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ARABIC SHORT NARRATIVES AND *NARRATIO BREVIS*:

SOME REMARKS

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1. Preliminary remarks¹

In the last decades,² Classical Arabic prose literature, for which a “researcher’s sketch map” was proposed some thirty years ago (Leder, Kilpatrick 1992), has seen increasing scholarly attention. Our knowledge of literary prose, and particularly about the short forms of narrative commonly referred to as *ḥabar* ‘anecdote’, has been greatly enriched by essays like Geris 1990; Malti Douglas 1985, 1988; Marzolph 1992; Leder 1998; Hámori 1996; Beaumont 1996, 1998; Özkan 2008, just to name a few, and comprehensive studies on the *ḥabar* and literary analyses of the *ḥadīth* have also been published (al-Qāḍī 1998; Yaqtīn 1997). In what follows, we wish to contribute by emphasizing the relevance of some concepts taken from studies on medieval European literature which we will take as a formal term of reference to have better insights into the “Arabic anecdote”, hence *ḥabar*. It is within this perspective that we propose to interpret the *ḥabar* in the light of categories typical of *narratio brevis*, a category including all those narrative forms whose fundamental feature is brevity (*brevitas*) and a formal model which can profitably be used for Arabic literature.² Although some classification of the different genres of prose seemed to exist in Arabic culture (Yaqtīn 1997:146ff.), short forms of narrative as a category have never had an explicit theorization. Having recourse to conceptual tools created for other literary traditions could help a better understanding of forms and functions of the Arabic narratives and facilitate the comparison of the Arabic literary tradition with others.

Short narrative forms were referred to — depending on the period and context of usage — as *ḥadīth*, *ḥikāya*, *ḥabar*, *qiṣṣa*, *nādira* etc. (Abdelmeguid 1954; Pellat, “*ḥikāya*,” “*qiṣṣa*,” “*nādira*,”; Spies, 1977: col. 685–718). al-Ġāḥiz (d. 255/869) in

¹ I express my warmest gratitude to Renzo Bragantini for his valuable suggestions in the field of European medieval literature: without his generous help this article would not have been written.

² In this article, we develop some suggestions already put forward in Ghersetti 2003. A similar approach in Hamori 1996 is based on Jolles’ specific definition of *exemplum*.

his introduction to the *Kitāb al-buḥalā'* uses, seemingly without significant differences in meaning, the words *ḥabar*, *nādira* (more frequent) and *ḥadīṭ*. At-Tanūhī (d. 384/994) in his introduction to *Niṣwār* uses *ḥikāya*, *ḥadīṭ* and *ḥabar* without apparent distinction to refer to stories transmitted during learned conversations, while in the introduction to his *Farağ* he uses almost exclusively *ḥabar*.³ Al-Ḥaṭīb al-Bağdādī (d. 463/1071) in *Tatfīl* uses *ḥikāya* and *ḥabar*, along with *nādira*. Later, *nādira* seems to be associated mostly with the sense of “odd,” “strange” or “unusual” thus corresponding to “curiosity”, as we can notice in the categorization hinted at by az-Zamaḥṣarī (d. 538/1144) “*bāb at-ta'ağğub wa-dīkr al-'ağā'ib wa-n-nawādir wa-mā ḥarağa min al-'ādiyāt*” (az-Zamaḥṣarī, *Rabī'*, IV:7). In his trilogy (*Adkiyā'*, *Ḥamqā* and *Zirāf*) Ibn al-Ğawzī (d. 597/1201) uses both *ḥikāya* and *ḥabar*, the second prevailing. The word *ḥabar* seems to have gained a growing popularity among the classical authors from the fifth/eleventh century on, when it was used more and more frequently in the titles of works to give them the flavor of truthfulness and/or historicity. For short forms like *ḥabar*, *ḥikāya*, *qiṣṣa* (but also *sīra*) the overarching definition of *anwā' ḥabariyya* has been also proposed (Yaqṭīn 1997:195ff.), thus paralleling the wide definitions “exemplary forms” or “exemplary discourse” in use in medieval European literature. For sake of brevity, here we will use *ḥabar* as a hypernym for the different narrative forms perceived as “true” in the Arabic literary tradition, echoing the category of *narratio authentica* ‘authentic story’ as opposed to *narratio ficta*. *Ḥabar* thus refers to any “true” self-contained narrative unit lacking formal independence and devoid of an independent value that is the basic constituent of literary texts.⁴ In what follows we will analyze the main features, functions, and relationship with the context of the *ḥabār* in parallel with the corresponding features of the *exemplum*.⁵ Our corpus is selected from texts of *adab* literature dating mainly from the ninth to the twelfth centuries.

Before dwelling on our analysis, it is worth stressing that *ḥadīṭ* in the technical sense, i.e. “*dicta and facta*” of the Prophet, is to be seen as a special kind of *ḥabar*, and shows remarkable analogies with the *exemplum stricto sensu* as defined by Jean de Garlande (thirteenth century): *exemplum est dictum vel factum alicuius autentice persone dignum imitationis* (an *exemplum* is a word or a deed of an authentic person worthy of imitation) (Bremond, Le Goff, Schmitt 1982:29). This “strict” definition will be integrated into a wider frame of analysis based on the “open and provisory

³ This term, however, can have different nuances in different contexts (Özkan 2008:90ff).

⁴ It also is a pillar of Arabic historiographical literature; for the relationship between *aḥbār*, historiography and literary use see Leder 1992 and 2005.

⁵ Intended in the wider acceptance of “exemplary forms” or even “exemplary discourse”, in which the dialectics of the different genres explain both textual components and social function (Jauss 1977:34–47).

definition” (“definition ouverte et provisoire”) of Bremond, Le Goff, Schmitt 1982:37-38.

