

RE-LOCATING THE *ARABIAN NIGHTS*

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Much has been written about the Arabic *Kitāb Alf laila wa-laila*, commonly known in English as the *Arabian Nights*. Ever since the French orientalist scholar Antoine Galland published his adaptation of the Arabic text at the beginning of the eighteenth century, hundreds of thousands of readers have delighted in dwelling in the world of the *Arabian Nights*, a world which — though situated in distant regions — in many respects corresponds to Western expectations of pleasure and dreams of an exciting, if not a fulfilling life. Much has been written about the intensive and lasting effect the *Arabian Nights* had on Western creativity, in literature as well as in art. And much has been written about what the *Nights* actually are and how they came to be what they constitute today. Given the fact that almost three centuries have passed since the *Nights* were officially introduced to the European audience, it may come as a surprise that research into the *Nights* still holds good for a number of major new insights, some of which were published as recently as during the past decade. Considering the large number of manuscripts that have not yet been analyzed in depth, our understanding of the *Nights* is bound to develop still further as we continue to decode its complexity.

Given the prominent position the *Arabian Nights* have gained in Western imagination within the past three centuries, it is difficult to talk about this text without an emotional element. My personal approach to the *Arabian Nights* is not necessarily a sympathetic one. Like many, since my childhood reading I have been amazed by and attracted to Aladdin and his wonderful lamp, Ali Baba and the wondrous treasure grove, Sindbad's unbelievable adventures. Later, I did manage to read the *Nights* as a whole — though I admit it was a laborious task, and not only because I read Enno Littmann's German translation, which ever so often is being praised for its accuracy as well as being criticized for its uninspired dryness. I was and I still am fascinated by the *Nights* — but gradually my uncritical fascination became at first intermingled with and then superseded by a critical distance, originating from and continuously being fed by a general aversion to monuments. Monuments rise high and tend to cast long shadows. True, they do attract awe and amazement, but

their sheer bulk and their impressive shadow more often than not prevent an adequate appreciation of their own composite nature and also obscure a deeper understanding of neighboring constituents contributing to the monument's grandness.

Contrary to other complex narrative compilations of Near Eastern literatures, such as the *Sindbād-Nāme* or *Kalīla wa-Dimna* whose contents were canonized in a native language at a considerably early stage¹, the textual history of the *Arabian Nights* can be traced back with some certainty only to the fourteenth century A. D. Anything likely to be regarded as a Vulgate text of the *Arabian Nights* was not created until late in the eighteenth century, in direct response to the European demand for complete editions initiated by the enthusiastic reception Galland's publication had received. The *Arabian Nights* were "discovered" in a European atmosphere thoroughly impregnated by the French (literary) narrative conventions and fashion of 'conte de fées' and their craving for the extravagant. Ultimately, one might even go as far as stating that the *Arabian Nights* were created by the West. And certainly the history of their textual development as well as the approach of researchers after Galland are much more telling about Western attitudes towards the Oriental other than conveying an idea of the roles and functions the *Arabian Nights* possessed in their original surroundings.

Muhsin Mahdi, in the concluding volume three of his edition of the Galland manuscript² has supplied two decisive chapters with titles whose headings read: "Constructing the *Nuits*" (chapter 1.7), and "Reconstruction" (chapter 2.13). While the former refers to the various components of the first French edition, the latter deals with the Sabbagh forgery of a complete and unique copy of the alleged Baghdad *Nights*. To these two historicizing steps, one might add a third aiming to understand the *Nights* in the meaning they originally possessed within their indigenous context. This can probably best be achieved by a deconstructive process I would like to define as "re-locating" the *Nights*. The eventual result of such a re-location is to be the unveiling of a new meaning, specific to the text as it came into being. Yet, in order to arrive at this stage, it is first necessary to disassemble the *Nights*, to analyze their complex nature in order to dismiss components of extraneous origin and

¹ S. BELCHER, *The Diffusion of the Book of Sindbād*, *Fabula* 28, 1987, p. 34-58; F. DE BLOIS, *Burzoy's Voyage to India and the Origin of the Book of Kalilah wa Dimnah*, London 1990.

² M. MAHDI, *The Thousand and One Nights (Alf Layla wa-Layla) from the Earliest Known Sources*, vol. 1-3, Leiden 1984/84/95.

be able to extract the skeleton constituting its substantial quality — not necessarily a skeleton of content, but rather more one of intention. This kind of re-location does not result in a radically new analysis of the *Nights*. In a most unspectacular way, it is merely a focused evaluation of some of the most important results of previous research. In this respect, two points deserve particular consideration: first, the image of the *Nights* as evaluated in their culture of origin; and second, their textual history predating direct European influence.

