


# The Greek death of Sībawayhi and the origins of Arabic grammar\*

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## Abstract

Sībawayhi, the founder of the Arabic grammatical tradition, was said to have died in Persia of sorrow after losing to Kufan rivals in a competition in Baghdad. The first part of this article demonstrates the artifice of Sībawayhi's biography, his death tradition in particular, and the stakes involved in its elaboration in early Islamic culture. The second part argues that the tradition of his death was based on the model of Homer's death, which can be shown to have circulated and been creatively adapted in contemporary Syriac historiography. The third part considers the consequences of Sībawayhi's Greek death for the old question of the influence of Greek on early Arabic grammar.

**Keywords:** Early Islam, Sībawayhi, Arabic grammar, Hellenism, Syriac historiography, Islamic biography, Homer

In a recent study I argued that the tradition of Imru' al-Qays' death, from a poisoned robe sent to him by Caesar as revenge for seducing his daughter, did not incidentally resemble that of Heracles. In support of that claim it was briefly suggested that the "greatest Arab poet" (*ash'ar al-shu'arā'*) was not the only founding figure of early Islamic culture to die a mythological Greek death, and that the demise of Sībawayhi, the "leading *imām* of grammar" (*imām a'immat al-naḥw*), was also based on a legendary Greek model.<sup>1</sup> I will here examine this suggestion in detail. Following a discussion of Sībawayhi's biography and the stakes involved in its elaboration in early Islam, I focus on his death, arguing that it is an Arabic adaptation of the tradition of Homer's death, also paralleled in Syriac historiography. I conclude by considering the significance of this

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1 T. Fassberg, "The Greek death of Imru' al-Qays", *JAOS* 140/2, 2020, 415–33, with Sībawayhi at 429. For Sībawayhi as *imām a'immat al-naḥw*, al-Ṣafadī, *Kitāb al-wāfi bi-l-wafāyāt*, ed. A. al-Arna'ūt and T. Muṣṭafā, 29 vols (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2001), 23:66. For Imru' al-Qays as *ash'ar al-shu'arā'*, e.g. Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-shi'r wa-l-shu'arā'*, ed. A.M. Shākir, 2 vols (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1966), 1:37.

Greek death with regard to the old question of Greek influence on early Arabic grammar.

## 1. The life of Sībawayhi

Even Sībawayhi's earliest biographers knew little about his life. It is not clear exactly when or where he was born, but he was undoubtedly of Persian origin, his name apparently meaning "little apple". It has been estimated that he arrived in Basra circa 145/762 to study either hadith or Islamic law. Whichever it was,<sup>2</sup> it did not go well: while studying with Ḥammād b. Salama (d. 167/784) he bungled the recitation of a hadith concerning the piety of Abū l-Dardā' (d. 32/652), a Companion of the Prophet, using the nominative (*abū*) instead of the accusative (*abā*). Disgraced, he turned to the study of grammar, determined to avoid such humiliation in the future. He proceeded to establish a reputation for himself in his new field and travelled to the newly established capital of Baghdad. There he engaged the famous Kufan grammarians al-Kisā'ī (d. 189/805) and al-Farrā' (d. 207/822) in a public debate highlighted by the infamous "question of the hornet" (*mas'alat al-zunbūr*), namely: should the final pronoun in *qad kuntu azunnu anna l-'aqra ba ašaddu las'atan min al-zunbūri, fa-idhā huwa hiya/iyyāhā* ("I have long thought that the scorpion is more powerful in terms of its sting than the hornet, and indeed it is"), be nominative (*hiya*) or accusative (*iyyāhā*)? Sībawayhi again opted for the nominative, not without justification, but al-Kisā'ī introduced four Bedouin who happened to be outside and confirmed that Sībawayhi was wrong. Humiliated yet again, Sībawayhi returned home to Persia, where he died a young man.

The artifice of Sībawayhi's biography is manifest. Ring composition structures his life symmetrically: just as he left his initial field of study in Basra in disgrace over his choice of the nominative, so in Baghdad the same choice led to public humiliation, marking his departure from the field. It also resulted in his departure from Iraq, adding another ring to his biography, his birth and death in Persia framing a failed attempt to establish himself in the heartland of the Abbasid empire.<sup>3</sup>

Sībawayhi's biography is not simply an elegant piece of storytelling. The stakes for the biography of the founder of the Arabic grammatical tradition,

2 Cf. K. Brustad, "The iconic Sībawayhi", in A. Koranga et al. (eds), *Essays in Islamic Philology, History and Philosophy* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 141–65, 159. For details and some discussion of his biography, see G. Humbert, *Les voies de la transmission du Kitāb de Sībawayhi* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1–8; M.G. Carter, *Sībawayhi* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), ch. 1. His early Islamic biographies are surveyed below. It of course does not follow from the relative ignorance of the early biographers (or from the artifice of his biography, discussed below) that Sībawayhi was not a historical figure.

3 On structuring, see J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 167–73. Specifically on *mas'alat al-zunbūr* as a fabrication, see J. Blau, "The role of the Bedouins as arbiters in linguistic questions and the *mas'ala az-zunburiyya*", *Journal of Semitic Studies* 8/1, 1963, 42–51; also R. Talmon, "The 'mas'ala zunburiyya' and the authenticity of *aḥbār* about the early controversies between the Basran and Kufan schools of grammar", *al-Karmil* 7, 1986, 131–63. See also Brustad, "Iconic Sībawayhi", 156–62.

whose practitioners wielded considerable authority, were high.<sup>4</sup> According to modern and – more importantly – ancient narratives, the *raison d'être* of the science of grammar was religious.<sup>5</sup> In the telling of Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995), Abū l-Aswad al-Du'ālī (d. 69/688) – whose knowledge of grammar was due to none other than 'Alī b. Abī Tālib – was asked by Ziyād b. Abīhi (d. 53/673), who was governor of Basra and the eastern provinces and well-known for his oratory, to compose a guide to aid believers in accurately reciting the Quran. Abū l-Aswad demurred, but when he overheard someone mangling Q 9:3, disastrously declaring that God was “free of his messenger”, he realized the threat posed to Arabic – and, by extension, Islam – by the people they had conquered.<sup>6</sup> The belief in their responsibility for the corruption of the language of the Quran echoes throughout the Islamic tradition, as well as in modern scholarship.<sup>7</sup>

- 4 For grammarians' authority, see M.G. Carter, “Language control as people control in medieval Islam: the aims of the grammarians in their cultural context”, *Al-Abhāth* 31, 1983, 65–84 (C.H.M. Versteegh, “A sociological view of the Arab grammatical tradition”, in P. Wexler et al. (eds), *Studia linguistica et orientalia memoriae Haim Blanc dedicata* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1989), 289–302, 299: “we cannot simply equate the Arab grammarian with our image of a linguist”). For the development of Arabic biography, see M. Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mūn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), ch. 1, with 11–3 on grammarians; see J. Bray, “Literary approaches to medieval and early modern Arabic biography”, *JRAS* 20/3, 2010, 237–53, for a discussion of biography as a major genre of Arabic literature.
- 5 e.g. C.H.M. Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar and Qur'ānic Exegesis in Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); M. Shah, “Exploring the genesis of early Arabic linguistic thought: Qur'anic readers and grammarians of the Kufan tradition (part I)”, *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5/1, 2003, 47–78, and “Exploring the genesis of early Arabic linguistic thought: Qur'anic readers and grammarians of the Baṣran tradition (part II)”, *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5/2, 2003, 1–47; M. Bernards, “The contribution of *mawālī* and the Arabic linguistic tradition”, in M. Bernards and J. Nawas (eds), *Patronate and Patronage in Early and Classical Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 426–53, 426. For Islam as logocentric, see M.G. Carter, “Linguistic science and orthodoxy in conflict: the case of al-Rummānī”, *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der arabisch-islamischen Wissenschaften* 1, 1984, 212–32, 215–6, with references.
- 6 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. A.F. Sayyid, 2 vols (London: Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, 2009), 1:104–5. On the Abū al-Aswad traditions, see M.G. Carter, *Sībawayhi's Principles: Arabic Grammar and Law in Early Islamic Thought* (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2016), 1–2, with references, with a critical study of them in R. Talmon, “Who was the first Arab grammarian? A new approach to an old problem”, *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 15, 1985, 128–45. On 'Alī's part in this tradition, see C.H.M. Versteegh, *Greek Elements in Arabic Linguistic Thinking* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 6–7, with references.
- 7 e.g. Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Lughawī, *Marātib al-naḥwīyyīn*, ed. M.A. Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār Nahḍat Miṣr, 1974), 10; al-Zubaydī, *Ṭabaqāt al-naḥwīyyīn wa-l-lughawīyyīn*, ed. M.A. Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1973), 21–2; Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima* (Beirut: al-Maṭba'a al-Adabiyya, 1900), 546; al-Suyūfī, *al-Iqtirāḥ fi 'ilm uṣūl al-naḥw*, ed. A.M. Qāsim (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sa'āda, 1976), 56–7. In modern scholarship: J.W. Fück, *'Arabīya: recherches sur l'histoire de la langue et du style arabe*, trans. C. Denizeau (Paris: M. Didier, 1955), ch. 2 (with special emphasis on Persian influence); C.H.M. Versteegh, “Arabic grammar and the corruption of speech”, *Al-Abhāth* 31, 1983, 117–38. Cf. P. Larcher, “Les origines de la grammaire arabe”, in E. Ditters and H. Motzki (eds), *Approaches to Arabic Linguistics* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 113–34.