2. Structure

Habar and *exemplum* have a similar structure consisting in the division of the single units into two well-defined parts, one purely narrative and the other carrying the mention of the source,⁶ and the (mostly oral) channel of transmission. This is mirrored in *ḥabar* and is still more perceptible in *ḥadīṭ*, where the mention of the full chain of transmitters is a *conditio sine qua non*. Verbs of perception vouching for the authenticity of the information related are very frequent in the *exempla*: the most widely used formula (roughly fifty percent of the total number of formulae in the *Sermones Vulgares* of Jacques de Vitry, d. 1240) is *audivi* ‘I heard’. The thirteenth century *exempla* in most cases only contain a concise formula indicating the transmission of the story (*audivi, dicitur*) without mentioning the source, a formula that recalls the kind of very succinct or anonymous *isnāds* so frequent in the literary *ḥabar* (*balaḡanī* etc.). In both *ḥabar* and *exemplum* the authoritative source, explicit or implicit, marks the story as true, and the narrative part proper is built using narrative techniques that insist on the bare relation of facts, thus giving the impression of a straightforward observation of reality.⁷ The syntagmatic decomposition of the *exemplum* into its most basic form also shows a part consisting in a narrative text and a normative text which is usually peripheral to the narrative part, called lesson or *sensus*. This peripheral element disappears in the collections of *exempla* of the ‘golden age’ (thirteenth to fourteenth century), the period of the most important literary developments of the *exemplum*. At that time the connection of the *exemplum* with its discursive context becomes looser and looser but the *sensus*, or *moralisatio*, is still supposed to be a basic constituent. Analogously, in the literary *ḥabar* the normative function does not materialize in a text but remains implicit and is recognizable in the positioning of the narrative unit in a larger context. Functionally, in principle, both *exemplum* and *ḥabar* (and notably that specific kind of *ḥabar* that is the *ḥadīṭ*) are examples and models of behavior to conform to (or to avoid), lessons to follow (or not to follow). The function is paradigmatic, the aim didactic or edifying. Finally, a further point of contact between *exemplum stricto sensu* and *ḥadīṭ* could be hinted at: the classification system of collections of *exempla*, i.e., the ‘logical’ order based on a grouping of different entries concerning

⁶ On the syntagmatic division of the *exempla* see Bremond, Le Goff, Schmitt 1982:113ff., esp. 120–131.

⁷ On narrative techniques in Arabic and medieval European short narratives see respectively Beaumont 1996 and Del Corno 1989.

a specific notion (Bremond, Le Goff, Schmitt 1982:60–63) largely resembles the criteria of arrangement in the *muṣannafāt*.

3. Features

Further formal analogies between *exemplum* and *ḥabar* are considered in what follows. It is important to remember that, although vestigial, the constitutive traits of both forms are always present and can materialize with varying degrees of intensity. It is thus possible to find two stages of evolution one beside the other in the same work, as in the case of the tale of the man and the snake in at-Tanūḥī's *Farağ* mentioned below, or of the *ḥabar* in the *Kitāb al-wuzarā'* of al-Ġahšiyārī (Hámori 1996). Jean de Garlande's definition of the *exemplum* emphasizes two basic features: authenticity (*authentice persone*) and the paradigmatic value of the sayings and deeds (*dignum imitatione*). The *exemplum* is then *narratio authentica*, and as such differentiated from all that is classified as *narratio ficta* in the system of the different forms of *narratio brevis*, thus echoing the same dividing line present in Arabic literature: truthfulness is, in both cases, the criterion of discreteness among two categories and their different genres. The paradigmatic value too is, at least in principle, a fundamental of the literary *ḥabar*. The “open and provisory definition” of Bremond, Le Goff, Schmitt, offers other useful clues to gain better insight into the literary *ḥabar*: in it the *exemplum* is defined as “un récit bref donné comme véridique et destiné à être inséré dans un discours (en général un sermon) pour convaincre un auditoire par une leçon salutaire” (Bremond, Le Goff, Schmitt 1982:37-38). This definition insists on the narrative character of the *exemplum*, its brevity, its authenticity (the story is always presented as historical or factual), the dependence on a larger context,⁸ its purpose and finally, its aim (originally salvation, but later amusement when the *exemplum* becomes a ‘popular literary convention’).⁹ In this “open” definition formal traits here are put side by side with the conventions of use and the function of the literary units. Also relevant are the distinctive features described by Humbert de Romans, the fifth general of the Dominicans (d. 1277):¹⁰ *exemplum* is characterized by *auctoritas*, *brevitas*, *veritas*, and *delectatio*. These features are also recognizable in the form of the *ḥabar*, in its use and function in *adab* literature, even if to different degrees, and as such can constitute an appropriate

⁸ L'*exemplum* “ne se suffit donc à lui-même” (Bremond, Le Goff, Schmitt 1982:159); “ne constitue pas un ‘genre’... par la nécessité où il se trouve de toujours s’inscrire dans un autre discours, un sermon, un ouvrage d’édification, une chronique, un traité juridique etc. L'*exemplum* n’a pas d’autonomie” (Berlioz, Polo de Beaulieu 1998:405).

⁹ For the evolution and the literary developments of the *exempla* see Berlioz, Polo de Beaulieu 1998: ch. 3.

¹⁰ In *De dono timoris* (also known as *Tractatus de habundantia exemplorum*), as summarized by Picone 1985:19–20.

working tool that supplies the researcher with descriptive categories wide enough to include Arabic *ḥabar* in its diverse forms.

The first and foremost feature common to *ḥabar* and *exemplum* is the narrative character: even the shortest texts have some plot which can be analyzed into some distinguishable ‘movements’, like in the following example.

He [*ba‘d al-quṣṣās*] said: “A man called two singers and when they had to start singing one said to the other: ‘Follow me’; ‘No, it is you who will follow me’; ‘No, it is you who will follow me.’ When the matter had been going on for a long time, the owner of the house said: ‘Now all of you follow me.’” (Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Adkiyā*, 157)

This two-line-long *ḥabar*, although consisting almost entirely of a dialogue, can be analyzed as the sequence of the following functions: A enters a contract with B and C; B and C do not comply with it; A breaks the contract.

