Tailors of stories: biographers and the lives of the *khabar*

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Résumé : *Cet article traite des différents usages du* khabar*, l'élément constitutif de la prose classique arabe. Il vise à mettre en lumière comment les auteurs et les compilateurs dans les différentes disciplines furent à même de rassembler, mélanger et éditer le même matériau afin de produire les narrations les plus adaptées à leurs buts spécifiques. L'article prend aussi en considération le rôle des bribes de poésie enchâssée dans les récits en tant que noyaux autour desquels se rassemblent les passages en prose pour former un récit cohérent.*

Mots-clés: *Biographie arabe médievale Abū Bakr al-Sūlī (m. 335/947),* khabar.

Abstract: *This paper explores various uses of the* khabar*, the basic constituent unit of classical Arabic prose, illustrating how authors and compilers across different disciplines are able to collect, mix and edit the same material in order to produce narratives which respond to specific aims. It also investigates the role of snippets of poetry within stories as kernels around which clusters of prose congregate to form a coherent story.*

Keywords: *Medieval Arabic biography Abū Bakr al-Sūlī (d. 335/947),* khabar

Birth of an anecdote

What a *shaykh* is al-Sūlī indeed
librarywise he's the best there is!
When you ask him a question
seeking from him an explanation
He says "Quick, boys, bring
of science the *Such-and-Such* ream!"

Abū Bakr al-Sūlī (d. 335/947) is one of the few medieval Arabic scholars who are reasonably well-known, to this day, outside the field of medieval Arabic studies, and outside the scholarly world in general. What renders al-Sūlī memorable is that he was one of the earliest chess players known to have really existed,

and as such his name is known by chess historians as well as Arabists. Before acquiring this kind of universal fame, however, the polymorphous scholarship of al-Sūlī has enjoyed different reputations across various centuries, subjects, and genres. Through the analysis of some stories connected to al-Sūlīs life and work, this paper will attempt to illustrate how the same pool of material was used by different sources to shape a life portrait fitting their specific work. The short piece of *hijā'* translated freely above is found, with minor variations, in three biographies of al-Sūlī. Looking at the context of each occurrence will provide a good starting point for the present analysis.

Although by the third/ninth century oral transmission was but a convention in most scholarly disciplines (Schoeler, 2006), despising excessive reliance on paper remained an accepted standard. Al-Sūlī himself dismisses his older contemporary Ibn Abī Tāhir Tayfūr (d. 280/893) as being a *sahafī*, one who relies on the written word (Toorawa, 2005: 22). And yet there can be little doubt as to the meaning of the three lines above: al-Sūlī may fancy himself a scholar, but he needs to look everything up in one of his books, which makes clear that he has no memory and is, therefore, no *shaykh*.

Al-Sūlī's fondness of books is a matter of record: one of his earliest biographers, the late fourth/tenth century bookseller Ibn al-Nadīm, calls him *jammā' li'l-kutub*, a collector of books (Ibn al-Nadīm, 1973: 167). Such a description cannot but have a positive tone when found in a work attempting to catalogue all books ever written; however, Ibn al-Nadīm does not refrain from accusing al-Sūlī of plagiarism a few lines later in the biography.

Our short piece of *hijā'* appears about a century later in *Ta'rīkh Baghdād* (al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī, 1931: III, 427), preceded by the following:

> [Abū 'l-Qāsim] Al-Azharī said: I heard Abū Bakr b. Shādhān say: I saw that al-Sūlī had a house full of books which he had arranged in rows. Their covers were of different colours, each row of books in a colour: one row was red, another green, another yellow, etc. [... al-Sūlī] would say: "for each these books I have a *samā'*".
>
> Abū 'Abdallāh al-Husayn [b. al-Hasan] b. Muhammad b. al-Qāsim al-'Alawī [al-Jawālīqī] recited to us: Abū l-Hasan Muhammad b. Abī Ja'far the genealogist recited to me: Abū Sa'īd, known as al-'Uqaylī, recited to me, composed by himself on al-Sūlī (*ramal*): ...