Sībawayhi would thus appear an unlikely founder for the Arabic grammatical tradition. In another version of the foundation narrative reported by Ibn al-Nadīm, it was a Persian's malapropism, proclaiming a limping (*zālī'*) horse "strong" (*dālī'*), which prompted Abū l-Aswad to exclaim: "these *mawālī* ... entered Islam and became our brothers; if only we had taught them how to speak".<sup>8</sup> Such a sentiment would have been out of place, however, in the time of Sībawayhi and the reception of his work in Abbasid Baghdad, which was marked by Arab-Persian tension, reflecting Arab anxieties as well as increasing attention to Persian identity.<sup>9</sup> One of the targets of the strident anti-Arab polemic, associated with a Persian-led Shu'ūbiyya movement,<sup>10</sup> was Arabic oratory, and the Arabic language more generally.<sup>11</sup> It was therefore easily perceived as a threat to Islam, for instance by al-Jāhīz (d. 255/868).<sup>12</sup> The same al-Jāhīz interpreted the traditional claim for the Quran's inimitability (*i'jāz*

8 Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 1:105.

9 For Arab insecurity, see P. Crone, "Imperial trauma: the case of the Arabs", *Common Knowledge* 12/1, 2006, 107–16, and J.E. Montgomery and P. Webb (eds), *Ibn Qutaybah: The Excellence of the Arabs* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), xvii–xviii; for Arab identity more broadly, see P. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016). For the history of Persians in Iraq, see M.G. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), ch. 5; for Persian identity under Islam, and the increasing attention it received from the middle of the third/ninth century, see S.B. Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). M. Cooperson, "Arabs and Iranians", in B. Sadeghi et al. (eds), *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 364–87, discusses the terms "Arab" and "Iranian". See, recently, L. Harb, "Persian in Arabic: identity politics and macaronic Abbasid poetry", *JAOS* 139/1, 2019, 1–21, for the treatment of the Persian as an inferior "other" in contemporary poetry, and below for the treatment of Sībawayhi himself.

10 On the Shu'ūbiyya, see I. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, trans. C.R. Barber and S.M. Stern, 2 vols (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967), 1:137–98; followed by H.A.R. Gibb, "The social significance of the Shuubiyya", in *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 62–73; R.P. Mottahedeh, "The Shu'ūbiyah controversy and the social history of early Islamic Iran", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 7, 1976, 161–82; H.T. Norris, "Shu'ūbiyyah in Arabic literature", in J. Ashtiany et al. (eds), *Abbasid Belles-Lettres*, 31–47 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); S. Enderwitz, "al-Shu'ūbiyya", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn, 13 vols (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2004) (online, hereafter *EF*); P. Crone, "Post-colonialism in tenth-century Islam", *Der Islam* 83, 2006, 2–38, 11–8; for a more sceptical account, S.B. Savant, "Naming Shu'ūbīs", in *Essays in Islamic Philology*, 166–84, and Montgomery and Webb, *Ibn Qutaybah*, xx–xxii. Savant, *The New Muslims*, 27–8 insists on the restriction of the Shu'ūbiyya to Baghdad, Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 244–9, to the second/eighth century.

11 Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 1:156–61, 182, 191–8; Norris, "Shu'ūbiyyah", 38–9, 43–5; C.H.M. Versteegh, "What's it like to be a Persian? Sībawayhi's treatment of loanwords", in C.H.M. Versteegh and A. Marogy (eds), *The Foundations of Arabic Linguistics II: Kitāb Sībawayhi. Interpretation and Transmission* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 202–21, 206–7.

12 Al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, ed. 'A.S.M. Hārūn, 7 vols (Cairo: Maktabat Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1938–45), 7:220. Also Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 1:148; Gibb, "Social significance", 70. For Islamic traditions that were hostile to Persian, in opposition to Arabic, see S. Bashear, *Arabs and Others in Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), 53–4 (and briefly, Versteegh, "What's it like", 206). The debate over the status of Persian in Islam became especially pronounced in the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh

*al-Qur'ān*) in linguistic terms, a thesis that gained in strength during the third/ninth century, partially in response to Shu'ūbī claims.<sup>13</sup>

The status of Arabic on the one hand, and of Persians on the other, were then both matters of some sensitivity in Islamic society in this period, and they merged in the figure of Sībawayhi. We find Sībawayhi's work being used alongside that of Homer, Euclid and Ptolemy, as well as icons of Persian identity, in contemporary polemic against the inimitability of the Quran.<sup>14</sup> One participant in this polemic was Ibn al-Rāwandī of Khurasan (d. 298/910?), who was considered a heretic and either died in hiding in Baghdad or returned to Persia.<sup>15</sup> The pressure on Persians (or those of Persian descent) who by contrast sought to fit in is apparent in the virulent anti-Persian polemic for which they were responsible, as in Ibn Qutayba's (213–70/828–89) *The Excellence of the Arabs*; among grammarians, Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004) went to greater lengths than his Arab colleagues in his insistence upon the superiority of Arabic.<sup>16</sup> Sībawayhi was hardly unusual in being an Arabic grammarian of non-Arab descent,<sup>17</sup> but the large number of *mawālī* would have placed pressure on grammarians to establish the standing of their nascent discipline. Furthermore, as the dichotomy between "Islamic" and "foreign sciences" hardened, it would have been in their interest to align their tradition with Islam and dissociate it from foreign influence.<sup>18</sup> It has indeed been suggested that the substantial effort involved

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centuries (L. Richter-Bernburg, "Linguistic Shu'ūbiya and early neo-Persian prose", *JAOS* 94/1, 1974, 55–64).

- 13 Al-Jāhiz, *Hujaj al-nubūwa*, in *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*, ed. Ḥ. al-Sandūbī (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Rahmāniyya, 1933), 143–4; also 'Alī l-Ṭabarī, *Kitāb al-dīn wa-l-dawla*, ed. A. Mingana (Cairo: al-Muqattaf, 1923), 44–5. For the context of its development and the possible relation to the Shu'ūbiyya, R.C. Martin, "The role of the Basrah Mu'tazilah in formulating the doctrine of the apologetic miracle", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 39, 1980, 175–89, 179; S. Vasalou, "The miraculous eloquence of the Qur'an: general trajectories and individual approaches", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 4/2, 2002, 23–53, 24–8. Carter, "Science and orthodoxy", 217: "the fact that it was even felt necessary to construct proofs of *i'jāz* indicates just how severe was the crisis through which Islam was then passing...".
- 14 M. Rashed, "New evidence on the critique of the Qur'anic miracle at the end of the third/ninth century: Qusṭā b. Lūqā vs. the Banū al-Munajjim", in P. Anderson (ed.), *In the Age of al-Fārābī: Arabic Philosophy in the Fourth/Tenth Century* (London: Warburg Institute, 2008), 277–93. It is particularly interesting that Sībawayhi's grammar is being used against the language of the Quran, when his discipline was ostensibly entrusted with its preservation (as well as entirely sensible that the rules he deduced undermine the claim for its inimitability).
- 15 J. van Ess, "Ebn Rāwandī", in E. Yarshater (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (London: Paul Kegan and Routledge, 1982–present) (online). Ibn Rāwandī was a student of al-Mubarrad, mentioned below.
- 16 See Versteegh, "What's it like", 213 for Ibn Fāris, who belonged to the Kufan school. Mottahedeh, "The Shu'ūbiyah controversy", 179: "it is remarkable how many of the anti-*shu'ūbiyah* like Ibn Qutaibah and az-Zamakhshari were non-Arabs".
- 17 Bernards, "Contribution of *mawālī*". See Fück, *'Arabīya*, 27, on the attraction of *mawālī* to grammar as a means of assimilation, also reflected in Sībawayhi's motivation to learn grammar.
- 18 e.g. Ibn Qutayba, *Faḍl al-'arab wa-l-tanbīh 'alā 'ulūmihā*, ed. W.M. Khālīṣ (Abu Dhabi: Dār al-Kutub al-Waṭaniyya, 2010), 121; see G. Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges*:



in establishing Abū l-Aswad as the founder of Arabic grammar was motivated by the need for an Arab founder, perhaps in response to Shu‘ūbī criticism.<sup>19</sup>

Abū l-Aswad was especially attractive as a founder for the “school” of Basra, because Basran grammarians were traditionally depicted as radical and as departing from the religious tradition that the Kufans were reputed to uphold.<sup>20</sup> Conversely, the Kufans claimed that it was Abū l-Aswad who had made the crucial grammatical mistake that launched Arabic grammar.<sup>21</sup> The figure of Sībawayhi, author of the “Quran of grammar”,<sup>22</sup> could not but play a central role in the struggles over disciplinary history. His book was far from being an immediate success, even among Basrans, but by the fourth/tenth century a chain of transmission had been constructed to lead from Sībawayhi all the way back to Abū l-Aswad.<sup>23</sup> The Kufans for their part claimed that Sībawayhi had a speech defect and didn’t know how to speak Arabic.<sup>24</sup> The

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*Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 75–80; also D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998), 161–5. Sībawayhi’s grammar in particular would not have appeared beholden to any religious agenda (A. Levin, “The status of the science of grammar among Islamic sciences”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 29, 2004, 1–16). Cf. Carter, “Language control”, 76, and “Science and orthodoxy”, 223.

