: in the middle of a *wādī* with consistent water resources, occasionally provided with a down-up path (occasionally designed in stairways), or the presence of a vertical rock formation in a particular position, etc. (on this see further).

[14] See Daum 1985 Daum 1987 and 2016. Recently Chr. Robin (2018) has been able to demonstrate that the annual pilgrimage in Ma'rib was held in the first decade of March, i.e. soon before the rain season (on this see further).

> water of the wadi. If the girl was not offered, the ʿAfrīt would hold back the water. The killing of the dark old demon by the young luminous stranger secures the water [...]. The young stranger then marries the girl (who happens to be the daughter of the ruler of the village), thus establishes himself in the village, and, after the death of the Sultan, becomes the new ruler and the ancestor of the ruling dynasty[15].

When I first read the story of the wedding of al-Hadhād and al-Ḥarūrā I considered it as a fabulous tale about the supernatural origins of al-Hadhād's daughter Bilqīs or, at the most, about her acquaintance with *jinn*s (though in Koran the master of *jinn*s is Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is rather surprised at the amazing miracles he is able to perform thanks to the help of *jinn*s). Only after having read Daum's reconstruction, I have been able to understand the deep meaning of the tale, and I also believe that it may give further elucidations on the question of pre-Islamic religion and its relationship with the environmental and economic context in which it developed throughout the millennia.

In the tale reported above, the stranger hero is al-Hadhād while the girl is replaced by a gazelle threatened by a wolf, having no visible relationship with water, but paralleling here the ʿAfrīt. As soon as the gazelle is saved, indeed, a city appears surrounded by beautiful gardens and orchards and all kinds of animals – a sign for the rite for fertility to have been accomplished. Yalab, the king of this wonderful land (a realm of *jinn*s indeed), informs al-Hadhād that it is called Maʾrib (after al-Hadhād's own country) and the city is called ʿArim, which is the name of Maʾrib dam in both Sabaic sources and the Koran. A dam is usually placed in the same point, in the middle of the *wādī*, where the girl was to be offered to the demon and where the fight between this latter and the stranger hero occurs, according to the myths recorded by Daum (1987, pp. 8–9), and present day Yemenite sanctuaries are located in a similar landscape[16]. Then Yalab, actually a *jinn* himself, reveals to al-Hadhād that the gazelle was indeed her daughter al-Ḥarūrā and he is going to marry her to al-Hadhād in reward of his courage, thus making of him his heir.

According to Daum's reports, the family that presently tends the sanctuary is supposed to be the offspring of the spouses remembered in the myth; incidentally it must be said that this marriage is not explicitly told in some versions of the story, but many details in the rituals performed during the *ziyāra* are visibly connected with a wedding ceremony (e.g. the oiling and *henna* dying of pillars, and so on; Dawm 1987, p. 7). Thus the story can be read as the foundation-

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[15] Daum 1987, pp. 9–10; see also Daum 1983, in particular pp. 42–49 of tale n. 4, and pp. 261–262.

[16] Daum 1987, pp. 5–6, and 8–9; see also Daum 2016. In al-Hadhād's tale, the gazelle is entrapped in a "narrowness" (*maḍīq*) that might be interpreted as the top of a *wādī*.

myth of a dynasty of shrine-keepers, whatever role they have in the government of their society.

Here are some remarks on the details of al-Hadhād and al-Ḥarūrā tale, which possibly deserve further investigations.

1) **Timing**: the wedding is scheduled by the king of *jinn*s "on the next month"; we find in the poem attached to the story (verse 8) that this month is *Rağab*, a holy month in pre-Islamic times[17]. I consider this detail as proof that the poem is inseparable from the tale[18].

2) **The wedding banquet** (*walīma*): it is offered by Yalab, the bride's father, and the whole bridegroom's family moves to her place for the ceremony, according to a matrilocal marriage-system that Daum points out to be an old South Arabian tradition, contrasted by later customs[19]. Note that the wedding ceremonies last three days before the two spouses can join together (in the castle her family built for him).