Second is the brevity (*brevitas*), common to all these narratives. The Arabic sources do not tell us much about what a short story is or, better, what brevity is in prose, and particularly in narrative. Though the idea of conciseness (*iğāz*) has been much discussed and is considered a typical feature of Arabic discourse and eloquence, regarded as a praiseworthy characteristic of speech, and showing a well-defined relationship between meaning and form (van Gelder 1981), the idea of brevity in connection with narratives remains undefined in the literary and stylistic theories of the Arabs. On the contrary, it is a fundamental to medieval European poetics, in which *abbreviatio* and *amplificatio* are two alternative modes of literature. More than an objective measure (number of pages, quantity of words) brevity is, in both Arabic and European narratives, a quality or an ‘interior duration.’ Besides its duration in terms of time, it also has a psychological dimension which is by far more difficult to reckon. *Brevitas* is by no means accidental but rather a formal model (Zumthor 1983).

What precisely makes us perceive as ‘short’ *ḥabars* of different length is not the quantity but rather a quality of the narrative called linearity, i.e., the fact that the narrative has a linear progression: everything that has been introduced in the beginning and narrated in the middle has been resolved. Nothing is left unsettled; nothing is left over after the story is narrated. The narrative is a closed, self-contained unit: that is why a *ḥabar* eighteen lines long has the same ‘interior duration’ as a *ḥabar* three and a half lines long. An example of the first case is the thirty-three lines ‘detective story’ of the caliph al-Mu‘taḍid:¹¹ the caliph is watching the construction of a house when he sees a black slave showing an astonishing glee and energy. When the slave is asked about the reason for his behavior he does not reply clearly, nor does Ibn Ḥamdūn, who is present, have any reliable explanation to offer. The caliph

¹¹ Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Adkiyā*, 47–48; cmp. al-Tanūhī, *Niṣwār*, VII, 68–69; on this kind of anecdote see Malti Douglas 1988.

says that this is the behavior of someone who has gotten money not belonging to him or, in other words, of a thief. The slave is beaten and confesses his crime: he murdered a person to steal his money, burned the corpse, and threw the bones into the Tigris, and is light-hearted because of the *dīnārs* he now possesses. The caliph investigates further and succeeds in finding out the identity of the victim and in restoring the money stolen to the victim's wife. The slave is put to death. In this *ḥabar* nothing is left unsettled: the narration focuses on the cleverness of al-Muʿtaḍid in solving a difficult case, and the material of the narration contains both the difficult case, the process of investigation, and the final and just solution (Sklovskij 1966:94–95). To comprehend the story, one does not need to look for something outside it, since everything is contained within the story itself. The same can be said for shorter stories, like the three-line long story on the *qāḍī* Iyās b. Muʿāwiya.¹²

al-Ġāḥiẓ said: “Iyās was making the pilgrimage. He heard the barking of a dog in the distance and said: ‘This is a tied dog.’ Then he heard its barking [again] and said: ‘It has been released.’ Then they got ultimately to the water and asked them [the people who owned the dog] about the dog and learned that indeed he had been tied up and then released. So, he was asked how he had known this and replied: ‘Its barking, while the dog was tied, was coming from one point; afterwards I heard it sometimes coming near and sometimes going away’”.

The narrative contains all the elements necessary for its development and conclusion: the enigma, the solution proposed by Iyās,¹³ and its explanation. Nothing remains unresolved and every element necessary to the development of the story is contained within the narrative itself. It is exactly this closed structure and this ‘poetics of brevity’ that make this possible.

It is worth remembering that brevity is also a quality dependent on the duration of its oral performance, which imposes a cohesion of narration different from that of a written text. The relevance of oral performance to the quality of *brevitas* in the forms of the medieval *narratio brevis* has been duly underlined by Zumthor 1983; Beaumont points to the same kind of relationship (brevity of the narratives/oral performance) in connection with early Muslim traditions: “For my own part, I think it likely that the traditions existed in oral form, and if that is the case, then there is some validity to this explanation of the brevity of the *ḥabar* narrative” (Beaumont 1996:7). The oral dimension of the performance of literary *aḥbār* is something that must not be forgotten, even in periods of what was defined as ‘writerly culture’ (Toorawa 2005). References to oral transmission are not rare in the texts: in the introduction to their collections of *aḥbār* both al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī (*Tatfīl*) and Ibn

¹² Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Adkiyā*, 69; cmp. al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān*, II, 75–76.

¹³ Iyās b. Muʿāwiya, *qāḍī* of Basra (d. 121/739), was proverbial for his perspicacity (cmp. *Adkā min Iyās*, Freytag 1968 I:593); he is also mentioned as the champion of *firāsa* in ps. Suyūṭī *Kanz al-madfūn* (Canova 2004).

al-Ġawzī (*Adkiyā*, *Hamqā*) refer to auditory perception and not to the reception of a written text: they talk for instance of *samā*, *istimā* and *sāmi* 'ūn.¹⁴ If we think of at-Tanūhī's *Niṣwār* we have a sense of how the narration of stories was spread in the circles of learned persons in the tenth century. The author declares that he wants to register only what is oral and what had not been fixed in a written form until that moment, even if it sounds somehow odd to the reader because unusual (*hāriġa* 'an as-sunan al-ma'rūfa fī l-aḥbār wa-t-turuq al-ma'lūfa fī l-ḥikāyāt wa-l-āthār; at-Tanūhī *Niṣwār*, I, 1). This means that, if the narrative corpus had largely been fixed at that time, there was still a creative trend of narratives considered worthy of being written down for further citation whenever necessary. This also means that oral performance had a certain impact on the length and narrative techniques of stories.