- 19 Talmon, “First Arab grammarian?”, 141; R. Talmon, “Schacht’s theory in the light of recent discoveries concerning and [sic] the origins of Arabic grammar”, *Studia Islamica* 65, 1987, 31–50, 45: “the Abū l-Aswad tradition in its multitude of versions, all with a *leitmotiv* of ‘helping the *mawālī*’, is a perfect pro-Arab reaction to Shu‘ūbī attacks”. R. Talmon, “An eighth-century grammatical school in Medina: the collection and evaluation of the available material”, *BSOAS* 48/2, 1985, 224–36, esp. 234–5, further suggests that the second/eighth-century grammatical school of Medina was effaced from the traditional history of the discipline because so many of its members were *mawālī*. Cf. Shah, “Kufan tradition”, 51–2, and “Başran tradition”, 9, for criticism.
- 20 On Abū l-Aswad, again Talmon, “Schacht’s theory”, 45–6. For the view of Basrans as innovative and Kufans as conservative, Versteegh, *Grammar and Exegesis*, chs 5–6; R. Talmon, “The term *qalb* and its significance for the study of the history of the early Arabic grammar”, *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der arabisch-islamischen Wissenschaften* 8, 1993, 71–113; Shah, “Kufan tradition”, and “Başran tradition”. For the traditional opposition between Basra and Kufa more broadly, I. Goldziher, *On the History of Grammar among the Arabs*, trans. K. Dévényi and T. Iványi (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1994), 32–3; G.J. van Gelder, “Kufa vs. Basra: the literary debate”, *Asiatische Studien: Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft* 50/2, 1996, 339–62. On the concept of grammatical “school”, M. Bernards, *Changing Traditions: Al-Mubarrad’s Refutation of Sībawayh and the Subsequent Reception of the Kitāb* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), ch. 5.
- 21 Abū Ḥāmid, *Risāla*, ed. H. Ṭa’ān in “Makḥṭūṭ farīd nafīs ‘an marātib al-naḥwiyyīn”, *al-Mawrid* 3 (1974): 137–44, 139, discussed in Versteegh, *Grammar and Exegesis*, 172–3.
- 22 Abū al-Ṭayyib, *Marātib al-naḥwiyyīn*, 106.
- 23 Versteegh, *Grammar and Exegesis*, 167–70. For the early reception of Sībawayhi’s work, Versteegh, *Grammar and Exegesis*, 13; Bernards, *Changing Traditions*, 10, 54; Brustad, “Iconic Sībawayhi”, 144–5.
- 24 Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-‘udabā’*, ed. I. ‘Abbās, 7 vols (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1993), 1:56; Abū l-Maḥāsīn al-Tanūkhī, *Ta’rīkh al-‘ulamā’ al-naḥwiyyīn min al-Başriyyīn wa-l-Kūfiyyīn wa-ghayrihim*, ed. ‘A.F.M. Hulw (Riyad: Dār al-Hilāl, 1981), 98.1. See Carter, *Sībawayhi*, 11–2; Versteegh, “What’s it like”, 203. Cf. the case of al-Rummānī, in Carter, “Science and orthodoxy”, 218.

derision directed at him focused on his Persian descent,<sup>25</sup> which notably was also a source of controversy in the case of both of his Basran teachers, al-Khalīl (d. 160–175/776–791) and Yūnus b. Ḥabīb (d. 182/798).<sup>26</sup> Sībawayhi's nemesis al-Kisā'ī was of Persian ancestry as well, and like Sībawayhi is said to have sought out grammatical instruction in Basra following some difficulties in Arabic; but he rejected the Basran doctrine, and his reading of the Quran came to be recognized as one of the seven canonical readings.<sup>27</sup> Whereas the Persian identity of al-Kisā'ī and others was elided, Sībawayhi's was emphasized, as the predominance of his distinctly foreign name – in place of an Arabic patronymic – demonstrates.<sup>28</sup>

Sībawayhi's biography, as we have seen, similarly stresses his foreignness to Iraq and to Islamic scholarship and his rejection by its foremost authorities.<sup>29</sup> Within the contexts of his work in the second/eighth century and its reception in the third/fourth and ninth/tenth centuries, these biographical traditions clearly did not form randomly and were not shaped by purely aesthetic considerations. They were rather a resource which in these charged circumstances was manipulated to inflect the history of Arabic grammar in the service of competing interests. In an attempt to partially recover the process of these traditions' formation, we now turn our attention to the tradition of his death.

## 2. The death of Sībawayhi

Sībawayhi's death, variously dated somewhere between 161/778 and 194/810, was already a matter of controversy in the third/fourth and ninth/tenth centuries. The earliest extant account of Sībawayhi's life and death is by the aforementioned Ibn Qutayba in his *al-Ma'ārif*:

هو عمرو بن عثمان . وكان النحو أغلب عليه، وكان قدم بغداد فجمع بينه وبين أصحاب النحو، فاستنزل، فرجع ومضى إلى بعض مدن فارس، فهلك هناك وهو شاب.<sup>30</sup>

He is 'Amr b. 'Uthmān. He was primarily a grammarian. He came to Baghdād, and a meeting was arranged between him and the grammarians.

- 25 Al-Zajjājī, *Majālis al-'ulamā'*, ed. 'A.S.M. Hārūn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1983), 118; Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, 20 vols (Cairo: Dār al-Ṭibā'a al-'Āmira, 1868), 3:210. See Versteegh, "What's it like", 208.
- 26 For al-Khalīl, R. Talmon, *Arabic Grammar in its Formative Age: Kitāb al-'Ayn and its Attribution to Ḥalīl b. Aḥmad* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 2–13 and see also 66–8, 80–1, 122–3; for Yūnus, Talmon, *Arabic Grammar*, 7 n. 35. Talmon interprets the claim for al-Khalīl's Persian ancestry as a Shu'ūbī attempt to belittle the Arabs.
- 27 See R. Sellheim, "Al-Kisā'ī", *EL*<sup>2</sup>.
- 28 For al-Kisā'ī, Bernards, "Contribution of *mawālī'*", 450–1; Brustad, "Iconic Sībawayhi", 157. On his name, Humbert, *Les voies*, 5–8; Carter, *Sībawayhi*, 8–9.
- 29 It is significant that whereas Sībawayhi reproached colleagues for theoretical arguments that were not grounded in the language of the Quran or Bedouin testimony (Versteegh "Grammar and corruption", 146–9; Bernards, *Changing Traditions*, 91), in his biography it is they who seal his defeat, repudiating – even betraying – him.
- 30 Ibn Qutayba, *al-Ma'ārif*, ed. T. 'Ukkāsha (Cairo: Maṭba'at Dār al-Kutub, 1960), 544. On this passage see also Brustad, "Iconic Sībawayhi", 142–3, 156–8.

He was humiliated, returned [to Baṣra]<sup>31</sup> and departed for a city in Persia, where he died a young man.

It is easy to see how the opaque reference to Sībawayhi's premature death could invite speculation as to what might have happened.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand al-Zajjājī (d. c. 340/950), who prided himself on mediating between the Basran and Kufan schools, though agreeing that Sībawayhi left for Persia immediately after his loss and remained there until his death, made no mention of him dying young.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile al-Sīrāfī (d. 368/979), of Persian descent and famous for his voluminous commentary on Sībawayhi's work, discussed the date of his early death at length, but did not address its cause.<sup>34</sup>

Others did, however. Al-Marzubānī (297–384/910–94), whose family came to Baghdad from Khurasan and who studied with Kufan and Basran grammarians, reported an anonymous tradition according to which a drunken Sībawayhi fell while trying to scale a fence and smashed his head. He also reported an anonymous tradition that had him dying of sickness.<sup>35</sup> A different fourth/tenth century source, Abū Bakr al-Zubaydī (316–79/928–89), a follower of Sībawayhi, reported a tradition that goes back to al-Mubarrad (c. 210–86/826–900), the leading Baṣran grammarian of his time, as well as his Kufan rival, Tha'lab (200–91/815–904), according to which Sībawayhi died of sorrow shortly after returning home.<sup>36</sup> Al-Zubaydī related a similar tradition going back to al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ (d. 210–21/825–35), the teacher of Al-Mubarrad's teachers and the exclusive transmitter of Sībawayhi's work, in which Sībawayhi succumbed to an incurable illness (*dharab*) shortly after returning home; it was his sorrow (*ghamm*), al-Akhfash emphasizes, that killed him.<sup>37</sup> This tradition dominates later biographies, which frequently feature the phrase *ghamman bi-l-dharab*.<sup>38</sup>

The death of a young man from heartbreak appears suspect, to say the least; and if such an account was current already at the beginning of the third/ninth

31 Carter, *Sībawayhi*, 8, reads *fa-raja' a wa-madā* as signifying one action; I think it is better read as two separate journeys in the light of Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 1:143, and the tradition from al-Akhfash discussed below.

32 Cf. Humbert, *Les voies*, 3.

33 Al-Zajjājī, *Majālis al-'ulamā'*, 9–10. See C.H.M. Versteegh, "al-Zadjdjadī", *IE*<sup>2</sup>.

34 Nor, following him, did Ibn al-Nadīm (*al-Fihrist*, 1:142–3). See al-Sīrāfī, *Akhbār al-naḥwiyyīn al-Baṣriyyīn*, ed. F. Krenkow (Beirut: al-Maṭba'a al-Kāthūlīkiyya, 1936), 48–50; and G. Humbert, "al-Sīrāfī", in *IE*<sup>2</sup>.

35 Al-Marzubānī, *Kitāb nūr al-qabas al-mukhtaṣar min al-muqtabas*, ed. R. Sellheim (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1964), 96–7. Al-Marzubānī was himself accused – perhaps unfairly – of being a drunkard, and unreliable as a source (R. Sellheim, "Al-Marzubānī", in *IE*<sup>2</sup>). On his biographical work, Cooperson, *Classical Biography*, 12–3.

36 Al-Zubaydī, *Ṭabaqāt al-naḥwiyyīn*, 68.

37 Al-Zubaydī, *Ṭabaqāt al-naḥwiyyīn*, 69–70. On the role of al-Akhfash and al-Mubarrad in the transmission of the *Kitāb* see Humbert, *Les voies*, and Bernards, *Changing Traditions*, in depth. The tradition from al-Akhfash is treated in detail below.