Al-Khatīb presents his reader with two different items of information, each equipped with a detailed *isnād*, where one source describes al-Sūlī's library and a second, separate source relates the short invective poem. The first report seems to be neutral or even positive: Ibn Shādhān, a *muhaddith*, appears to admire al-Sūlī's meticulous organisation, and acknowledges his claim that he had learned each book from a teacher and had not just bought them and read them on his own. Al-Khatīb seems to be the one who makes the connection between the two reports and juxtaposes them. This is the usual *modus operandi* of the author of the *Ta'rīkh Baghdād*, who sticks as close as possible to the conventions of *hadīth* transmitting, giving a strong impression of neutrality and leaving his reader to draw her own conclusions. However, conclusions can hardly diverge: following a claim with a damning poem will automatically discredit and ridicule such claim. And in fact, later biographers of al-Sūlī seem to have taken the hint.

Our poem also appears about two centuries later in Yāqūt's *Muʿjam al-udabāʾ* (Yāqūt 1993: 2677-2678), where it is introduced as follows:

> Abū Bakr al-Sūlī had a library which he had devoted to the different books he had collected. He had arranged them in it in the best of orders. He would say to his friends: "I have a *samāʿ* for everything which is in this library". When he wanted to consult one of these books, he would say: "Boy, bring me such-and-such book". Abū Saʿīd al-ʿUqaylī heard him say this one day, and recited: ...

Yāqūt makes a first step towards merging the two statements in that he eliminates *isnād*s and also adds an etiologic remark for a line in the poem. Such a remark succeeds in binding the two paragraphs together: the poem stems from an habit of al-Sūlī which is reported together with other information on his library. The only name left is that of al-ʿUqaylī, who is mentioned as the author of the *hijāʾ* but is, in turn, also bound to the preceding *khabar* through the remark that he himself saw al-Sūlī practising such habit.

The final stage of the merging process is found in the *Wafayāt al-Aʿyān* (Ibn Khallikān, 1968-1972: IV, 360):

> Despite [al-Sūlī's] virtues, the agreement about his skill in the sciences, his humour and his refinement, there was still a detractor who lampooned him, albeit mildly. It was Abū Saʿīd al-ʿUqaylī; he saw that [al-Sūlī] had a house full of books which he had classified. Their covers were of different colours, and he would say: "For all these I have a *samāʿ*'". When he needed to consult one of them, he would say: "Boy, bring me such-and-such book". The above-mentioned Abū Saʿīd al-ʿUqaylī recited these lines: ...

In this last version, the poet al-ʿUqaylī has climbed a virtual ladder within the story, getting to be its main character beside al-Sūlī. In short, we have seen how two short factual *khabar*s develop, through successive editorial hands, into one coherent narrative *khabar*, a self-contained anecdote which will function in many different contexts.

The *khabar*, a (true) story

The literal meaning of *khabar*, which in the present study will be translated with 'anecdote', 'story', or 'statement', is 'item of news', 'piece of information'. It constitutes the basic element for most genres of classical Arabic prose (Leder and Kilpatrick 1992: 10-11) and has been widely explored and mined for historical evidence and literary content. The main quality of the *khabar* can at the same time be considered its main shortcoming: it is a self contained anecdote of varying but limited length, often accompanied by an *isnād* validating its authenticity. As such, it can be reused for different purposes, mixed with other *khabar*s, shortened, edited, grouped thematically or chronologically and, last but not least, forged. A significant amount of scholarship has been devoted to analysing historical and biographical prose, whose building block is the *khabar*, to trace the origins of various strands of stories and separate fact from fiction, with methods often reminiscent of those employed by religious scholars to establish the authenticity of *hadīth* (Schoeler, 1996). If this is a very hard task within works of biography and historiography, it becomes almost

impossible once we move into the realm of literature (Günther, 2000: 172): as has been pointed out, a forger who followed some simple rules would be able to produce credible and entertaining narrative material (Kilito 1985: 72-82). Moreover, going back to the example above, some of the seemingly factual information we are given in the final version of the story is but an an attempt to explain the poetry and would have little sense without it.