A further clue to the strict correlation between classical Arabic *narratio brevis* and oral performance (esp. the transmission of *ḥadīth*, Toorawa 1985:9ff), also in connection with the practice of the sermon, is the fact that traditionists and preachers not infrequently composed monographic *adab* works, which we take as not accidental: al-Madā'inī (d. 228/842) and Ibn Abī d-Dunyā (d. 284/894) and their *al-Faraġ ba'da š-šidda*; an-Nīsābūrī (d. 406/1015) and his '*Uqalā*' *al-maġānīn*; al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī and his *Kitāb al-buḥalā*' and *Tatfīl*; Ibn al-Ġawzī and his trilogy *Adkiyā*, *Hamqā*, and *Zirāf* are only some instances. The custom of telling stories (even if of a specific kind, like stories of the Prophet and edifying stories), is typical of the activity of these two categories of learned men. A certain number of narratives was a cultural stock of both traditionists and preachers. The link between the homiletic practice and the short forms of narratives is intriguing. Neither the *ḥabar* nor the *exemplum* is an independent unit, and both must be set within a wider text: in medieval European literature this is usually a sermon where the *exemplum*, used as a rhetorical device, has the pragmatic function of stimulating the attention of the audience to make them listen to useful things and to fix them in their memories. As in medieval European literature, in Arabic homiletic practice the preacher had not only to use narratives to persuade his audience with paradigmatic stories but also to arouse the listeners' attention and avoid boredom. In this sense the *ḥabar* is a rhetorical device widely used to stir conscience.¹⁵ Ibn al-Ġawzī in *Kitāb al-quṣṣās wa-l-muḍakkirīn* conceived to provide a valid ethical and intellectual framework for preachers, repeatedly underlines the importance of narration and the role of narratives: narration (of 'true' stories) is even recommended, and the preacher must know and have recourse to a wide array of narratives. Suitable narratives also have a canonical position in the structure of the sermon, i.e., the interpretative part

¹⁴ al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī, *at-Tatfīl*, 8: "...tu 'ġibuhum al-mulaḥu wa-yu'tirūna samā'ahā"; Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Adkiyā*, 3: "talqīhu albābi s-sāmi'īn..." and "...idā sami'a aḥbāra man..."; Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Hamqā*, 5: "anna l-'āqila idā sami'a aḥbārahum..."

¹⁵ On the rhetorical function of the *aḥbār* in Ibn Qutayba's '*Uyūn al-aḥbār*' see Guellati 2015:105-118.

following the Qur'ānic verses. The link between storytelling and the exhortation, which is the typical aim of the sermon, is well stressed in this text where it is emphasized that, since ancient times, both have been considered in some measure equivalent (Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Quṣṣās*, paragraphs 4, 340, 320, 323, 313). There is a significant parallelism between homiletic practices and canons of sermons in both Arabic and medieval European cultures.

Veritas (truthfulness) is another principle of *exemplum*, and by far the most relevant to the *ḥabar*: the narrative unit is, or is perceived to be, true or very likely (*véridique*), even if in both cases this is often more a literary convention than a reality.¹⁶ In the European medieval tradition the factuality of the *exempla* is openly acknowledged by its appurtenance to the category of *narratio authentica* opposed to *narratio ficta*. In the classical Arabic poetics, despite several terms used to identify narratives with a non-factual character (*ḥurāfāt*, *asmār*, *asāṭīr*...) “whose fictional character relegates them to a status of inferior or null literary dignity” (Bürgel 2003), this dichotomy ‘factual/non-factual’ has not been formalized in terms of two different categories. This is perhaps due to the strong resistance to giving imaginary stories the status of literary forms, with the notable exception of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*.¹⁷ In principle, a narrative unit can be considered as a text (*naṣṣ*), i.e. accepted as a piece of literature, only on condition that it is not false.¹⁸ The position of the learned men on the literary, but also legal, acceptability is clear: Ibn al-Ġawzī in his introduction to *Ḥamqā* considers licit humorous and even obscene *aḥbār* on condition that they are true; later on, a jurist like al-Wanṣarīsī (d. 914/1508) reports *fatāwā* that declare illicit even the buying and selling of books containing fictive narratives, and forbids the *imāma* to those who read them (al-Wanṣarīsī, *Mi'yār*, VI:70). The factuality conventionally attributed to the *ḥabar* is inscribed in the term itself. The basic meaning of *ḥabar* is “piece of information”. Its meaning in the Arabic sciences of language is “predicate”, i.e., the part of the sentence from which the listener gets the piece of information (*yastafīdu*), being the informative element in the couple topic–comment. In the rhetorical tradition (*balāġa*), where it is contrasted with the performative (*inṣā'*) (Larcher 1991), it corresponds to the constative utterance i.e., the one susceptible to be (or to be considered) true or false,

¹⁶ Del Corno 1989:267 points out the efforts made, and the techniques employed by medieval preachers to give a factual feel to unbelievable *exempla*; for the *ḥabar* see e.g., Leder 1998.

¹⁷ On attitude of learned Islam towards imaginary stories see Drory 1984; Bonebakker 1992a 1992b. On fiction and fictionality in classical Arabic literature also see Kennedy 2005: XI–XXII.

¹⁸ Yaḡīn 1997:53ff., especially p. 57 “*al-kalāmu l-maqbūlu l-maḥmūdu llaḏī yurādu bihi l-ḥaqq.*”

and whose truthfulness consists in its correspondence to reality.¹⁹ The (presumption of) factuality is enhanced by the narrative techniques used in the literary *ḥabar*, which all contribute to a realistic style. The high degree of *mimesis* (imitation), which comes through especially in the dialogues, the choice of the narrative point of view, the external focalization, the intradiegetic narration, are all means that aim to give the reader/listener an impression of realism and objectivity.