38 Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-'udabā'*, 5:125; al-Qifṭī, *Inbāh al-ruwāh 'alā anbāh al-nuḥāh*, ed. M. Ibrāhīm, 3 vols (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1950–5), 2:359; al-Suyūfī, *Bughyat al-wu'āh fī ṭabaqāt al-lughawīyyīn wa al-nuḥāh* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sa'āda, 1908), 367. See below for the use of both terms in relation to the death of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, whom we will see to be interestingly related to Sībawayhi.



century, it was apparently already regarded with suspicion by Ibn Qutayba and the fourth/tenth-century sources who did not include it in their accounts of SĪbawayhi's life. Where, then, did the story come from and, more importantly, how did it gain widespread acceptance? While some of his biographers were content to leave his premature death unexplained, others will have had a stake in his possessing a more robust biography. If SĪbawayhi was to serve as a founder for the "school" of Basra, at least, it was a problem that there was so little to say about him, and especially about his death.<sup>39</sup> The most economical way to construct a death tradition out of the spare available biographical material was offered by emplotment, that is, the causal connection of two events – his humiliation and his death – which in Ibn Qutayba and some of the later sources were kept separate.<sup>40</sup>

This move evidently struck the fancy of the audiences of SĪbawayhi's biography. A tragic air pervades later versions of his biography, which frequently describe him as handsome and narrate in pathetic detail the tears of his brother, in whose bosom he perished. Neither the economy of the emplotment nor its aesthetic qualities appear entirely sufficient, however, to explain the success of this incredible death in driving competing traditions (e.g. al-Marzubānī's) out of circulation and establishing its own authority. Its force, I submit, resided in its resonance.

Dying as a penalty for failing to solve a riddle is a well-attested motif of folk literature, but we can be more specific here, for dying of sorrow over such a failure is a variation that is apparently unattested outside of Hellenistic culture.<sup>41</sup> The sphinx famously committed suicide after Oedipus solved her riddle, and while it is not clear that she did so out of sorrow, some Greek sources had the seer Calchas perish, heartbroken after his colleague Mopsus, Tiresias' grandson, correctly answered a riddle about figs (or piglets).<sup>42</sup> In these cases it is the

39 Humbert, *Les voies*, 3: "comment la date de la mort d'un si grand personnage a-t-elle pu passer inaperçue aux yeux de ses contemporains?" More broadly, the importance of death traditions is a function of the role of death as the end-point of biography, which fundamentally is narrative; see P. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1984), ch. 4 (p. 103: "... the narrative must tend toward its end, seek illumination in its own death. Yet this must be the right death, the correct end"). On the contemporary Islamic practice of filling out lacunose narratives, cf. L.I. Conrad, "The conquest of Arwad: a source-critical study in the historiography of the early medieval Near East", in A. Cameron and L.I. Conrad (eds), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, I: Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1992), 322–401, esp. 364, on Ibn A'tham's narrative of the conquest of Arwād, and more generally, 390–4; also L.I. Conrad, "The *mawālī* and early Arabic historiography", in *Patronage and Patronage*, 370–425, 411, with further references.

40 For the concept of emplotment, see H. White, "The historical text as literary artifact", in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), 81–100, and for the case of Imru' al-Qays, Fassberg, "Greek death", 424.

41 Cf. S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, 6 vols (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955–8), H541.

42 For Calchas, see Strabo 14.1.27, with T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 702. F. Kimmel-Clauzet, *Morts, tombeaux et cultes des poètes grecs* (Bordeaux: Ausonius, 2013), 47, discusses the relation of Calchas' death to Homer's. For the case of the sphinx,

one who posed the riddle who died, not the one who failed to solve it, but Homer's case is different.

Homer's rich biographic traditions, which circulated widely in late antiquity and beyond, prominently included a public competition with his most important rival, Hesiod.<sup>43</sup> Like Sibawayhi, Homer surprisingly – perhaps unfairly – lost.<sup>44</sup> The loss had little impact on him, but he later found himself on the losing end of a rather more fateful wisdom competition, having forgotten that the oracle at Delphi – familiar also from the deaths of Calchas and the sphinx – had warned him of a children's riddle on the island of Ios.<sup>45</sup> As he sat there by the sea, he noticed some boys returning from fishing; addressing them in riddling form as hailing from (landlocked) Arcadia, he asked what they caught.<sup>46</sup> The boys responded with a riddle of their own: “what we caught, we left behind; what we didn't catch, we carry with us”.<sup>47</sup> Homer was at a loss, and when the

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see Gantz, *Greek Myth*, 497–8. See also M.L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 74, for Indo-European comparanda.

- 43 For the formation of his biographical tradition, see B. Graziosi, *Inventing Homer: The Early Reception of Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); M. Kivilo, “The early biographical tradition of Homer”, in T.R. Kämmerer (ed.), *Identities and Societies in the Ancient East-Mediterranean Regions: Comparative Approaches* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2011), 85–104. Biographies, including from late antiquity, are conveniently collected in M.L. West (ed.), *Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
- 44 For discussion, see Graziosi, *Inventing Homer*, 171–4; J. Uden, “The Contest of Homer and Hesiod and the ambitions of Hadrian”, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 130, 2010, 121–34, 130–2; P. Bassino, *The Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi: A Commentary* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 167–9.
- 45 e.g. *The Contest of Homer and Hesiod*, in West (ed.), *Lives of Homer* 5, 324–5. On the fishermen children as traditional rivals of Homer, see D. Levine, “Poetic justice: Homer's death in the ancient biographical tradition”, *Classical Journal* 98, 2002, 141–60 (cf., interestingly, in Syriac culture Abraham bar Dashandad's exhortation to “read the fishermen and not the poets”, quoted by S.P. Brock, “From antagonism to assimilation: Syriac attitudes to Greek learning”, in N. Garsoïan et al. (eds), *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 17–34, 28 with n. 128). In Isaac Porphyrogenitus, *Praefatio in Homerum*, ed. J.F. Kindstrand (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 1979) 14, Homer – echoing Oedipus – blinds himself in dismay after failing to solve the children's riddle, then perishes. The oracle itself embodies a link between riddles and death: it speaks in riddles, and by misinterpreting or ignoring them one may risk death, as in the case of Homer, and also Hesiod (see V. Liapis, “On the antagonism between divine and human performer in archaic Greek poetics”, in E.J. Bakker (ed.), *Authorship and Greek Song: Authority, Authenticity, and Performance* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 197–221, 217–19).
- 46 See discussion in G.S. Kirk, “The Michigan Alcidas-papyrus; Heraclitus fr. 56d; the riddle of the lice”, *Classical Quarterly* 44/3–4, 1950, 149–67, 160–7; G.L. Koniaris, “On Homer and the riddle of the lice”, *Wiener Studien* 84, 1971, 29–38; and recently Liapis, “Antagonism”, 213, and J.I. Porter, “P.Mich. inv. 2754: new readings of Alcidas, “On Homer””, *Classical Philology* 116/1, 2021, 1–25, 12–13.
- 47 e.g. *The Contest of Homer and Hesiod*, in West (ed.), *Lives of Homer* 18, 350–1. The riddle, in slightly different form, goes back to Heraclitus in the sixth/fifth centuries BCE, and is unlikely to have originated with him (Porter, “New readings”, 4 n. 13). On the riddle see also A. Kahane, *Diachronic Dialogues: Authority and Continuity in Homer and the Homeric Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 20–2; in iconography, B. Bergman, “A painted garland: weaving words and images in the

boys explained that they caught no fish but partially deloused themselves, he recalled the oracle and realized his days were numbered. According to one tradition, on his way back from the sea he slipped in the mud and subsequently died.<sup>48</sup> Another version, however, which pointedly claims that Homer was already ill when he arrived on the beach,<sup>49</sup> shows the tradition of his fall to be a rationalizing attempt to indirectly connect the boys' riddle with Homer's death in order to avoid directly associating them.<sup>50</sup> The tradition to which such rationalizing versions are responding is found in numerous sources, which present his death as a result of his sorrow over the failure to solve the riddle.<sup>51</sup>

We thus find both Homer and SĪbwayhi to have died of heartbreak stemming from defeat in a wisdom competition decided by a question concerned with animals who were themselves (traditionally) agents of death.<sup>52</sup> But did Arabic-speakers know Homer and the story of his death? These are two separate

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House of Epigrams in Pompeii", in Z. Newby and R. Leader-Newby (eds), *Art and Inscriptions in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 60–101, 71–6; and in folklore, Levine, "Poetic justice", 142.

- 48 *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*, 18, 350–3, and similarly P. Mich. inv. 2754 (for whose text see now Porter, "New readings"). See Bassino, *Commentary*, 190–3, for commentary. Surprisingly, we find here SĪbwayhi's other death tradition, namely death as the result of a fall. Both, we might note, were in a state of altered consciousness, SĪbwayhi because he was drunk, Homer because he was coming to terms with his death. For the resonance of Homer's fall, Levine, "Poetic justice", 153–5. In Tzetzēs, *Chiliades*, ed. P.A.M. Leone (Naples: Libreria scientifica editrice, 1968), 13.645–59, Homer's sorrow is also kept apart from his fall.
- 49 Ps.-Herodotus, in West (ed.), *Lives of Homer*, 397, as in *Suidae Lexicon*, ed. A. Adler, 5 vols (Leipzig: Teubner, 1928–38), s.v. Ὅμηρος 146–62, and see also *Chronographia anonyma* in J.A. Cramer (ed.), *Anecdota graeca e codd. Manuscriptis bibliothecae regiae Parisiensis*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1839), 2:228.
- 50 In Proclus' *Chrestomathy* Homer's fall is caused by a combination of dismay over the riddle and the shock of recalling the oracle (see West (ed.), *Lives of Homer*, 420–3). A different rationalizing account is found in an Escorial manuscript, where as a result of depression Homer starves himself to death (*Vita scorialensis I* in West (ed.), *Lives of Homer*, 441). Hunger is also the cause of death mentioned by Sotades in Stobaeus, *Florilegium* 4.34.8.16.
- 51 Ps.-Plutarch, *Vita Romana*, *Vita scorialensis II*, in West (ed.), *Lives of Homer*, 411, 437, 449, respectively; *Greek Anthology* 7.1, and 7.213; Valerius Maximus 9.12.3; Tzetzēs, *Exegesis in Iliadem*, ed. G. Hermann (Leipzig, 1812), 37.25–6; Ps.-Nonnus, *Scholia mythologica* 4.33, on which see more below. Cf. Porter, "New readings", 5 with n. 16. The Homeric Lives are schematically compared and their inter-relationships discussed in Kirk, "Riddle of the lice", 163–7; see Kimmel-Clauzet, *Morts, tombeaux et cultes*, 38–48, for a broad overview of the sources on Homer's death, assembled at 285–97. Levine, "Poetic justice", explores the roots of the Homeric death tradition.
- 52 Greek and Roman figures said to have died of phthiriasis, or louse-disease, include Alcman, Pherecydes, even Plato, and also Sulla (with regard to SĪbwayhi, I refer primarily to the scorpion). For discussion of deadly lice, see M. Davies and J. Kathirithamby, *Greek Insects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 169–76; S. Grau, "How to kill a philosopher: the narrating of ancient Greek philosophers' deaths in relation to their way of living", *Ancient Philosophy* 30, 2010, 347–81, 364–7. It is significant that the louse sucks human blood, and that *phtheir* (louse) was associated in antiquity with *phtheirein*, "to die" (Kahane, *Diachronic Dialogues*, 21; Porter, "New readings", 4 n. 11).