3) **The girl and the evil-demon**: compared to the narrative pattern of the myth, the version of this tale abridges all the action part of the story in few words and we have a gazelle and a wolf instead of the girl and the demon (ʿAfrīt). But once we are then informed that the gazelle is a beautiful *jinn* girl, rightly the king's daughter, we can suppose the wolf to be a *jinn* or a demon too, able to transform himself into a wild animal.

4) **The "Shahriyar" or "Bluebeard" topic**: in this version of the story there is no tyrant demon who demands the "sacrifice" of a new girl every year. Yet this important topic is elsewhere, in other stories about Bilqīs.

The figure of Bilqīs – who according to the tale is the fruit of the marriage of the stranger hero and the daughter of the local king, and thus is going to become the queen of that land – summed up in Yemenite legends so many mythological motifs that her identification with the Queen of Sheba mentioned in the Koran (and in the Bible) appears to be nearly coincidental. I mean to say that, besides the fact that the figure of Queen of Sheba in Koran was influenced by misdrash Jewish literature (see *E.I.2*, s.v. Bilḳīs), many stories

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[17] It is in *Rağab* that the *ʿumra* to the Kaʿba was usually performed as well as many of South Arabian *ziyāra* of present days; see *E.I.2* s.v. Radjab.

[18] Note that verse 8 in this poem is the only one where the first hemystich rhymes with the second: this may point to an independence (or preeminence) of this second part of the poem with respect to the first 7 verses.

[19] Daum 1987, p. 12, quoting also Beeston 1983; Robertson Smith (1907, pp. 77–83) admits that matrilocal marriage was not so rare among Bedouin both in early Islamic age and earlier, quoting several exemplar cases.

about a queen or princess of pre-Islamic Yemenite mythological past possibly pivoted on the name of Bilqīs[20] and eventually merged with the Koranic figure. In these stories, albeit her moral qualities and competence were recognized ("the most clever woman ever heard in those times" is said in this tale as well as in other sources), she had to fight to get her inherited right to rule. Such fights incorporate narrative material which, in some relevant details, fits inside the same mythological pattern shown above.

Here are some examples: in some versions she is acclaimed by her community because she defeats the tyrant ruler Suhayr b. ʿAbd al-Šams b. Wāʾil who actually acts as the ʿAfrīt-demon does – he demands the *ius primae noctis* from every virgin before they marry[21]; during her fights she seeks asylum at a cousin of hers, Ǧaʿfar b. Qarṭ, who lives in the fortress of ʿAlʿāl round al-Aḥqāf, a day-trip far from the Grave of Hūd[22]; in some cases she has a little brother (called ʿAmr) or a step-sister called Šams ("Sun")[23]; finally she gets her right to rule in Maʾrib: this happened either because her right was recognized by her people (*Dāmiġa* p. 469, *Mulūk* p. 104), or because the Ḥimyar king Yāsir Yunʿim granted her total autonomy (*Mulūk*, p. 116, quoting Ibn Hišām), or even because she married a king[24]. The meeting with Solomon quoted in the Koran (after the Bible and Jewish literature), once read in a Yemenite perspective, is itself a way to validating her ruling throughout a religious prestige – i.e. her conversion to monotheism instead of her worshiping the sun. According to some sources Solomon forced her to get married or he himself married her.

This all hints to Bilqīs' figure as a unifying one in the framework of Yemenite mytho-history: a king or a queen (i.e. a ruling dynasty) is appointed to rule a community because of his/her competence and religious function, but

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[20] Several possible etymologies of the name Bilqīs have been given (see *E.I.2*, s.v. BILḲĪS; also Pennacchietti 2002). The issue is that this name does not occur in South Arabian epigraphy and that Arab philologists did not record any serious explanation of this name (nor recorded any related Arabic root). A second name of her found in the sources is Balqama (and also Yalqama or Yalmaqa in *Ištiqāq*, p. 311): the common consonants BLQ of these two names may point to the adjective *balqāʾ* (masculine *ablaq*) meaning "a colour in which white and black is".