Relevant for the narrative techniques is the presence of the *isnād*, which constitutes an organic part of the *ḥabar* in that it “effects some fundamentals such as whether the narrative is diegetic or mimetic and the temporal order of the events” (Beaumont 1996:29). Notwithstanding the exiguity of some *isnāds* mentioning names of unknown and perhaps fictive persons, or anonymous sources (‘*an ba ‘d wulāt Miṣr ‘an ba ‘d al-kuttāb*, etc.), or the disappearance of any informant in introductory formulae of the type *qīla*, *balāḡanī* etc., the existence of a source bearing responsibility for the story is always implied, thus suggesting the authenticity of what is related. In fact, anonymous *isnāds* are paradoxical in terms of informativeness, while they make sense if seen as a “relata refero” sign and a clue to the perception of narrative as factual.²⁰ Differences exist between the exemplary discourse and the *ḥabar* in narrative techniques: for instance, the *exemplum* usually makes less use of dialogue than the *ḥabar*, generally preferring a lower degree of *mimesis* (e.g., indirect speech). Rather, truthfulness is rendered through a detailed description of the historical environment; besides, the episode is given as recent, and either witnessed by the narrator himself or by a trustworthy witness from whom the narrator has heard it.²¹ Both forms nevertheless have in common the presumption of factuality, including the authoritative or trustable source certifying the information. The notion of *auctoritas* is emphasized by Humbert de Romans, who compiled a list of the sources considered as the depository of truthfulness, and this is very similar to what gave rise to the huge literature of ‘*ilm ar-riḡāl*, the science of the trusted sources in the transmission of the *ḥadīth*. In the literary *ḥabar* this is much looser, considering the kind of *isnād* we have already referred to: acknowledged authorities are not

¹⁹ *Ṣidq al-ḥabar muṭābaqatuhu ila l-wāqi‘* (al-Qazwīnī, *Matn*, 8). The delicate question of truthfulness/falseness as discussed by al-Nazzām and al-Ġāḥiẓ is summarized in al-Qazwīnī, *Īdāh*, 95–97.

²⁰ The difference between the function of the *isnād* in *ḥadīth* science and in literature is described in al-Qāḍī 1998:309–348. We do not share the author’s conviction that the aim of literary *aḥbār* was limited to amusement, that is conventionally considered a means more than an end.

²¹ Especially in the later phases of development of the *exempla*: Del Corno 1989:177, 267; Zink, 1983, esp. 40–45.

relevant to this kind of *isnad*, on condition that ‘someone’ bears the responsibility for the story related, whether he is overtly mentioned or not.

4. Contexts, functions

Function, or purpose, of narratives must also be considered. For medieval European literature the importance of such an element has been largely demonstrated (Jauss 1977), and this seems to be paralleled in Arabic literature. Here, telling stories for the mere pleasure of narration is unacceptable, and entertainment and leisure are not an end in themselves, but rather a means to reach a certain end. In *adab* literature the aim, openly declared by the authors, is to educate, both in the moral and the informative sense, through a well-balanced mixing of the serious and the humorous, and the purpose of the *adab* works, as is spelt out in their introductions, has very often a paraenetic or didactic flavor. at-Tanūḥī, for instance, in *Farağ* says that the stories (*aḥbār*) he will present constitute an exhortation to patience and endurance for those who suffer, and an invitation to trust in God’s help (at-Tanūḥī, *Farağ*, I:52)²² even if—we should precise—they very often have a witty and worldly tone. In *Niṣwār*, the same author claims the paradigmatic value of the stories he registered that show the virtues and the intelligence of worthy persons and can thus be a useful lesson to those who will receive science (*‘ilm*) and knowledge (*ma‘rifā*) of the worldly and future life (at-Tanūḥī, *Niṣwār*, I:11–12). The didactic and paraenetic function is also recognized for the *aḥbār* related by Ibn al-Ġawzī in *Adkiyā*’ and *Ḥamqā*, the second being specular to the first. In *Adkiyā*’, conceived for praising God for the gift of intellect to man, stories featuring intelligent people aim at fecundating the mind of the listeners (*talqīhu albāb as-sāmi‘īn*) and educating (*ta’dīb*) those who have a high opinion of perceptive people difficult to imitate (Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Adkiyā*’, 3). This is also stressed in the introduction to *Ḥamqā*, where stories featuring witty people are defined as “an *example* to imitate, because the stories of the brave teach bravery” (*miṭālan yuḥtaḍā li-‘anna aḥbāra š-šuğ‘ān tu‘allimu š-šağā’a*) while, on the contrary, the stories of silly people have an exemplary value in the opposite sense: they push the intelligent to profess his gratitude to God for the gift He has granted him, incite him to avoid the causes of silliness, and finally amuse him when he has become tired of seriousness (Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Ḥamqā*, 5–6). The same elements are present in Ibn al-Ġawzī’s *Zirāf* where it is said that the funny stories related show the intelligence and the acumen of men and thus stir and excite the intelligence of those to whom they are addressed (Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Zirāf*, 11). Along with the paradigmatic value of *aḥbār*, emphasis is also put on the function of diversion and relaxation attributed to witty narratives. These are presented as a means of reinvigorating the intellect and stirring the attention to make it ready for further intellectual occupation. For instance, in *Tatfīl* al-Ḥaṭīb al-Bağdādī

²² On the overall meaning of the collection and the arrangement of narratives Özkan 2008:36–39.

claims that, despite more serious matters to be engaged in, he is ready to satisfy the request of collecting funny *ahbār* but feels obliged to justify himself arguing that this material aims to prepare the reader for more worthy intellectual activity (al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī, *Tatfīl*, 7–8). Alike, in *Rabīʿ*, az-Zamaḥṣarī explains that he conceived this book for the mental relief of those who read his ponderous Qurʾanic commentary *al-Kaššāf* and would be tired after such demanding reading (az-Zamaḥṣarī, *Rabīʿ* I:36). This function of narratives legitimizes the use (and sometimes abuse) of funny or licentious narratives, something also typical of the *exempla* where the preachers acknowledge amusement and diversion as a good means of persuading the audience. *Delectatio* is in fact a feature overtly admitted by Humbert de Romans; and Jacques de Vitry in his *Sermones Vulgares* recommends the use of funny stories to avoid tediousness and inattention among the listeners because the preacher must make people laugh and not weep. Over time what was originally a means becomes progressively an end, and the purpose of the story is no longer to teach something or to offer a moral lesson but purely to amuse.