For the purpose of this investigation, it is irrelevant whether the stories at which we look describe real historical facts or not. In fact, it may be argued that such question is irrelevant altogether and can never be resolved. What seems much more important is that the premise on which the readership/audience received an anecdote was that it was true. This is illustrated, for instance, by the continuing convention of *isnād*s in non-religious contexts long after oral transmission had ceased to be the standard way of communicating knowledge, and by the continuing stigma attached to tales as the opposite of anecdotes, although in practice the two forms intersected substantially (al-Musawi 2007: 262-264).
The premise of authenticity does not necessarily mean that the public perceived all *akhbār* as the absolute truth; rather, one did not ask oneself such a question – it was, in other words, irrelevant (Kilpatrick, 1998). Thus, while factually it is a backward projection to claim that al-'Uqaylī had seen al-Sūlī send for his books, editorially it is important to give more space to al-'Uqaylī , because it helps framing the poetry within a realistic story which enhances its effect on the reader/listener.

All of the above is summarised effectively by al-Jāhiz in the third/ninth century: in the introduction to his *Kitāb al-bukhalā'*, he warns his patron that he has omitted two types of stories from his collection on misers: those where the characters (*ashāb*) should not be named, out of respect or affection, and would be recognised even if they were not named; and those in which the characters are not named and the story as a consequence become uninteresting because linking the story to an appropriate individual (i.e. somebody well known for his avarice) will make it twice as enjoyable, whereas an unlikely protagonist will leave the public lukewarm. Moreover, al-Jāhiz will not include stories whose sources (*arbāb*) are unknown; all sources in the book are known, although al-Jāhiz does not name all of them out of fear or respect (al-Jāhiz, 2001: 30-32; Kilito, *loc. cit.*).

The same reasoning applies to the attribution of poetry: it does not do to publish an invective under one's name if one is known as a *ghazal* poet; it is advisable to attribute such invective to someone whose name will enhance the poem's effect on its audience. One further step in the evolution of our story may have been the transformation of the unimportant al-'Uqaylī into a famous lampooner such as, for instance, Ibn Bassām (302/916), whose reputation as the height of *hijā'* was so high that poetry was composed in his style and attributed to him, a gift which he accepted willingly (Osti, 2007).

Another characteristic which *khabar* and poetry have in common is that they can be recycled: Kilito (1985: 31-40) has described the preislamic panegyrist as tailor who, if his patron does not pay up, can get his revenge by reusing

the same poem for another patron. This process is similar to the work of the author/compiler of prose with a set of *akhbār*: he unstitches and re-stitches *akhbār* together in order to fit not, or not only, the wishes of a patron but the context and aims of his work. In the case of our story, Ibn Khallikān uses the third *khabar*, that containing the poem, as a sponge to absorb the snippets of information around it, thus forming a coherent narrative.

Over the last fifteen years, many studies, beside the ones already cited, have approached the question of the different uses of *khabar* material. Within this framework, the present study takes inspiration in particular from an analysis of a group of *khabar* as they appear in different genres (Malti-Douglas, 1999), focussing instead on how material on the life and work of al-Sūlī can be classified according to how the sources use it to yield a particular reputation.

Footnotes: the etiologic anecdote

In its final form, the library story can be described as an etiology: a cluster of short statements, later turned into one single *khabar*, which explains and frames a piece of poetry, illustrating it with a – plausible if not true – story, in the same way in which early Islamic historians explained the foundation of a city (Noth, 1997: 189-195). On a more general level, a similar etiologic function is the standard role of the *khabar* in biographical literature. The typical biographical entry will begin with a short description consisting in a number of statements on the character and qualities of the biographee. These will be followed by a series of *akhbār*, often grouped thematically, which are at the same time an explanation and an illustration of such statements.

Here are, for instance, Yāqūt's introductory remarks on al-Sūlī:

> […] Abū Bakr was born in Baghdad and received his education there [his main teachers and students]. He himself was an historian, an *adīb* and a *kātib*. He was a well-established boon companion of the caliphs [names of the caliphs he served]. He was also unequalled in his times in the game of chess, to the point that it was said that he was the one who invented it; but it is not so, as chess was invented by Sissah al-Hindī for Shihrām, king of al-Fars.