questions; the answer to both is affirmative. Graeco-Arab contact had a long history going back well over a millennium before the time of Sībawayhi, and Hellenistic culture persisted under Islamic rule and in Baghdad, in particular, was buttressed by Syriac scholars immigrating from Edessa.<sup>53</sup> Theophilus of Edessa (695–785), who served as an astrologer in the Abbasid court in Baghdad around the time of Sībawayhi, was said to have translated into Syriac “two books on the conquest of the city of Ilion [Troy] . . . by the poet Homer”, and while he was most likely not translating from the *Iliad*, Syriac excerpts of that work were circulating in Mesopotamia in the third/ninth century.<sup>54</sup> The famous translator Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq was known not only to recite Homeric poetry in the court of Hārūn al-Rashīd in Baghdad only a few decades after Sībawayhi’s death, but was even conversant with Homeric exegesis.<sup>55</sup> Though the Arabic translation movement focused on philosophical and scientific texts, the texts that were translated not infrequently mentioned Homer, and even quoted him. Through such quotations Homeric verses made their way into Arabic literature, at which point some began to circulate independently, appearing in original Arabic works such as al-Bīrūnī’s *Description*

- 53 Fassberg, “Greek death”, 425–6, with references, also 430 with n. 79. For Syriac scholars in Baghdad, see J.M. Fiey, *Chrétien syriaques sous les Abbassides surtout à Bagdad, 749–1258* (CSCO 420, Leuven: Peeters, 1980); also L.I. Conrad, “Varietas Syriaca: secular and scientific culture in the Christian communities of Syria after the Arab conquest”, in G.J. Reinink and A.C. Kluglist (eds), *After Bardaisan: Studies on Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity in Honour of Professor Han J.W. Drijvers* (Louvain: Peeters, 1999), 85–105, 105.
- 54 Bar Hebraeus, *Muḥṭaṣar al-duwal*, ed. A. Ṣālḥānī (Beirut: al-Maṭba’a al-Kāthūlikiyya, 1890), 41.2–5, 220.3; *Chronicon syriacum*, ed. P. Bedjan (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1890), 127.2–3. A. Hilken, “Syriac *Ilioupersides*: the fall of Troy in Syriac historiography”, *Le Muséon* 126, 2013, 285–317, 288, attractively suggests that the “two books” were the *Sack of Ilion*, a poem from the Epic Cycle, a corpus with which Homer was consistently if variously associated, but cf. L. Niccolai, “From epic to parable: a Syriac reading of the fall of Troy”, *Le Muséon* 132, 2019, 37–64, 42–50. The translation of some genuinely Homeric verses is preserved in Antony of Tagrit’s *Rhetoric*, for which see H. Raguse, “Syrische Homerzitate in der Rhetorik des Anton von Tagrit”, in *Paul de Lagarde und die syrische Kirchengeschichte* (Göttingen: Lagarde-Haus, 1968), 162–75, along with Hilken, “Syriac *Ilioupersides*”, 286–8, and also M. Mavroudi, “Homer in Greece from the end of antiquity 1: the Byzantine reception of Homer and his export to other cultures”, in C.O. Pache et al. (eds), *The Cambridge Guide to Homer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 444–72, 457–8. On Theophilus, R.G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), 400–1; M. Debié, *L’Écriture de l’histoire en Syriaque* (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 139–43. On the reception of Homer in Syriac culture, as well as Hellenism more broadly, Brock, “Antagonism to assimilation”, with 28–9 on Homer; J.W. Watt, “Grammar, rhetoric, and the enkyklios paideia in Syriac”, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 143, 1993, 45–71, with 59–61 on Homer; and Conrad, “Varietas Syriaca”, with 91–4 on Theophilus and Homer, and 96 on Evagrius’ use of Homer.
- 55 Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a, *‘Uyūn al-anbā’ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā’*, ed. E. Savage-Smith et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 8.29.2–3, discussed by G. Strohmaier, “Homer in Bagdad”, *Byzantinoslavica* 41, 1980, 196–200; P. Pormann, “The Arabic Homer: an untold story”, *Classical and Modern Literature* 27/1, 2007, 27–44, 28; M. Mavroudi, “Greek language and education under early Islam”, in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts*, 295–342, 325. And see similarly Rashed, “New evidence”, 289–93, on Quṣṭā b. Lūqā.

of India.<sup>56</sup> It matters little for our purposes that not all such quotations attributed to Homer were actually from the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*; as with the Syriac Homer, so too the Arabic Homer was not merely the author of the two epics. When al-Sijistānī (d. c. 379/985) noted that some Homeric poetry had been translated into Arabic, he was in fact referring to a gnomological collection which the Greeks attributed to the comic playwright Menander.<sup>57</sup> Just as Homer usurped the latter's sayings, so his biography in al-Mubashshir b. Fātik's collection of sages' lives takes over elements from Aesop's.<sup>58</sup> Whatever transformations he underwent, he nevertheless remained a figure of venerable authority, and only a vague awareness of Hellenistic culture would have been required in order to be familiar with his name: he was referred to as "the Greek Imru' al-Qays".<sup>59</sup>

The story of Homer's death travelled east, too. A version of his death, related in Pseudo-Nonnus' scholia to Gregory of Nazianzus' *First Invective Against Julian*, was translated into Syriac, probably during the sixth century CE.<sup>60</sup> Some three or four centuries later, Homer's exchange with the boys is quoted in Antony of Tagrit's *Rhetoric*.<sup>61</sup> But Homer's death tradition not only circulated in early Islamic Mesopotamia, it was also appropriated and creatively

- 56 J. Kraemer, "Arabische Homerverse", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 106, 1956, 259–316, 263–79.
- 57 Al-Sijistānī, *Muntakhab siwān al-ḥikma*, ed. 'A.R. Badawī (Tehran: Bunyād-i Farhang-i Īrān, 1974), 192–3, and see Kraemer, "Arabische Homerverse", 307–8, also 316; mentioned also in Mavroudi, "Greek language and education", 324. See M. Ullmann, *Die arabische Überlieferung der sogenannten Menandersentenzen* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1961) for Menander's Arabic *sententiae*. On the correlation of Menander and Homer as representatives of pagan literature, see S. Nervegna, *Menander in Antiquity: The Contexts of Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 201–2.
- 58 Al-Mubashshir b. Fātik, *Mukhtār al-ḥikam wa-maḥāsīn al-kalim*, ed. 'A.R. Badawī (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya, 1980), 29–33. Cf. B. Graziosi, "On seeing the poet: Arabic, Italian and Byzantine portraits of Homer", *Scandinavian Journal of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 1, 2015, 25–47, 33–4. Similarly, in Thomas of Marga's ninth-century monastic history, Homer in the course of the time he spent alone in the desert, became adept at alchemy (*The Book of Governors: The Historia Monastica of Thomas, Bishop of Marga, A.D. 840*, ed. E.A.W. Budge, 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1893), 2:530).
- 59 Al-Bīrūnī, *al-Āthār al-bāqīya 'an al-qurūn al-khāliya*, ed. E. Sachau (Leipzig: DMG, 1923), 86.17; Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *Uyūn*, 4.1.11.3. Like Imru' al-Qays – as well as Sībawayhi, as noted above – he was deployed in arguments concerning the inimitability of the Quran; see P. Nwyia and K. Samir (eds), "Une correspondance islamo-chrétienne entre Ibn al-Munāḡḡim, Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq et Qusṭā ibn Lūqā", *Patrologia Orientalis* 40/4, 1981, 664–9, also discussed in Rashed, "New evidence". On the Arabic reception of Homer, see also D. Gutas, "Reception, Syriac and Arabic", in M. Finkelberg (ed.), *The Homer Encyclopedia* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 719–20, and Mavroudi, "Byzantine reception", 459–63, arguing for the importance of Byzantine allegory as a channel of transmission.
- 60 S.P. Brock (ed.), *The Syriac Version of the Pseudo-Nonnos Mythological Scholia* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 97–8 (translation) and 228–9 (text). The scene of his death is here transferred to Arcadia, as a result of Homer's own riddling address to the children (cf. Kimmel-Clauzet, *Morts, tombeaux et cultes*, 463 n. 15).
- 61 J.W. Watt (ed.), *The Fifth Book of the Rhetoric of Antony of Tagrit* (CSCO 480–1, Leuven: Peeters, 1986), 480:69 (text), 481:57 (translation). For the rivalry between fisherman and poets cf. again Abraham bar Dashandad's exhortation in Brock, "Antagonism to assimilation", 28, with n. 128. For Antony's dates see M. Nicosia, "Reassessing



adapted in Syriac historiography.<sup>62</sup> Three Syriac chronicles, with some differences in detail, relate the events of the battle of al-Qādisiyya (c. 14–17/635–38), the turning point in the Islamic conquest of Iraq, as follows. As the Arabs and Sasanians set up camp on the banks of the Euphrates, near Kufa, the Sasanian king sends a local Christian spy from al-Ḥīra (or Ḥirtā) to the enemy camp. When he sees a Maʿaddī tribesman bent over, urinating or defecating, eating bread and delousing himself, he asks him what he is doing. The tribesman responds: “as you can see, I am bringing in the new, removing the old, and killing my enemies”. The spy immediately understands: a new people is about to enter, the old people will depart, and the Sasanians will be killed. Inevitably, they are routed and chased all the way to Ctesiphon, the Sasanian capital.<sup>63</sup>