[21] *Dāmiġa*, pp. 468–469; see also my *ARABI I*, Tale 3.

[22] *Tīǧān*, p. 149; about Ǧaʿfar b. Qarṭ a curious fable is attached, which includes many features concerning his visiting (*yuǧāwiru*) the Grave of Hūd and well fitting with the description of that *ziyāra* made by Daum, thus establishing a further linkage with South Arabian seasonal pilgrimages.

[23] Note that not only *Šams* is the name of an ancient South Arabian goddess (and Koran XXVII 24 states that the Queen of Sheba and her people used to worship the Sun), but al-Šamsī is the name of the stranger hero in at least one of the tales recorded by Daum (1987 p. 5).

[24] According to Wahb b. Munabbih and al-Hamdānī this king is called Ḏū Bataʿ; in *Mulūk* (p. 112) he is also called Mūhab Il or Barīl; in *Waṣāyā* 1997 (p. 77) she married Šammar Yurʿiš (said to be her cousin); another version states that she ruled over Maʾrib in autonomy during the reign of Yāsir Yunʿim. On these versions see my *ARABI I*, pp. 13–14.

also because he/she is able to connect sparse sanctuary structures into a sort of central state system.

If Bilqīs in this tale is the result of the marriage between the stranger hero and the king's daughter, she cannot but represent Maʾrib itself, the prosperous and heavenly state or society governed by a ruling dynasty which at its turn identifies itself with that same state and society. Note that only in the case of al-Hadhād the matri-local wedding system, which is central in these tales, does give also birth to a female ruling descendant (Bilqīs)[25].

It may be argued that any exogamic marriage implies the joining of distant lineages. But this is exactly what I think such stories are pointing to once referring to ruling families or dynasties (see further).

5) **The hunt**: The tale begins with al-Hadhād going out to hunt with a group of servants and courtiers. The presence of the court makes it less likely to be an individual sporting hunt and, though it is probably a scarce evidence, at the same time it is not impossible to be a "ritual hunt", so widespread in pre-Islamic South Arabia. Whatever the religious interpretation we give to the rite of the sacred hunt, a hunter figure sounds somewhat in contrast to the agricultural society reflected in the realm of *jinn*s. A very simplified interpretation of the story would see this as a reference to the passage from a hunting-based society to an agricultural one. But it is more proper to read the encounter of a foreign (the male al-Hadhād) with a local (female and magic) element as a pact of synergy between the mobile (pastoral or even military) and the sedentary (productive or rural) components of the new society borne out of this myth, by which each one recognizes the other and admits that none of the two can live without the other.

6) **The stranger hero**: In my view, the part here played by al-Hadhād is that of a Prometheus-like hero, rather than a deity[26], whose main enterprise is to tame the violence of seasonal floods (represented by the wolf); al-Hadhād indeed does not kill the wolf (i.e. the water-demon), he just drives it away: this infers that it would come back next year or next season – thus warranting the ritual repetitiveness of the scene – but it would doubtlessly be tamed again. Such a myth is not simply connected with the solar year calendar and meteorological events (and the economic life which depends on them), but with the controlling

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[25] We can find in Yemenite folklore another version of this "Bluebeard topic", but set in an entirely male context: it is the story concerning the ascent to the throne of the king Yūsuf Ḏū Nuwās, but it is totally centered on male honour and virtue, and any reference to rituals of paganism has been lost (see my *ARABI I*, tale 5).

[26] Daum (1985, pp. 32–41) gave to the stranger hero the title of god of the post-rainy season, of fertility, of light, of thunder, of a fighting god, and thus he identified him as the god ʿAṯtar.

and taking care of precious irregular and sometimes dangerous water resources[27]. In an agricultural society located in a quite dry area, this is obtained through the development of water-engineering technologies. In Yemen, and Maʾrib in particular, beside basins, floodgates, canals, wells and so on, the primary device of such technology is the dam (*ʿarim*) – which is exactly what appears soon after al-Hadhād's enterprise.