The tendency to shift from the sacred to the worldly, to transform the *sensus* from spiritual to artistic, triggers in the *exemplum* a process of literary elaboration resulting, in certain narratives, in a witty repartee or a clever quip. A similar tendency is perceptible in Arabic literature, for instance in the *ahbār* of the type “*al-ġawāb al-muskīʿ*” (peremptory response),²³ in which the meaning of the narrative is condensed in—and restricted to—the final *pointe* of the story, like in the following example.

al-Madāʿinī told us: “al-Muṭṭalib b. Muḥammad al-Ḥanzabī was the qāḍī of Mecca. He married a woman who had already outlived four husbands. He fell ill of a mortal disease, so his wife sat at his bedside weeping and asked him: ‘To whom will you leave my guardianship?’ and he replied: ‘To the sixth unlucky one.’”²⁴

The importance given to the final *pointe* or to the witty sentence sometimes obscures the moral content of the story and its pedagogical value seems to fade away. Occasionally, witty words lead to (worldly) salvation even if the character pronouncing them is guilty or morally reproachable, as in the following story.

I found in a book that two men were taken to a *wālī*, one being accused of *zandaqa* and the other of drinking wine. The *wālī* trusted the two men to one of his assistants and said: ‘Cut the head off this one’ pointing to the *zindīq* and ‘Inflict the legal punishment [flogging] on this one’ pointing to the one who drank wine. ‘Take them away!’ When [the assistant] went away with them to go out, the one who drank wine said: ‘O Emir! Deliver me to someone else to punish me, because I am not sure that this one will not make a mistake, cutting my head off and inflicting the legal

²³ *Adab* works often have a chapter on this subject, and an entire book on it is *Kitāb al-aġwiba l-muskita* of Ibn Abī ʿAwn (d. 322/934).

²⁴ *Aḍkiyāʿ*, 72; *Zirāf*, 27; ar-Rāġib al-Iṣfahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt* II:97; a different version in al-Ḥuṣrī, *Ġamʿ*, 229.

punishment on my colleague instead. A mistake in such a matter cannot be repaired.’ The emir laughed at him and released him. He had the head of the *zindīq* cut off (at-Tanūhī, *Farağ*, I:338).

Adab works are full of *aḥbār* of this type where what prevails is the pleasure of narration and the search for wittiness, and a similar phenomenon is also common in *narratio brevis*, where it has been labelled *vanitas* (vanity), signifying that the meaning transmitted by means of the narrative no longer refers to moral or religious values, but increasingly coincides with the words used for narration. Nonetheless, in the *ḥabar vanitas* seems to be a prominent feature only if the narrative unit is considered isolated from its context. In the corpus of *aḥbār* we have investigated, rare are cases where an anecdote is followed (or preceded) by the didactic part, like in the typical *exemplum*. One of the most significant instances of the simultaneous presence of the normative and of the narrative parts in a *ḥabar* is the series of *aḥbār* found in *Rusūm dār al-ḥilāfa* of Hilāl aṣ-Ṣābi’ (d. 448/1056), a work aiming at instructing high civil servants living at the caliphal court. The *aḥbār* are used to show how the perfect courtier must, or must not, behave and the exemplary function of this kind of narrative is emphasized by the explicit and systematic connection between the normative and the narrative part of the *ḥabar* (Ghersetti 2009). But, in general, the precept illustrated by the narrative is rarely explicitly stated as a structurally separate element: it is either part of the narrative unit, e.g., an aphorism uttered by one of the characters,²⁵ or it is not stated at all. The following is a good example of a *ḥabar* with a precept explicitly stated as a separate part before the narrative unit.

Abū Idrīs al-Ḥawlānī said: “I heard Muḥammad b. Idrīs aṣ-Ṣāfi’ī, may God be pleased with him, saying: ‘Never was an obese man successful unless he was Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan [aṣ-Ṣaybānī]’. He was asked why and replied: ‘The sensible man necessarily has one of the two dispositions: to attach importance to the hereafter and the life to come or to worldly existence and livelihood. Fat does not accumulate with concern: when he [the man] lacks one of the two ideas he reaches the threshold of bestiality and then fat can accumulate.’ Then he continued: ‘A long, long time ago,

²⁵ As in the case of Yaḥyā b. Ḥālīd that talks to his daughter, stating “the principle that it never rains but it pours” (Hámori 1996:363–364). Of the two *ḥabars* analyzed, one cannot be considered as an *exemplum* since “it contains no event to illustrate it”. Nevertheless, it must be noticed that Hámori uses a narrow definition of *exemplum*.

there was an obese king laden with fat...” (Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Aḍkiyāʿ*, 180–181; also, ar-Rāġib al-Iṣfahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt*, II:130)²⁶

In cases like this, the division into precept, or lesson, and narrative unit is self-evident, but the lesson very often seems to move from the periphery of the single *ḥabar* to the periphery of the entire collection of *aḥbār*. In fact, when we consider the *ḥabar* in context, we can recover its didactic and moral value, that depends on the key to interpretation given in the introduction to the collections or on the positioning of the single narrative. Likewise, for the *exemplum* the *sensus*, in general explicitly stated at the periphery of the narrative unit, over time gradually disappeared to the advantage of the pleasure of the narration and was left implicit or simply shown by the context. Hence, it had to be recovered orally by the preacher during the sermon, or by the listeners or readers themselves (Bremond, Le Goff, Schmitt, 1982: 63–66).