The anecdote of the spy and the tribesman repays close reading. The Christian spy, caught between the Muslim and Persian armies, stands for the Syriac reader, who is granted privileged access behind the scenes of history. As the spy decodes the tribesman’s message, so the reader is called to interpret the narrative of the battle of al-Qādisiyya as bearing more general significance, which was a convention of late antique historiography.<sup>64</sup> Alongside the Syriac perspective, the tribesman’s speech gives expression to a Muslim point of view. He in fact embodies a variation on the Islamic *topos* of the pre-battle meeting between a representative of the imperial – Byzantine or Persian – power with the “poor and pious” Muslim warrior, which subverted the pre-Islamic dynamic whereby the Romans would dispose of the Arab by disdainfully bribing him.<sup>65</sup> The

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Antony of Tagrit: when did he actually live?”, *Oriens Christianus* 104, 2021, 67–88; I thank the author for kindly sharing her work in advance of publication.

- 62 First noted by Brock, “Antagonism to assimilation”, 28–9, also Brock, “Syriac views of emergent Islam”, in G.H.A. Juynboll (ed.), *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 9–21, 13–4.
- 63 *Chronicon anonymum ad annum 1234*, ed. J.B. Chabot and A. Barsaüm, 3 vols (Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1952–3), 1:246–7; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, ed. J.B. Chabot, 4 vols (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1899–1910), 11.6, 4:416–17 (translation 2:421); Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicon Syriacum*, 101.
- 64 In the Syriac chronicles, L.I. Conrad “The Arabs and the Colossus”, *JRAS* 6/2, 1996, 165–87, 183, with references; with regard to the conquest narratives in Islamic historiography, Savant, *The New Muslims*, 91–2, with references, and specifically with regard to the battle of al-Qādisiyya, 205. For contact between the historiographic traditions, see R. G. Hoyland, “Arabic, Syriac, and Greek historiography in the first Abbasid century: an inquiry into inter-cultural traffic”, *ARAM* 3, 1991, 211–33; A. Borrut, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 137–66; Debié, *L’Écriture*, ch. 10; more broadly, Conrad, “*Mawālī*”, and specifically with regard to Theophilus, A. Borrut, “Court astrologers and historical writing in early ʿAbbāsīd Baghdād: an appraisal”, in J. Scheiner and D. Janos (eds), *The Place to Go: Contexts of Learning in Baghdād, 750–1000 CE* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2014), 455–502, 477–81. See M.P. Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christianity and the Early Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), ch. 1, for a broader discussion of Syriac accounts of the Islamic conquests as “records of collective memory”.
- 65 Masterfully discussed in T. Sizgorich, ““Do prophets come with a sword?” Conquest, empire, and historical narrative in the early Islamic world”, *American Historical Review* 112/4, 2007, 992–1015. The lengthy accounts of the pre-battle encounter between Muslims and Persians in al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M.J. de



tribesman's oracular response fittingly signals that agency is now his, that it is his speech which requires interpretation. The one viewpoint that is missing is appropriately that of the imperial representative, who is removed from the scene while the tribesman appropriates and rewrites a piece of Hellenistic lore.

The Syriac chronicle writers' source for this incident will have been Dionysius of Tellmahre (d. 845)<sup>66</sup> who, for the events of the seventh century, may well have relied on the aforementioned Theophilus, the "Hellenophile" translator of Homer whose chronicle has been described as "classicizing".<sup>67</sup> In spite of differences in detail, the Syriac anecdote, as Sebastian Brock has

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Goeje, 15 vols, 3 series (Leiden: Brill, 1879–1901), I:2235–44, 2268–85, are clearly related to the Syriac version. Emphasis is placed on Arab squalor; Y. Friedmann (ed.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 12: *The Battle of al-Qādisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), xv, notes that these encounters "echo" Shu'ūbī arguments. Yazdagird III, in particular, like the spy, recognizes that the Arabs are to win by interpreting Muslim answers to his questions regarding their attire as oracles (I:2239). Rustam, who also recognizes the inevitability of Muslim victory, with the help of a Ḥirtan translator expounds parables referring to the Arab squalor, and the Muslims respond with a parable of their own. In addition, there is some discussion of spies in al-Ḥīra, though on behalf of the Muslims (I:2249, 2255–6). It is also tempting to see the Syriac version as an adaptation of the report of the spy who observes the Muslims cleaning their teeth before prayer, which would be meaningful only to a Muslim audience (I:2291, with Friedmann, *The History*, 86 n. 293). Curiously, the encounter with Yazdagird is followed by the capture of fishermen, leading to the "Day of the Fish" (I:2244). See also Savant, *The New Muslims*, 200–6, and for overviews of the battle of al-Qādisiyya, and other sources for it, L. Vecchia Vaglieri, "al-Kādisiyya", *EF<sup>2</sup>*; F.M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 204–9.

66 Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 638 n. 41. On the sources of these chronicles, including Dionysius, see S.P. Brock, "Syriac sources for seventh-century history", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 2, 1976, 17–36, 21–3; L.I. Conrad, "Syriac perspectives on Bilad al-Sham during the Abbasid period", in M.'A. Bakhit and R. Schick (eds), *Bilad al-Sham during the Abbasid Period* (Amman: Lajnat tārikh bilād al-Shām, 1991), 1–44, 27–36; R.G. Hoyland, *Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle and the Circulation of Historical Knowledge in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 12–3. For his fragments, R. Abramowski, *Dionysius von Tellmahre, jakobitischer Patriarch von 818–845: zur Geschichte der Kirche unter dem Islam* (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1940), 126–44; and see A. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 85–104.

67 On Dionysius and his sources, Arabic, Syriac and Greek, see Conrad, "Syriac perspectives", 36–40; Hoyland, "Arabic, Syriac, and Greek", 219–31; *Seeing Islam*, 416–9; *Theophilus of Edessa*, 13 and 22; Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 47; more guardedly with regard to his reliance on Theophilus, Debié, *L'Écriture*, 27–31 and 143–9, as well as A. Papaconstantinou, review of Hoyland, *Theophilus of Edessa*, in *Le Muséon* 126, 2013, 459–65, 461–4. Dionysius was, like Theophilus, originally from Edessa; Dionysius' brother, Theodore, metropolitan of Edessa, was a scholar of Greek. On Theophilus' *Chronicle* and his sources, Hoyland, *Theophilus of Edessa*, 19–29, esp. 22–3, noting his "Hellenophilia" and "classicizing", his inclination for anecdotes and for warfare and diplomacy, and the dearth of material for events after 630. On a Homeric death as part of a possible pattern of scenes of Greek ruin resulting from the Islamic conquests, see n. 70 below. The story of the Ḥirtan spy is absent from Theophilus' other "dependents", Theophanes and Agapius, but both were wont to abbreviate Theophilus' narrative (Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 432, 442), which evidently is the

observed,<sup>68</sup> is derived from the tradition of Homer's death. Both revolve around riddles which serve an oracular function, are concerned with lice and founded on the opposition between what enters or adheres to the body and what is removed from it. To be sure, Homer fails where the spy succeeds, but both realize that the riddle presages demise – only the victim changes.<sup>69</sup> Homer's death tradition would thus have been useful for the purpose of representing the end of the Persian empire because Homer could stand for Hellenism itself.<sup>70</sup>

Sībawayhi's death, which I am arguing to be an Arabic iteration of Homer's death tradition, can be found to function similarly to the Syriac iteration, and is interestingly related to it. As the approximate starting point of the battle of al-Qādisiyya, Kufa was entwined with its end-point, Ctesiphon; after the latter's fall, Sa'd b. Abī Waqqāṣ, the commander of the Arab army at al-Qādisiyya, founded Kufa and was said to have built his own palace there on the model of Ctesiphon's White Palace.<sup>71</sup> Kufa thus links the narrative of the battle of al-Qādisiyya and Sībawayhi's biography: just as Arabs setting out from Kufa drove the Persians out of Iraq, so it was an attack by Kufans that brought about the departure of the Persian Sībawayhi. Kufans indeed appear to have played an instrumental role in both traditions,<sup>72</sup> and it is therefore significant that in both cases we have Arabs making their way from Kufa to the capital city situated on the banks of the Tigris (first Ctesiphon, later Baghdad), achieving the establishment of Kufa (literally, or as the pre-eminent grammatical school), as well as the expulsion of the Persians from Iraq. If in the case of

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case here; for their accounts of the battle of Qādisiyya, see Hoyland, *Theophilus of Edessa*, 104–5.

68 Again, Brock, “Antagonism to assimilation”, 28–9, and Brock, “Syriac views”, 13–4.

69 Elsewhere too it can be seen that where the traditions differ, the differences facilitate adaptation. The sea, a crucial component of the Homeric tradition, is separate from the riddle in the Syriac tradition, but is not actually absent: whereas Homer dies on the shores of the Aegean, the battle of al-Qādisiyya officially begins when the Persians cross a canal flowing from the Euphrates, al-'Aṭīk (“the old [river]”), which is also where Rustam and thirty thousand Persian soldiers find their death (this may explain the name of the first day of the battle, *yawm armāth*, the Day of the Rafts). Note also that al-Qādisiyya is described in Islamic historiography as a “moat” (*khandaq*) and in relation to a system of canals in al-Ṭabarī, *Ta' rīkh* I:2229–30, 2243, 2336–7. And see below on al-Akhfash's final meeting with Sībawayhi, on the “bank” of Basra.