While al-Masʿūdī and Ibn an-Nadīm in the tenth century A. D. testify to the ultimate origin of the *Nights* from Persian sources as well as to its popularity in their day, the most important finding for the early history of the *Nights* was presented by Nabia Abbot in 1949, constituting a dated paper fragment of the late ninth century rendering the introductory passage of the framing narrative³. Next in significance for the appreciation of the *Nights* in the Muslim Arab world are sundry statements located in the writings of the educated elite mentioning various narrative compilations such as the books about the wonders of the sea (*ʿağāʾib al-baḥr*), the *Sindbād-Nāme*, the epic of a certain Baṭṭāl or the romance about Ḥamza, the prophet Muhammad’s paternal uncle. Besides the mentions by al-Masʿūdī and Ibn an-Nadīm already referred to, these statements are given by such highly diversified authors as aṣ-Ṣūlī (*al-Aurāq*, written in 320/932), Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī (*Tārīḥ*, completed in 350/961), at-Tauḥīdī (*al-Imtāʿ wal-muʿānasa*, written in 374/984)⁴, Ibn Taimīya (died 728/1328; *Minḥağ as-sunna*)⁵ and al-Maqrīzī (died 845/1442; *Ḥiṭaṭ*).

While Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī and al-Maqrīzī supply cursory statements testifying to the popularity of imaginative narrative at some earlier period, aṣ-Ṣūlī, at-Tauḥīdī, and Ibn Taimīya more or less explicitly express their contempt of this kind of literature, which contains — as Tauḥīdī says — “unfounded statements, mixed with the impossible, conjoined to the marvelous and the entertaining, and incapable of derivation [taḥṣīl] and verification [taḥqīq]”⁶. This small collection of statements in Western research usually serves as the basis for the general assumption that narrative literature as such is disregarded in the Arab

³ N. ABBOT, *A Ninth-Century Fragment of the “Thousand Nights”*. *New Light on the Early History of the Arabian Nights*, *JNES* 8,3, 1949, pp. 129-164.

⁴ at-Tauḥīdī, *al-Imtāʿ wal-muʿānasa*, ed. A. AMĪN, A. AZ-ZAIN, Reprint Beirut s. a., vol. 1, p. 23.

⁵ Ibn Taimīya, *Minḥağ as-sunna*, Būlāq 1322/1904, p. 12.

⁶ Quoted from ABBOT (as in n. 3), p. 156.

world, a statement which — even though to some extent it might be true — clearly contradicts the overwhelming popularity of narrative literature in the Near East then and now. The contradictory nature of this hypothesis becomes obvious when one considers the fact that even some of the most conservative authors such as the Ḥanbalite Ibn al-Ğauzī (died 597/1201) cannot but admit that even Muḥammad liked to play tricks on his companions, occasionally laughed “until his molar teeth showed”⁷, and is even reported to have told the fantastic adventure of Ḥurāfa, the one contemporary eponymous for the later literary genre of fantastic, unbelievable and superstitious narratives (*ḥurāfāt*)⁸. So probably the statements referred to above mirror rather individual attitudes and should not be overestimated as representative of a general point of view. Anyhow, they apparently had no impeding effect on the flow of tradition.

Even though the popularity of the *Arabian Nights* is attested as early as the ninth century, the first documentary evidence for the exact title *Alf laila wa-laila*, contained in the notebook of a Jewish book dealer from Cairo around the year 1150, was discovered as late as 1958⁹. Even more surprising, so far only one Arabic manuscript containing a primary dating prior to Galland’s publication is known to exist. We are told that this manuscript of the *Thousand and one Nights* — the Vatican ms. Cod. Vat. Ar. 782 — was copied (from the Galland manuscript, then still in Syria) in the Muslim year 1001, corresponding to 1592-93. Is this just a coincidence or simply a fake?

Since Galland’s publication obviously constitutes a turning point in the history of the *Arabian Nights*, for a re-contextualizing evaluation of the *Nights*’s indigenous position it is of particular importance to study manuscripts prior to the crucial date of 1704-06, when Galland’s enlarged adaptation of the tales available in his manuscript was presented to the public. Surprisingly, previous research has never sought to compile a complete list of pre-Galland Arabic manuscripts of the *Nights*. When doing this, one finds altogether just about half a dozen Arabic manuscripts prior to Galland’s publication that have so far been taken into consideration by Western scholarship. Only two out of seven allow a somewhat definite dating; all others are dated tentatively on the basis of secondary evidence:

⁷ R. SELLHEIM, *Das Lächeln des Propheten, Festschrift A. Jensen*, München 1964, pp. 621-630.