This reading of the myth would explain the position of the sanctuary in the middle (or slightly on the right) of the *wādī* as a prideful trust in the effectiveness of the dam-device and a challenge to the power of the seasonal flood (see further, note 30).

I would add here a consideration on what has been called the "Religion of the Semites" (since W. Robertson Smith onward), frequently invoked to explain similarities between religious features and practices common to many of the societies that in time laid one over the other in South-Western Asia over a period of more than four thousand years. I would rather speak instead of "paganism" meant as a complex of beliefs by which a society represents its relationship with nature – how people undergo nature's power and react to it – in the shape of sacred structures. In ancient south-western Asia we see different forms of paganism that shared some features and possibly exchanged each other credences and habits just like they used to swap technologies, knowledge and, not least, linguistic features. But each one of these forms could only have its own local phenomenic appearance harmonic to its own environment and the society resulting from those specific conditions.

For example: it is absolutely common to find shrines next to a water source; but the water source can be a perennial river or a well or just the rain! Through the lens of that same narrative pattern described by W. Daum, I think that we may see inside Arabia itself some differences between the sanctuaries situated up or down the stream of the watercourse. The uphill sanctuaries (e.g. Qabr Hud in Ḥaḍramawt) are likely older and connected to an agricultural economy whose water regulation is easier and more fluid, if not related to a pastoralist or an even older pre-agricultural society[28].

On the other hand, the sanctuaries and temples built down in the valley – e.g. the ʿAwwam temple in Maʾrib, the pilgrimage temple in Ṣirwāḥ, the Qalīṣ in Ṣanʿāʾ, some sites in oases in Central Arabia such as the Kaʿba in ancient

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[27] An evil demon is quite often set to guard a well or a water source in many Yemenite fairytales, and the hero who is able to defeat him is greatly granted by the people (see for example the tales collected by W. Daum and G. Canova ; see also the tale collected by M.T. Johnstone among Modern South Aranian speakers (Johnstone 1978)).

[28] On this possibility, see the discoveries and the interpretations carried on by McCorriston (2010 and 2011).

Mecca[29], and, I would add, the vestiges investigated by Nevo and Koren in Sde Boqer (in today Israel Negev)[30] – are, on the contrary, more subject to seasonal rains and floods and thus controlling and bridling that water, sometimes as abundant as destructive, represent a main "heroic" goal for the communities that depend on it for their agriculture – what I would label "*wādī* economies"[31].

To sum up, even if the myth pattern itself and the religious rites connected to it may trace back to very ancient times (as it is likely elsewhere) in the case of this tale located in Maʾrib it would be a representation of a celebration of the dam function – if not its foundation – and the world that lives through it.

I do not wish to champion any "hydraulic hypothesis" in the deterministic terms used by some scholars (like K. A Wittfogel), but I would rather affirm that watering is one of the elements that forges not only an economic structure in a given society, but also its mythological dimension, that is to say, with the words of M.J. Harrower: «[water controlling works and technologies] are not only important on a practical and organizational level, but are socially important as they generate and reify economic disparities, differential power and cosmologies associated with irrigation»[32].

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[29] The Kaʿba in Mecca is well known for being built in the middle or at the end of a *wādī* (and indeed it suffered destruction caused by floods, as sources report) and faces the Zamzam spring, which is the result of hydraulic work.