Later in the short entry, Yāqūt uses a *khabar* related in al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj al-dhahab* (al-Mas'ūdī 1965-79: V, 218, §3470):

> It was related that al-Rādī bi-llāh went out for a stroll and came to a pleasant and blooming garden. He said to the people who were present: "Have you ever seen a view more beautiful than this?" Everybody praised what was there and described its beauty. Al-Rādī said: "The game of al-Sūlī at chess is more beautiful that this and than what you have described".

Al-Mas'ūdī reports this *khabar* in an excursus within his description of the caliph al-Rādī, from whom al-Sūlī transmitted much poetry. Yāqūt uses it to substantiate two of his statements about al-Sūlī: that he had been a courtier and that he had been the best chess player of his time. That al-Sūlī was an *adīb* and a *kātib* is illustrated later, when Yāqūt provides a bibliography of al-Sūlī's works.

Omissions: the mocking anecdote

The short descriptions usually found at the beginning of biographical may also be conspicuous for their omissions. Consider the *incipit* of al-Sūlī's biography in *Ta'rīkh Baghdād* (*loc. cit.*):

> [...] He was one of the scholars on the arts of *adab*, knowledgeable in the *akhbār* of the kings, the *ayyām* of the caliphs, the glorious deeds of the nobles and the classes of poets [list of teachers]. He had a vast authority for transmission, a good memory for *adab*s, skill in composing books and collocating their elements in their place. He was the boon companion of a number of caliphs, composed *akhbār* and biographies of them and collected their poems. He also wrote the *akhbār* of ancient and modern poets, viziers, *kuttāb* and leaders. He was sincere in his beliefs, he followed good practice and his advice was respected. He had a good ancestry [...] Abū Bakr al-Sūlī was also the author of much poetry of praise, *ghazal* and other types [list of students].

What is conspicuous for its absence, in a collection on traditionists, is an evaluation of al-Sūlī's reliability as a *muhaddith*. Immediately afterwards, as is his habit al-Khatīb starts by reporting one *hadīth* transmitted by al-Sūlī. However, the *hadīth* turns out to have a faulty *isnād* in the version transmitted by al-Sūlī, and this is enough to show his reputation as a *muhaddith*. And in fact, the lengthy biography goes on in a downward spiral: the *hadīth* is followed by a saying of a 'alid imam, then, after several anecdotes containing poetry, the question of transmission returns:

> Muhammad b. al-'Abbas al-Khazzāz: I was present while al-Sūlī was relating the *hadīth* of the Prophet [beginning with]: "he who fasts at ramadān and also some (*shay'an*)[1] of shawwāl". I said: "O *shaykh*, put the two dots which are under the *yā'* above it." He did not understand what I meant, so I said: "Actually, it is *sittan min shawwāl*".

This gross mistake in the transmission of *hadīth* confirms al-Sūlī's incompetence. Finally, al-Khatīb seals the entry with the two short *khabar*s on al-Sūlī's library, which contribute to the general negative impression. Thus, despite offering a sympathetic description of al-Sūlī at the beginning of the entry, by its end has managed to discredit al-Sūlī through the mere use of anecdotes. As has been shown above, later sources may have a more positive opinion of al-Sūlī but retain this final mocking anecdote as a conclusion of their biographies.

Osmosis: travelling across *akhbār* – the climbing word

In the library story we have seen how one individual name gradually cannibalises all others and climbs to the top of the anecdote, becoming its main agent. A similar mechanism applies to clusters of anecdotes or larger groups such as entire biographical entries. This is illustrated by how successive sources handle the relation between al-Sūlī and chess.

Al-Sūlī's ability at chess is recorded from very early on: al-Mas'ūdī, a contemporary of al-Sūlī, follows the story of al-Rādī's admiration mentioned above with an account of how al-Sūlī's arrival at court at the time of al-Muktafī dethroned the

then chess player in residence. Some decades after al-Mas'ūdī, Ibn al-Nadīm (*loc. cit.*) mentions that al-Sūlī "was one of the best of his time at chess"; then, within a specific section on chess-playing, two books by him are listed (Ibn al-Nadīm, 1973: 173). It is worth noting that chess is not mentioned in the initial description of al-Sūlī, but towards the end of the entry, just before his date of death.