⁸ Mufaḍḍal ibn Salama, *al-Fāḥir*, ed. ‘A. AṬ-ṬAḤĀWĪ, M. ‘A. AN-NAĞĠĀR, Cairo 1380/1960, pp. 169-172.

⁹ S. D. GOITEIN, *The Oldest Documentary Evidence for the Title Alf Laila wa-Laila*, *JAOS* 78, 1958, pp. 301-302.

(1) Now in the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale, the oldest manuscript still remains the one, that — as is often quoted “by an immense stroke of luck” — came into the possession of Galland and formed the basis for his translation. A note of one of its owners dates from the year 943/1536, thus supplying the term *ante quem*. There is some disagreement as for the term *post quem*, which is connected with the introduction of the *Ašrafī dīnār*, mentioned in the manuscript in two places (of which incidentally only one had been taken note of in the previous discussion concerning the manuscript’s dating). While until recently there appeared to be a consensus as for the introduction of the *Ašrafī dīnār* by official order in the year 1425, Muhsin Mahdi in volume three of his edition of the Galland manuscript without further discussion supplies the photographic reproduction of an *Ašrafī dīnār* “put in circulation during the reign of al-Ashraf Khalil” in the year 690/1291¹⁰. Be that as it may, it appears to be perfectly justified to speak of a manuscript compiled in the fourteenth or fifteenth century¹¹. The Galland manuscript is in three volumes and covers nights 1-281/282.

(2) Probably second in chronological order is the manuscript Arabic 706 in the Manchester John Rylands Library, which according to paleographic evidence appears to date from the first half of the sixteenth century. It covers what pertains to parts 6-12 of the *Arabian Nights*, starting with night 255¹².

(3) The Vatican manuscript dated 1001/1592-93 has already been mentioned. It is judged in its second part to represent a direct copy from the Galland manuscript, breaking off at a similar point. This manuscript constitutes the only pre-eighteenth century copy used by Muhsin Mahdi in collating his edition of the Galland manuscript.

(4) Hellmut Ritter has pointed out a manuscript in Kayseri (Raşid Efendi Kütüphanesi, Edebiyat 38) which he dates no earlier than the tenth century A. H./sixteenth century A. D.¹³. Its “text is divided into nights, but the nights are not numbered, the space for the numbers, which probably were to have been rubricated, not having been filled”¹⁴. If the dating holds true, it would make the Kayseri manuscript the oldest known manuscript to contain the concluding passage of the *Arabian Nights*.

¹⁰ MAHDI (as in n. 2), vol. 3, page opposite to the title page.

¹¹ See R. IRWIN, *The Arabian Nights, A Companion*, London etc. 1994, pp. 60 f.

¹² D. B. MACDONALD, *The Earlier History of the Arabian Nights*, *JRAS* 1924, pp. 353-397, at pp. 391-393; H. and S. GROTZFELD, *Die Erzählungen aus Tausendundeiner Nacht*, Darmstadt 1984, p. 41.

¹³ H. RITTER, *Oriens* 2, 1949, pp. 287-289.

¹⁴ H. GROTZFELD, *Neglected Conclusions of the Arabian Nights*, *JAL* 16, 1985, pp. 74-87, at p. 78.

(5) Besides a Turkish translation whose copy is dated 1046/1636-37 covering nights 1-765 in a redaction partly identical with the Galland manuscript, the oldest Arabic manuscript covering a substantial part of the *Arabian Nights* is the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale manuscript arabe 3612. According to Zotenberg it was acquired by the Royal Library from Benoit de Maillet (whence its designation as the "Maillet"-ms.) around 1738 and was copied in the second half of the seventeenth century, covering (with several lacunas) nights 1-905, thus almost representing a "complete" copy.

(6) Another Paris manuscript according to Zotenberg was written in the seventeenth century or at the beginning of the eighteenth century. It is referred to as the sixth volume of an *Arabian Nights* and covers nights 823-1000.