70 Recall that the Syriac tradition itself authorizes – indeed, urges – symbolic reading, which was typical of late antique historiography more broadly (see n. 64 above). If the adaptation of Homer's death indeed goes back to Theophilus, it may in fact fit a pattern of using scenes of Greek ruin in relation to the Islamic conquests that runs through his work. Cf. Conrad, “The Arabs and the Colossus”, 185, on Theophilus' fanciful ascription of the demolition of the Colossus of Rhodes, “as a symbol of the achievements of Antiquity and its cultural heritage”, to the Arabs. It has also been suggested that in his translation of “the conquest of Ilion”, Theophilus presented the sack of Troy as a warning to eastern Christianity – see Conrad, “*Mawālī*”, 388, with Hilken, “Syriac *Iliouperides*”, esp. 310, but cf. Niccolai, “Epic to parable”.

71 See S.B. Savant, “Forgetting Ctesiphon”, in P. Wood (ed.), *History and Identity in the Late Antique Near East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 169–86, 178 n. 24, and *passim* for detailed discussion of Ctesiphon as a fraught *lieu de mémoire*.

72 See Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, 204 n. 179 (on p. 338), on traditions concerning the battle of al-Qādisiyya.

the battle of al-Qādisiyya they were explicitly fighting in the name of Islam, in the case of Sībawayhi, as we have seen, they were doing so implicitly.<sup>73</sup> As in the case of Imru' al-Qays, where the exile of the king of Kinda from Arabia to Byzantium laid the ground for the rise of Islam,<sup>74</sup> Homer's death tradition is employed in both the Syriac and Arabic traditions to signify the banishment of Persians who were hostile or at least foreign to Islam.

While it is clear why the Homeric death tradition would be of use to Sībawayhi's rivals, it appeared above that the author of the Homeric emplotment of Sībawayhi's death may have been the Basran al-Akhfash. But we can see why a Homeric death would also be valuable to al-Akhfash, in whose account Sībawayhi's sad story of rejection is transformed into a narrative of redemption. In the tradition preserved by al-Zubaydī, Sībawayhi himself told al-Akhfash of his loss when he came to bid him farewell on the "bank" (*shāṭi'*) of Basra before departing for Persia. Al-Akhfash then set out for Baghdad, where he went to al-Kisā'ī's mosque and put to him 100 questions, all of which al-Kisā'ī failed to answer.<sup>75</sup> Al-Akhfash's account thus produces a new layer of ring composition for Sībawayhi's story: as al-Akhfash came to Sībawayhi's aid after he was first humiliated by accepting him into his *majlis*, so he avenged his second humiliation. He in fact accomplished more than mere revenge, for al-Kisā'ī was so struck by al-Akhfash's performance that he entrusted his children's education to him, which plainly serves to signify the Kufans' acceptance of Basran grammar. It is significant that al-Akhfash concludes his lengthy narrative by abruptly returning to Sībawayhi, reporting that he died of sorrow: if by means of this tradition al-Akhfash glorified himself,<sup>76</sup> he also turned Sībawayhi from an unfortunate victim of tribalism or bribery into a heroic, Homeric victim. In the event that the story of Sībawayhi's humiliation was already established, one way of salvaging his reputation – indeed, of cementing his authority and legacy – would be to have him die of sorrow *à la* Homer.<sup>77</sup>

The Homeric death tradition would thus have been useful both to Sībawayhi's rivals and his followers. It is not necessary that this death should have been specifically associated with Homer,<sup>78</sup> only that it be recognized as fitting for a founding figure. What is important is that this narrative, in one form or another, was current in Mesopotamia and accessible to Arabic-speakers,<sup>79</sup> and in many

73 The biographical tradition, after all, marked Sībawayhi as a religious misfit, for it was only after failing his religious studies that he embarked on his career as a grammarian. Note also his association with the theologically suspect al-Nazzām in al-Tanūkhī, *Ta'rikh*, 107–8.

74 Fassberg, "Greek death", 432.

75 Al-Zubaydī, *Ṭabaqāt al-naḥwiyyīn*, 70.

76 The rivalry between al-Akhfash and Sībawayhi is palpable, e.g. in Abū al-Tayyib, *Marātib al-naḥwiyyīn*, 111. For more on al-Akhfash see F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, 9 vols (Leiden: Brill, 1967–84), 9:68–9; Versteegh, *Grammar and Exegesis*, 14–15; Humbert, *Les voies*, 14–17; Carter, *Sībawayhi*, 35, 136.

77 One might see the Abū l-Aswad foundation narrative as an inverse instance of what might be termed collaborative one-upmanship: as a response to the Basrans attributing the invention of grammar to Abū l-Aswad, the Shī'ite Kufans asserted that he was in fact indebted to 'Alī.

78 Al-Mubashshir b. Fātik, *Mukhtār*, 30, merely states that Homer died at the age of 108.

79 Cf. Hoyland, *Theophilus of Edessa*, 33: "language constituted no barrier to exchange between Syrian and Arab cultures". For Syriac scholars in Baghdad, including

ways attractive as a death tradition for Sībawayhi. There was certainly no contradiction in assigning a Greek death to a Persian, for in late antiquity Hellenism was broadly equivalent to paganism.<sup>80</sup> As in the case of Imru' al-Qays, Sībawayhi's death tradition could be of service both within Islamic culture and without: while internally it denied the notion that a non-Arab not sufficiently versed in Islam could found Arabic grammar, thereby legitimizing it, externally it crafted a founding figure worthy of competition with rival traditions.<sup>81</sup>

### 3. The origins of Arabic grammar

Recognizing the death of the founding father of Arabic grammar as Greek is significant not only for the reception of Hellenism in early Islam, but also because it has long been claimed that Arabic grammar itself was built on Greek foundations. This claim has encountered staunch opposition; critics prominently argue that Islamic law rather served as a model for Arabic grammar.<sup>82</sup> But the two

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Theophilus and Dionysius, see again Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques*, and Conrad, "Varietas Syriaca", 105.

- 80 See G.W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), ch. 1; also A. Cameron, "The eastern provinces in the 7th century A.D.: Hellenism and the emergence of Islam", in S. Said (ed.), *Ελληνισμός: Quelques jalons pour une histoire de l'identité grecque* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 287–313, 287 and 311, noting that "Hellene" could even mean Persian! Hellenistic and Persian cultures, representing the two imperial powers that had historically bordered on Arabia, could both be perceived in contrast with Islam as polytheist (for the Persians, see Savant, *The New Muslims*, 181–3 and ch. 6, e.g. 204 and 229; for the split between Hellenism and Byzantine Christianity, Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, 84–95, cf. Savant, *The New Muslims*, 178–80). Both could also be pictured as genealogically related (Savant, *The New Muslims*, 48–51). Persians and Greeks were thus interchangeable in the pre-battle encounter *topos* discussed above (Sizgorich, "Prophets with a sword"). I note that a prominent general in the Persian army at al-Qādisiyya was named al-Jālinūs (i.e. Galen, e.g. al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ* I:2169–76).
- 81 Cf. T. Sizgorich, "Narrative and community in Islamic late antiquity", *Past and Present* 185/1, 2004, 9–42, e.g. on the recognition of Muḥammad as prophet, also M. Kister, "The *Sīrah* literature", in A.F.L. Beeston et al. (eds), *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 352–67, 355. Conrad, "*Mawālī*", 374–5: "... early Islamic culture in all its forms represented the agenda of a small minority that was pursued in the midst of the cultural activity of a vast majority with other goals and priorities".
- 82 A. Merx, *Historia artis grammaticae apud Syros* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1889), 137–54; F. Rundgren, "Über den griechischen Einfluss auf die arabische Nationalgrammatik", *Acta universitatis upsaliensis* 2, 1976, 119–44; Versteegh, *Greek Elements*, especially ch. 1. More recently, differently, R. Talmon, *Eighth-Century Iraqi Grammar: A Critical Exploration of Pre-Ḥalīlian Arabic Linguistics* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 162, claimed that pre-Sībawayhian grammar "originated under massive influence of foreign linguistic and language-oriented sciences". Against Greek, and for Islamic law, M. G. Carter, "Les origines de la grammaire arabe", *Revue des études islamiques* 40, 1972, 69–97 (cf. Talmon, "Schacht's theory"); G. Troupeau, "La logique d'Ibn al-Muqaffa' et les origines de la grammaire arabe", *Arabica* 28/2–3, 1981, 242–50, argues against Greek logic as a source for Arabic grammar, but cf. D. King, "Grammar and logic in Syriac (and Arabic)", *Journal of Semitic Studies* 58/1, 2013, 101–20. Overviews in R. Talmon, "The philosophizing Farra': an interpretation of an obscure saying attributed

claims are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are both embedded in Sībawayhi's biography.