In relation with the relevance of the context, the analysis could be enriched introducing the notion of macrotext. Collections of *aḥbār* can thus be considered not only as an organic and unitary literary text with their own coherence (Malti Douglas 1981), but also, and more specifically, as macrotexts. This notion was coined to describe a collection of texts in which each minor text, seen as a microstructure, is articulated within a macrostructure that acquires in this way a functional and informative character. The functionality and informative scope of a collection of texts is possible when one of the following conditions is realized: a) there is a combination of thematic and/or formal elements running through all the texts, and this produces the cohesion and the unity of the collection; b) there is such a progression in the discourse that any single text has its specific place and cannot be found elsewhere.²⁷ This definition fits the monothematic *adab* works where unity is guaranteed both by the thematic element and the formal one; moreover, a progression in terms of chapters and of the arrangement of the *aḥbār* into groups inside the chapters can also be seen. Analysis of the collections of *aḥbār* as macrotexts is aptly made on a triple level: single short microunits (narratives), larger intermediate units (chapters or sections) and a macrounit (the collection), that are all interrelated and cooperate, to different degrees, in reciprocally defining their meaning. Similarly to what happens in the *exemplum*,²⁸ it seems to us that if the lesson is not found in the single microunit (the *ḥabar*), it can nevertheless be found in the larger context of the

²⁶ al-Ḥawlānī (d. 80/699): a jurist of the Syrian school of law and a *qāṣṣ*; aṣ-Ṣaybānī: an authority of *fiqh* and *ʿilm al-uṣūl* who studied with aṣ-Ṣāfiʿī and was *qāḍī* of Raqqa under Hārūn ar-Rašīd.

²⁷ Corti 1978:185; 169–220 for a semiotic analysis of micro/macrotexts; for macrotexts in Arabic literature see Cassarino 2003.

²⁸ Bremond, Le Goff, Schmitt 1982:33: “la morale est souvent implicite ou simplement éclairée par le contexte dans l’*exemplum* de la belle époque, c’est-à-dire du XIII^e siècle.”

macrotext(s), being then resident not at the periphery of the single narrative unit but more at the periphery of all text(s).

The dependence of the meaning of single narrative units upon a context which orientates their interpretation, becomes obvious when we consider the occurrences of the same *ḥabar* in different works, like in the following case.

Abū Aḥmad al-Hārithī said: “There was a Christian doctor called Mūsā b. Sinān to whom they brought a man: his penis was swollen to the point he could not urinate, and he was crying and calling for help. [The doctor] asked him about his complaint and the man replied that he had not been urinating for days. [The doctor] saw that his penis was swollen and examined his general condition without finding anything that could cause the retention of urine, nor a calculus. He let him stay one day at his clinic and interrogated him. He said: ‘Tell me, have you introduced your penis where people usually do not introduce it and after that you got this [complaint]?’ The man said nothing and looked ashamed. The doctor did not give up and tried to coax the man into telling the truth, promising to keep his secret, until [the man] said: ‘I had sexual intercourse with a male donkey.’ Then the doctor said: ‘Bring me a hammer and some slaves.’ They came and grabbed the man, the doctor put his penis on a blacksmith’s anvil, struck it with the hammer one painful time only and a barleycorn emerged. [The doctor] conjectured that a barleycorn from the donkey’s anus had entered the hole of the penis and when he struck, it came out” (Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Adkiyā*, 186).

This same *story* is quoted by at-Tanūḥī (*Faraġ*, IV, 204–205)²⁹ but with some notable differences: the *isnād* is different, the doctor is anonymous, there is a major emphasis on the mimetic mode (the narrative unit is almost completely composed of dialogues), the therapy is much more compassionate. There is also a kind of *moralisatio* in the end, when the doctor exhorts the protagonist to turn to God in repentance. Interpretation is also triggered by the context: in at-Tanūḥī’s *Faraġ* the introduction and the position of the anecdote (the chapter about those who escaped from the danger caused by a disease) shift the focus to the escape from hardship, and the story has the function of demonstrating how relief can be achieved even in the most difficult and obscure situations, and even if the moral behavior is not irreproachable. This moral tone is missing in the version of *Adkiyā*’ where the lesson implicit in the anecdote, if any, has no ethical connotation, unless we take the unsympathetic narration of the therapy as the moralist’s vengeance for immoral behavior. Here the story is given in a neutral mode, the attitude of the doctor is very professional (with a certain attention to the psychological aspect of the situation) and the narrative has the tone of a mere chronicle, with some emphasis on the diegetic mode, thus focusing on the cleverness of the doctor, emphasized by the careful relation of the questions and of his perspicacity. A clue to interpretation is found both

²⁹ On medical stories in at-Tanūḥī Bray 2006.

in the introductory part of this monothematic work and in the position attributed to this unit (the chapter on perspicacity of doctors); the *ḥabar* is to be interpreted as a paradigm of human intelligence. A further example of this functional polysemy is the well-known *ḥabar* on the origin of the toponym *bi'r al-kalb*.

Abū 'Ubayda said: "A man went out from Basra and a dog followed him. Some people attacked him, injured him, and threw him into a pit, covering him with earth. When they went away the dog approached the top of the pit, scratched about, and dug until the head of the man appeared: he was hardly breathing. A group of people passing by got him out still living". (Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Adkiyā'*, 246)

In this concise version (two and a half lines *vs.* the fifteen lines of the most ancient version) the narrative is presented to the listener/reader without any *sensus*. The meaning is to be looked for in context (examples of intelligence) so that the story can be interpreted as an example of the acute intelligence of dogs. Other extant versions are much more detailed, and the most ancient version, in al-Ġāḥiẓ's *Ḥayawān*, is by far longer and richer in details: the man is the master of the dog, he beats the dog to make it leave, he travels with his brother and his neighbor, who escape after the attack, and the salvific intervention of the dog is described in detail. The story is introduced by a verse condensing the narrative in a concise form, and as such seems to guide the reader's interpretation.

Abū l-Ḥasan b. Ḥālawayh recited, from Abū 'Ubayda, by a poet [unidentified]: "His neighbor and his full brother escaped from him/and his dog brings him out into the open to safety even though he had beaten it". (al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān*, II:122–123)

The purpose of the story is clearly suggested and becomes even clearer in the commentary: this is a sign of the natural fidelity (*wafā'*) and affection (*ilf*) of dogs. The story is used as a rhetorical device to show that dogs are blessed with innate psychological qualities, in a polemical attitude against the general contempt for dogs widespread in Islamic culture. The same anecdote, with minor variations in wording, is also quoted by Ibn al-Marzubān (d. 309/921) in *Faḍl al-kilāb*, a collection of poems and *aḥbār* intended to rehabilitate dogs depicted as more trustworthy and moral than men (Ibn al-Marzubān, *Faḍl*, 31–32 Arabic; 8 English). In this context the story not only works to show the fidelity of dogs but also to contrast it with the infidelity of man, thus highlighting the contrast between a positive pole (the animal) and a negative one (the human being). The principle to be demonstrated here is that "A dog is man's best friend."