(7) The manuscript MA VI 32 in the Tübingen University Library, which until very recently was regarded as the second oldest manuscript of the *Arabian Nights*, covers nights 283-542, and might thus be assumed to contain the second volume of an *Arabian Nights*' redaction in four volumes. Actually, it contains a version of the romance of 'Umar ibn an-Nu'mān, and thus constitutes an early example of how the *Nights* were enlarged with extraneous material. While a 1984 survey of the history of the *Arabian Nights* has the manuscript dating to the fifteenth century, Duncan B. MacDonald, who originally pointed out the manuscript, discussed the judgments by Seybold and Wetzstein, dating the manuscript anywhere between the middle of the fifteenth and "at latest at the beginning of the sixteenth century"¹⁵. Recently however, Muhsin Mahdi has pointed out that the earliest date mentioned by one of the manuscript's owners is Ġumādā II 13, 1252/September 26, 1836¹⁶. Lacking any further evidence, there appears to be no sensible reason for a dating as early as the fifteenth century.

Dating manuscripts that do not contain explicit mention of when they were copied is an extremely sensitive affair, since one has to rely on an authoritative evaluation of language, writing, paper quality or book-binding. Keeping this in mind, the dating of most items of the era prior to or contemporary with Galland is highly unsatisfactory. Moreover, any judgment might easily be influenced by wishful thinking. As for the *Arabian Nights*, besides the Tübingen manuscript just mentioned, this

¹⁵ MACDONALD (as in n. 12), p. 391; GROTZFELD (as in n. 12), p. 41.

¹⁶ MAHDI (as in n. 2), vol. 2, pp. 300-303.

statement holds especially true for the so-called Sabbagh manuscript which until quite recently had been regarded as the faithfully prepared copy of a Baghdad manuscript predating Galland's publication (*Ġumādā* II 2, 1115/October 21, 1703). But Muhsin Mahdi now has argued beyond any reasonable doubt that this manuscript was forged by Michel Sabbagh under the very eyes of the critical orientalist community he later presented it to¹⁷.

To sum up: What do the above considerations amount to in regard to the re-location of the *Arabian Nights*? Four points seem especially relevant:

(1) It is imperative to discard from a body of tales forming an integral (if not "authentic") part of the *Arabian Nights* those tales in the printed editions that are not to be found in any of the pre-Galland manuscripts. True, as MacDonald once put it, "a quite modern MS may carry a more complete tradition than one centuries older,"¹⁸ but given the situation of an extraneously and thus artificially intensified demand for complete manuscripts of the *Nights*, at least since the middle of the eighteenth century this statement does not hold true: Since no older manuscripts were available, authors had to exploit other sources, whether oral or written, and they were bound to deviate from anything like a standardized corpus of texts. This may already be relevant for the Maillet manuscript, which generates the impression that — in the words of Zotenberg — "ledit copiste ne suivait aucun modèle, qu'il a juxtaposé un peu au hasard les récits recueillis par lui-même", in an apparent attempt — maybe even a first attempt — to compile a collection really divided into one thousand and one nights¹⁹.

(2) One must also discard (as not constituting an integral part of the "authentic" anthology) those tales in the Galland publication not originating from his manuscript. This step is bound to be particularly painful for Western readers, since they have to part with the idea of their most cherished tales forming part of the *Nights*. "Aladdin," "Ali Baba," and the "Ebony Horse" derive from tales told to Galland by the Syrian Maronite Hannā Diyāb, and — at least since their Arabic manuscripts

¹⁷ MAHDI (as in n. 2), vol. 1, pp. 249-259 (Arabic); vol. 3, pp. 61-72 (English).

¹⁸ D. B. MACDONALD, *A Preliminary Classification of Some Mss. of the Arabian Nights*, *A Volume of Oriental Studies*, *Festschrift E. G. Browne*, Cambridge 1922, pp. 304-321, at p. 321.

¹⁹ H. ZOTENBERG, *Histoire d'Alâ al-Dîn ou La Lampe merveilleuse; texte arabe, avec une Notice sur quelques manuscrits des 1001 Nuits, Notices et extraits* 28, 1887, pp. 182 sq.

were identified as merely adapted translations based on Galland — there is no evidence that they ever formed part of a written redaction of the *Nights*. A similar statement is valid for the Sindbād-*tales* as well as for some of the longer romances, such as the romance of ʿUmar ibn an-Nuʿmān. The Sindbād-*tales*, although included in the eighteenth-century Turkish adaptation, originally constituted a separate book, and the romance of ʿUmar ibn an-Nuʿmān most probably also circulated in a distinct form before being added to the standard corpus of the *Nights*²⁰.