While al-Khatīb's long biography of al-Sūlī does not refer to chess at all, in Yāqūt's short entry al-Sūlī's qualities as a chess player have made it into the first summarising paragraph of his biography, as has been seen above, and constitute his main individual feature. Ibn Khallikān (*loc. cit.*) takes this trend further, giving al-Sūlī's full name as "Abū Bakr Muhammad b. Yahyā b. 'Abdallāh b. al-'Abbās b. Muhammad b. Sūl Tikīn, the *kātib* known as *al-Sūlī al-Shitranjī*". In other words, al-Sūlī's relation to chess is now encapsulated in his very *shuhra*, the name by which he is known. Not only that, but Ibn Khallikān relates both stories on chess found in al-Mas'ūdī and, above all, he inserts in the biography a long excursus on the origins of the game, as we shall see below.

Thus, the word *shitranj* has worked its way from the bottom of al-Sūlī's qualities in *Kitāb al-Fihrist* to his main characterising feature in *Wafayāt al-A'yān*.

Self-promotion: the cross-referring anecdote

Ibn Khallikān's long excursus on chess provides a good illustration of the cross-referring anecdote. This is related to what has elsewhere been described as a proleptic *khabar* (Malti-Douglas, 1999: 318). It indicates a *khabar* working as a bookmark which the author uses to send the reader to look up other parts of his books, or another one of his works.

Like Yāqūt, Ibn Khallikān (*loc. cit.*) says that some went as far as saying that al-Sūlī had invented chess, but this was wrong. While Yāqūt only mentions the inventor's name, Ibn Khallikān goes on to offer a long etiologic story, relating how the Indian king had been presented the game by a wise man called Sissa as an improvement on backgammon, and how the gift of wheat asked by Sissa, an example of arithmetic progression, was so great that all wheat in the world would not have been enough to pay it. The origin of chess is a story first found in the earliest known treatise on chess, probably authored by al-Sūlī himself, and later reported by al-Ya'qūbī in his account of the history of India (Osti, 2008). It is a good story, and Ibn Khallikān recycles it for his biographical dictionary although it is hardly biographical material. Moreover, this story in turn provides an occasion for Ibn Khallikān to explain how the amount of wheat requested by Sissa is calculated, a process which had been explained to him personally by "a mathematician from Alexandria". At the end of his explanation, which involves calculating the amount of cities in the whole world, the mathematician mentions the circumference of the earth.

Ibn Khallikān adds:

> This is definite and there is no doubt about it, and were it not for fear of being too long and going beyond my original intention, I would explain it. I shall mention this in my biography of the Banū Mūsā.

And in fact, Ibn Khallikān's biography of Muhammād b. Mūsā b. Shākir (d. 259/863) and his brothers (Ibn Khallikān, 1968-72: V, 161-163), who are credited with being the first in the Muslim world to have calculated the circumference of the earth, details how they proceeded with this calculation. With this final reference, Ibn Khallikān has not only shown his competence in foreign sciences; he has also attempted to make sure that his reader looks up other parts of his encyclopaedic work, which may even entail having to buy another volume.

Stitching

We have seen above anecdotes used to provide evidence; to evaluate an individual and lampoon him; to serve as stepping stone for a concept; and to provide a link to other places. These are but a few examples of the many uses of the *khabar*, but in the context of al-Sūlī's life they are particularly significant, because although all sources mentioned here draw from the same pool of material, they edit it in such a way that the resulting individual portraits are quite different from one another. Thus, while in the *Kitāb al-Fihrist* al-Sūlī is a solid scholar, albeit not without defects, for al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī he is a frivolous man with no solid knowledge, only good for the entertainment which his stories provide. Yāqūt offers very little information on al-Sūlī besides his skill at chess, and finally Ibn Khallikān uses al-Sūlī's biography as a pretext to discuss chess and various stories connected to the game.

We go back to the image of the author/compiler as a tailor and of the *khabar* as his cloth, which he cuts and sews to fit his ideal reader. Thanks to this method, al-Sūlī's biography enjoys a longer and more varied life than that of his subject.

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Notes

[1] The published version has here the correct *sittan*, but I prefer to explicitate al-Sūlī's mistake in order to make the anecdote more immediately understandable.