5. From the short to the long of it: techniques

In some way analogous to what we could see in Arabic short narratives, it has been noticed that in the *exemplum* the paradigmatic function gradually tends to evolve towards ends which are no more didactic but merely amusing, and the *sensus* of the story tends to disappear to the advantage of the mere anecdote, flowing later into the

novella.³⁰ Although strongly criticized,³¹ the hypothesis of a genetic approach which sees the *novella* as a derivation of the *exemplum* in our opinion could offer interesting clues in terms of techniques. Particularly *amplificatio*, the process insisting on the static motifs of the narration (presentation of the characters, description of the environment and circumstances)³² and the addition of realistic details, is something that characterizes the anecdote (Jolles 1980:185–200). It seems to us that this technique can be discerned also in Arabic short narratives, where it operates in characterizing the *nādira* as opposed to *ḥabar* (Geries 1990, Hámori 1996).

The two versions of the anecdote of Abū Māzin al-Aḥḍab and Ğabal al-‘Ammī in al-Ġāḥiẓ’s *al-Burṣān wa-l-‘urġān* and *al-Buḥalā’* studied in Geries 1990 clearly represent this kind of process. The first, defined as a *ḥabar*, is very short (a few lines) and the narrative techniques point to the neutral presentation of facts (for instance the colloquial variety of language used by Ğabal gives the story a flavor of reality): the anecdote is thus presented as a chronicle and a piece of information more than a narrative. The second version is much longer and richer in details: elements like the description of characters, the mimesis of long dialogues, the description of setting, and the development of the events, all artfully constructed, aim at arousing the interest and the curiosity of readers. All this transforms the mere fact of informing into the art of narrating. Even functions are different: at the end of the *ḥabar* there is a very concise sentence that recalls a kind of *moralisatio* and suggests the condemnation of the avarice of Abū Māzin, while at the end of the more elaborate version (defined *nādira*), the reader is rather inclined to laugh. Another example of the techniques of *amplificatio* is visible in the accumulation of versions of a well-known pious *ḥabar* quoted in at-Tanūḥī’s *Faraġ* (Ghersetti 1990), where the story, that recalls the Aesopian fable of the man and the ungrateful snake, is mentioned in four versions (at-Tanūḥī, *Faraġ* I, 200–201). The most concise is the following (four lines, including the *isnad*).

Ğa‘far al-‘Ābid transmitted this story (*ḥabar*) in Rāmahurmuz, with a different wording, except that the meaning is very close. I related what reached me from that: “He said: ‘I read in the books of the ancestors that a snake escaped from one who

³⁰ The parallel has been suggested by Beaumont, that had in mind Boccaccio’s *Decameron*: “we can see in at-Tanūkhī’s book the development of fictions out of religious *exempla* in a way that more or less parallels the growth of many medieval European fictions” (Beaumont 1998:138).

³¹ Del Corno, 1989:180; he sees the medieval literary system as more properly characterized by the interrelations between its different elements.

³² Del Corno 1989:176, 178 for the difficulty of tracing a neat boundary between *exemplum* and *novella*.

hunted it down to kill it. The snake asked a man to conceal it, he concealed it in his mouth and refused it to him who searched for it.”

This is a truly minimal narrative structure, and the narrative segment that relates the ungratefulness of the animal is lacking, while it is present, and even amplified, in the other three versions, one preceding and the other two following the *ḥabar* above. Those are by far longer and more detailed: in the first (fourteen lines), the snake, that is followed by a man who wants to kill it, encounters a pious man praying and asks him to conceal it. The man accepts and conceals the animal under his robe but, once safe, the animal wants to kill him. In the end the man is saved by divine intervention. Apart from differences in the *isnād*, in the longer versions many details are added, some elements changed, and some expanded. In the third version the identity of the man and the place of prayer are more detailed, the religious affiliation of the man and the snake is specified, and there are rather long dialogues between the man and the snake and the man and the animal pursuer. The happy ending, on the contrary, is mentioned in an elliptical way. The fourth and longest version, on the authority of Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna, recalls the preceding, but with the addition of some minor details (the pursuer brings a sword, the snake prudently looks around before coming out) that stress its narrative character and, most important of all, the final part is constituted by the miraculous intervention of an angel sent by God to relieve the pious man. There is a shift from a succinct chronicle to narratives that have a more literary character: the *ḥabar* above is a point of departure for creating narratives where the details (the identity of the pious man, his religious membership, the reason for hating of the snake, the place where it is concealed, the way of salvation, etc.) accumulate to build a story.

6. Final (short) remarks

Examples can, of course, be multiplied and, as in the narrative traditions we have investigated, the pleasure of narration could lead us astray, but *brevitas* has its own rights and we must reach a conclusion. Structural, formal, and functional analogies between the *ḥabar* and the *exemplum*, or better the exemplary forms, seem to us worthy of attention and could suggest new perspectives of investigation to researchers, and notably supply researchers of Arabic literature with apt analysis tools. They could also explain the permeability of the medieval European literary system to “Oriental” narratives, and their acceptance and wide circulation (the so-named “irruption” Berlioz, Polo de Beaulieu 2008) in Europe in the Middle Ages, and even later.³³

³³ A telling example is the story of the sons of Nizār b. Ma‘add passed from the Arab world and Persia to sixteenth-century Venice, moving then to eighteenth-century English literature with Horace Walpole’s *The Three Princes of Serendip* (Bragantini in Cristoforo Armeno, *Peregrinaggio*, 14ff.).

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