(3) What remains might appear as a fragment of the monument we have grown used to admire. Yet Mahdi in an essay originally published in 1983²¹ has argued that a substantial corpus of tales included in the older redactions of the *Arabian Nights* is shaped by — to put it in simple words — the common idea of teaching by stories. This would turn the apparent fragment into a powerful text-device capable of unifying a large number of tales of diverse origin, eventually even encompassing those of a basically entertaining character without any moralizing intent.

(4) Thus step by step the “complete” *Nights* divided into 1001 units boils down to a presumably much smaller core corpus linked by a common idea which at the same time would accommodate whatsoever other narrative material. It may be a solely personal conviction, but this is my idea of possibilities opened up by re-locating the *Nights*: First, if one were to reduce the original *Nights* to the ingenious powerful text-device mentioned above, one could abandon the imperative need for a definite and fixed closing of the frame story. Though the frame story itself remains essential, the introductory setting itself supplies sufficient impetus for the unifying accommodation of narrative material. Maybe Ibn an-Nadīm actually saw “complete” copies of the *Arabian Nights*, as he mentions in his *Fihrist* — but we do not know what his notion of “completeness” implied: Was he talking of a collection divided into 1001 units? Or of one whose frame story closed in the way he outlined? Or of one which incorporated a “complete” set of specific tales? The actual “complete” editions prepared after Galland certainly constitute the outcome of a highly compulsive act, namely to prepare what is asked for, even though it did not exist when being requested — or previously never did exist. In this way, the overwhelming appreciation of the *Arabian*

²⁰ R. PARET, *Der Ritterroman von ʿUmar an-Nuʿmān und seine Stellung zur Sammlung von Tausendundeine Nacht. Ein Beitrag zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte*, Tübingen 1927; see also C. OTT, *Der falsche Asket. Ursprung und Entwicklung einer Romanfigur aus der sirat al-amira Dāt al-Himma*, M. A. Thesis, Tübingen 1992.

²¹ M. MAHDI, *Exemplary Tales in the 1001 Nights, The 1001 Nights: Critical Essays and Annotated Bibliography*, Cambridge, Mass. 1983, pp. 1-24; republished in MAHDI (as in n. 2), vol. 3, pp. 140-163.

Nights in Europe from the eighteenth century onwards constitutes a sort of double-crooked feedback, with the West being fascinated and attracted by allegedly foreign narrative literature produced according to its own expectations and satisfying its own demand. Moreover, Galland's original compilation even incorporated tales (such as "Aladdin") which to a large extent either derived from his own Western fantasy or were adapted to Western taste, so what the Western audience did to some extent was nothing but appreciate Western standards clad in a foreign garb. Second, this approach would allow us to abandon a distinct division into nights, once the general idea was conveyed to the reader — and this is exactly what happens in a number of manuscripts. Finally, reducing the *Arabian Nights* to a kind of background notion would simply allow them to become what they actually did become in the end — a universal framework for imaginative narrative.

As Robert Irwin in his recent survey simply put it, "complex problems remain to be resolved"²² in connection with the textual history of the *Nights*. Most important of all, a large number of manuscripts in libraries in East and West needs to be analyzed in depth: not only those classified as parts of the *Arabian Nights*, such as the Tübingen manuscript, but moreover and probably in the first place the huge number of manuscripts containing spurious narrative material. Any one of the numerous and as yet unclassified compilations of anonymously collected narratives usually termed *mağmū'a* might constitute single volumes of the *Nights* without the surrounding leaves that would allow their identification. Besides, as the *Ḥikāyāt 'ağība* published by Hans Wehr²³ or the Moroccan manuscripts taken into consideration in the recent study by David Pinault²⁴ prove, these anonymous collections are bound to contain tales similar to those included in the *Nights*. After all, these *mağmū'as* constitute the mine exploited by all post-Galland compilers of the so-called "complete" *Nights*. Probably the outcome of such research into Near Eastern narrative literature will result in further dismantling our preconceived and largely self-constructed apprehension of the *Nights*. But such a loss appears an adequate sacrifice compared to the promise of understanding the *Nights* in any way close to their appreciation in the surroundings they originated from.

²² IRWIN (as in n. 11), p. 61.

²³ H. WEHR, *Das Buch der wunderbaren Erzählungen und seltsamen Geschichten* (Bibliotheca Islamica 18), Wiesbaden 1965.

²⁴ D. PINAULT, *Story-Telling Techniques in the Arabian Nights*, Leiden — New York — Cologne 1992.