[30] Nevo & Koren 1990, pp. 26–28, in particular fig. 1, where the position of possible "shrines" or simple "slaughtering places" appears to be on the right side of the *wādī* below an upstream dam. Referring to the Kaʿba they said: «It is […] strange to find a religious center built in such a dangerous position, but it is precisely in such a position – low on the slopes of a wadi subject to flash floods – that cult centers were situated in Negev. At Sde Boqer, the cult buildings extended into the wadi bed. In order to protect the buildings from the danger of flooding, three dams of barriers were built across the main wadi of the Sde Boqer site, just upstream from the buildings». In my view it is exactly the opposite: the shrines have been built in that position because the dams were previously set up to govern the flood and thus let the valley flourish in safety. It is then remarked indeed that «In the fifth century A. D., many run-off cultivation system were constructed in the Negev, covering an area of about 40,000 dunams. Many pagan shrines were built as part of these systems» (p. 43). Probably not all the buildings that authors designate as shrines have an actual religious function (see also Johnes 2003 for reasonable critical remarks on Nevo & Koren's conclusions), but at least some of them are marked by elements that point to that. It is noteworthy to see in Sde Boqer a synchronicity of water-engineering works (dams) to improve agriculture and the construction of squared buildings on the right side of a *wādī* whose functions are possibly related to religion and sacrificing animals (slaughtering). Chronology of this site is not continuous, but according to archaeological data exposed by Nevo & Koren, the buildings they supposed to be religious structures in Sde Boqer would date between the 5th and the 6th century CE during the last pre-Islamic re-flourishing of the site.

[31] Here is not the place to go deep inside the issue (on this see for example Maktari 1971, Varisco 1983, etc.), but erecting a dam is a totally different technology compared to digging *qanāt* or *aflāǧ*, and managing the distribution of water from an uphill spring is not the same as doing it from a well.

[32] Harrower 2009, p. 60.

Once a mythological structure, modeled on an "hydraulic element" is crystallized in a foundation myth, it might indeed be employed also in those cases whereas the hydraulic element is not decisive for the institution of a new society.

7) **Intermingling**: In a framework of this kind, we may also append to this myth some political and religious concepts as they emerge, scattered, from scattered sources. For example: whosoever accesses to the role of creator and tender of the water-infrastructure, be he a ruler or a priest, is expected to maintain it, possibly to collect levy on the over-production resulting from the use of the infrastructure itself, and finally to redistribute incomes in the wisest way on seasonal occasions.

As already noticed, an important piece of the story is that the wedding involves two distinct separate families. The poem attached to the story indeed ends with three important terms: *tawāṣul* ("conjunction") *iṣhār* ("to become someone's relative") and *nasab* ("kinship" or "genealogy"). Here not only an economical system (the "*wādī* economy") is founded or celebrated, but also the birth of a new social and political structure: a foreign group joins the local one in an alliance sealed by a marriage. The offspring of this union shall tend the water-infrastructure, but it is supposed also to administer revenues to fix those same infrastructures and redistribute incomes in seasonal feasts. This is likely what kings used to do in ancient times in agreement with a religious authority[33], and what, to some extent, shrine tenders still do in present days Yemen, even though the economic relevance of shrine-centered systems has dramatically lessened. We can probably look at this alliance through the lens of the relationship between kingship and temples in the past, or between *sayyid*s (Prophet's descent) and *šayḫ*s (local tribesmen) in many present day Yemen communities.

An hypothesis that may be advanced, indeed, is that this tale got its "Islamic" shape (i.e. the one we find in 9th–12th centuries sources) at the time some *sayyid* (or *šarīf*) families came to dwell in Yemen in the first centuries after Hijra, or soon after the establishment of the Rassid Imamate at the end of 9th century.

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[33] We can see it throughout the whole history of Saba: in the first two lines of inscription RES 3945 (from the temple of ʾlmqh in Sirwāḥ) dated 7th century BCE, in the long list (more than 20 lines) of his *gestae* the *mukarrib* of Sabaʾ Krbʾl Wtr bn Ḏmrʿly puts in primary range the sacrifices to the two gods ʿṯtr and ʾlmqh in order that they would secure water to the land and to the whole irrigation system, and not destroy it. In inscription Ja547+546+545+544 dated 668 ES = 555 CE (at the end of Sabaic literature) the authors raised or actually restored (*msʿrw*) «the dam of Ma'rib (*ʿrm Mrb*) … In the name of Rḥmnn, the Lord of the heavens and the earth, and with the help of their lord, the king Abraha, king of Sabaʾ, ḏu-Raydān, Ḥaḍramawt, Ymnt and their Arabs of the Highland (*Ṭwdm*) and of Lowland (*Thmt*)» (according to inscription CIH 541, the same king Abraha started working on Maʾrib's dam ten years before).

[[APPROFONDIRE il sistema matrimoniale fra s_ada e tribù in Gingrigh 1989. A. Gingrich, "How the chiefs' daughters marry: Tribe, marriage patterns and hierarchies in North-west Yemen", in A. Gingrich, D. Haas and G. Paleczek (eds.) *Kinship, Social Change and Evolutions: Proceeding of a Synposium Held in Honour of W. Dostal*, Horn: Berger 1989, pp. 75–85.]]

I would thus conclude by venturing on one further comparison. It is probably not by chance that Robertson Smith (1907, pp. 85–86) quoted, as an example of an ancient traditional matri-local (or *mutʿa*) marriage, the story of the mother of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib – the Prophet's grandfather, considered in Muslim Tradition to be a preeminent figure of Qurayš trading welfare, a diplomat, and, remarkably, a well digger and even a good archer![34] It is said that her mother Salmā bt. ʿAmr, a woman of Naǧǧār tribe in Yaṯrib (a Ḫazraǧ family), held a particular position among her family. In the *Sīra al-nabī* the story is reported as follows:

> Hāšim had gone to Medina and married Salmā bt. ʿAmr, one of the Banū ʿAdī b. al-Naǧǧār. Before that she had been married to Uḥayḥa b. al-Ǧulah b. al-Ḥarīš [...] b. Ǧahǧaba b. Kulfa b. ʿAwf b. ʿAmr b. ʿAwf b. Malik b. al-Aws and bore him a son called ʿAmr. On account of her high position she held among her people, she would only marry on condition that she should retain control of her own affairs. If she disliked a man she left him. To Hāshim she bore ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib and called his name Šayba. Hāshim left him while he was a little boy. Then his uncle Muṭṭalib came to take him away [years after the death of Hāšim in Ghaza, n. o. r.] and bring him among his people in his town. But Salmā declined to let him go with him. His uncle argued that his nephew was now old enough to travel and was as an exile away from his own tribe who were the people of the temple (*ahl al-bayt*). Therefore it was better for the boy that he should be among his own family and therefore he refused to go without him. It is popularly asserted that Šayba refused to leave his mother without her consent; and this she ultimately gave. So his uncle took him away to Mecca, riding behind him on his camel, and the people cried: "It is al-Muṭṭalib's slave (*ʿabd*) whom he has bought" and that is how he got the name of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib.[35]

Talking in mythological language, Hāšim would be the stranger (Meccan) hero; he does not fight, but he is able to marry (temporarily a Medinian/Yaṯribian princess (or a hierodula? She anyway holds a "high position among her people");

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[34] He is credited to have dug (or restored) the Zamzam water spring (see for example *Sīra*, b. 140, pp. 190–191; pp. 63–64 of English translation.

[35] *Sīra*, I, chap. 139 (?130), p. 184; p. 59 of English translation. In other versions (reported in Ṭabarī, b. I, pp. 1082–1088; vol. VI, pp. 9–14 of English translation), al-Muṭṭalib took Šayba back to Mecca without the knowledge of her mother.

the fruit of this marriage is none but the grandfather of that Meccan who will firstly found a new "shrine" in Yaṯrib and then unite the two families (i.e. communities or cities) in a new social unity (the Islamic *umma*).

Final note: the first name of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, imposed by his mother, is Šayba, a word that, according to Ibn Durayd and many others after him, means "white": *šayb* in common Arabic is "hoariness" or "hoary", but it would hardly be applied to a newborn. Ibn Durayd, in his own opinion, explains it as "a white mixed with black"[36].

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