The role of Islamic law features in it quite explicitly: Sībawayhi's grammatical studies, we recall, were preceded by religious studies and fuelled by his failure at them, echoing the widespread narrative about the religious roots of grammar, and in particular the Abū l-Aswad al-Du'alī foundation narrative which is similarly concerned with a grammatical mistake with theological implications.<sup>83</sup> This article has argued that the claim concerning the foreign roots of Arabic grammar is also implicit in Sībawayhi's biography. It is notable that he is not the only figure who, after being expelled by an exasperated teacher, proceeded to establish himself as the pre-eminent authority in a different field of study; this evidently was a *topos*, one that links him with another outsider who attained mastery of Arabic, the Nestorian Ḥunayn. After being banished from his medical studies, a driven Ḥunayn embarked – like Sībawayhi – on linguistic studies, primarily Greek but also Arabic, acquiring a profession that consisted in importing Greek material into Islamic culture.<sup>84</sup> According to one tradition of his death he too perished of sorrow (*ghamm*) following a debate of a linguistic nature.<sup>85</sup>

That both claims regarding the origins of Arabic grammar are to be found in Sībawayhi's biography cannot be considered incidental. Its artful and artificial structure, in addition to its affinity with the Abū l-Aswad al-Du'alī foundation narrative, suggests that the biography of the founder of Arabic grammar was also constructed in part as a biography of the discipline he founded.<sup>86</sup> Sībawayhi's biography thus offers another avenue by which to approach the question of the origins of Arabic grammar, indicating that in discussing the

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to the grammarian Ta'lab", in C.H.M. Versteegh and M.G. Carter (eds), *Proceedings of the Second Workshop on the History of Arabic Grammar* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990), 265–79, 265–6; Versteegh, *Grammar and Exegesis*, 20–36; R. Baalbaki (ed.), *The Early Islamic Grammatical Tradition* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), xx–xxvi.

- 83 For the hadith mangled by Sībawayhi, e.g. al-Tanūkhī, *Ta'rikh*, 93. Cooperson, *Classical Biography*, 12, comments on the artifice of the Abū l-Aswad foundation narrative. See also n. 77 above.
- 84 Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *Uyūn*, 8.29; Bar Hebraeus, *Muḥtaṣar*, 250. Ḥunayn was himself from al-Ḥīra, and like Sībawayhi later arrived in Basra, from which he went to Baghdad. He is explicitly (albeit impossibly) connected to Sībawayhi as a fellow student of al-Khalīl; he is even said to have brought al-Khalīl's *Kitāb al-'Ayn* to Baghdad (8.28.8–9). Interestingly, an Arabic grammar "in the manner of the Greeks" was attributed to Ḥunayn (e.g. Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 2:290; Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *Uyūn*, 8.29.22); see now N. Vidro, "A book on Arabic inflexion according to the system of the Greeks: a lost work by Ḥunayn B. Ishāq", *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 72, 2020, 26–58, for possible fragments of this work preserved in the Cairo Geniza. See also Merx, *Historia artis grammaticae*, 106; Versteegh, *Greek Elements*, 118. Cf. Carter, "Les origines", 72.
- 85 Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *Uyūn*, 8.29.12, while at 8.29.11 he is said to die of *dharab*. On his death, see G. Strohmaier, "Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq und die Bilder", *Klio* 43–5, 1965, 525–33; and M. Cooperson, "The purported autobiography of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq", *Edebiyāt* 7, 1996, 235–49.
- 86 Cf. Brustad, "Iconic Sībawayhi", 143, 162; the apparent interpretation of Sībawayhi's biography as consolatory is not grounded in the context in which the biography was constructed.



possibility of Greek influence it is not sufficient to look for its traces – or the absence thereof – in Sībawayhi's theory.<sup>87</sup> We must also ask what, within the environment in which Arabic grammar developed, was the significance of the stories that were told about its foundation? The fact that both Sībawayhi's biography and the Abū l-Aswad al-Du'ālī foundation narrative are intent on showing that non-Arabs could only contribute to the development of grammar negatively implies that there was some concern about foreign influence, or the appearance of such influence, in the formation of Arabic grammar.

There was good reason for concern. The Arabic grammatical tradition did not develop in a vacuum.<sup>88</sup> It was but one of three contemporary grammatical traditions in Mesopotamia, along with Syriac and Hebrew, driven by the demands of reading scripture.<sup>89</sup> A letter written in 168/785 by Timothy I, Catholicos of the Church of the East, to Sergius, head of the monastic school of Abraham in Mosul, bears witness to a sense of rivalry between the Syriac and the Arabic and Greek grammatical traditions.<sup>90</sup> The three traditions are demonstrably related: the Syriac tradition drew deeply from the Greek, and made no attempt to deny doing so;<sup>91</sup> and numerous features of the Arabic tradition, including the names of the vowels and their signs – whose invention was attributed to Abū l-Aswad – betray contact with Syriac grammar.<sup>92</sup>

What of Arabic and Greek? While the Syriac tradition was not averse to acknowledging its Greek debt, if Arabic grammar were to safeguard the purity of the language of the Quran, it clearly could not admit to any foreign source, just as early Islamic culture more broadly endeavoured to present itself as having formed in sublime isolation from its neighbours.<sup>93</sup> In the third/ninth century, the

87 Cf. Bernards, "Contribution of *mawālī*", 427; D. King, "Elements of the Syriac grammatical tradition", in A.E. Marogy (ed.), *The Foundations of Arabic Linguistics: Sībawayhi and Early Arabic Grammatical Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 187–209, 189, and "Grammar and logic", 117.

88 Nor, importantly, did the other proposed model for the Arabic grammar, Islamic law (as acknowledged by Carter, "Les origines", 82 with n. 2). See, recently, J. Cole, "Muhammad and Justinian: Roman legal traditions and the Qur'ān", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 79/2, 2020, 183–96, with references.

89 King, "The Syriac grammatical tradition", 204.

90 O. Braun (ed.), *Timothei patriarchae I: Epistulae* (CSCO 30–1, Leuven: Peeters, 1914), ep. 19, 30:126–30 (text), 31:84–6 (Latin translation). For analysis see King, "The Syriac grammatical tradition", 199–201, and, in depth, V. Berti, *Vita e studi di Timoteo I, 823, patriarcha cristiano di Baghdad: ricerche sull'epistolario e sulle fonte contigue* (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 2009), 310–16. See, similarly, the Syriac-Arabic-Greek rivalry over rhetoric – with reference to grammar – in the proem to Antony of Tagrit's *Rhetoric* 5 (Watt (ed.), *The Fifth Book*, 480:1–9 (text), 481:1–7 (translation)).

91 King, "The Syriac grammatical tradition", esp. 194.

92 Already Goldziher, *History of Grammar*, 5–9, and see Versteegh, *Grammar and Exegesis*, 28–32; King, "The Syriac grammatical tradition", 202–3.

93 See Fassberg, "Greek death", 430–1, with further references, also Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 260–1, 339; and Cole, "Muhammad and Justinian", 192. Cf. al-Zubaydī, *Ṭabaqāt al-naḥwīyyīn*, 51, for the story that the "King of Greece" sent al-Khalīl a letter in Greek, which the latter managed to decipher. The danger inherent in this story is defused, however, by the manner in which al-Khalīl deciphered the Greek, which he accomplished on the basis of the pious assumption that "the letter would begin with 'in the name of God' or the like".



need for Arabic grammar to distance itself from foreign traditions would have grown especially pressing as Greek philosophical and logical texts began to be translated into Arabic en masse. In the fourth/tenth century, a time of both Hellenization and “Islamicization”,<sup>94</sup> Greek logic was perceived as a threat to Arabic grammar, resulting in the celebrated fourth/tenth-century debates over the merits of logic and grammar.<sup>95</sup> In contrast with Arabic grammar, the Syriac tradition – following the Greek – did not distinguish grammar from logic;<sup>96</sup> insisting on the distinction between them thus also served to set the Arabic tradition apart.

Significantly, the fourth/tenth century is also the point at which the authority of Sībawayhi’s Homeric death was established. It was at the same time that the traditional biography of another Perso-Islamic founding figure, Salmān al-Fārisī, the Persian Companion of the Prophet and a symbol of Persian acceptance of Islam, developed in a way that reflects concern with the place of Persians in Islam. Like Sībawayhi, Salmān too left Persia in search of religion, then changed course and was accepted by a new group. But whereas Sībawayhi in joining the Basran grammarians moved away from religion, Salmān switched from Christianity to Islam and was taken in by the Prophet as part of his own family. Having successfully adopted a Muslim identity, Salmān was buried in Iraq, in Ctesiphon, where his tomb is frequented to this day. Conversely, Sībawayhi’s *hijra* to the garrison town of Basra failed.<sup>97</sup> He thus returned to Persia to die a Greek death, the premature death of an outsider, like Imru’ al-Qays, alone and in anguish.

94 Carter, “Science and orthodoxy”, 213–5.

95 M. Mahdi, “Language and logic in classical Islam”, in G.E. von Grunebaum (ed.), *Logic in Classical Islamic Culture* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1970), 51–83; Versteegh, *Greek Elements*, chs 6–7, and “Logique et grammaire au dixième siècle”, *Histoire Épistémologie Langage* 2/1, 1980, 39–52; Carter, “Science and orthodoxy”; G. Endress, “Grammatik und Logik: Arabische Philologie und griechische Philosophie im Widerstreit”, in B. Mojsisch (ed.), *Sprachphilosophie in Antike und Mittelalter* (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1986), 163–299. Cf. Carter, “Les origines”, 72–3. And see above on the distinction between Islamic and foreign sciences. On the perceived threat of foreign cultures, and more broadly rationalism, in the tenth century, see also Crone, “Post-colonialism”, 18–28. The Syriac tradition also initially rejected Greek logic (Brock, “Antagonism to assimilation”, 19).

96 See King, “Grammar and logic”. Earlier, Persian may have been one conduit by which Greek logic entered Arabic. On Ibn al-Muqaffā’s logic and its background, see most recently E. Hermans, “A Persian origin of the Arabic Aristotle? The debate on the circumstantial evidence of the Manteq revisited”, *Journal of Persianate Studies* 11/1, 2018, 72–88, and see Talmon, “The term *qalb*” for the intriguing use of *qalb* in Arabic logic and grammar.

97 Like Ibn al-Rāwandī, mentioned above, who was as good as dead as soon as he left Baghdad (van Ess, “Ebn Rāwandī”). For the concept of *hijra*, P. Crone, “The first-century concept of *hiğra*”, *Arabica* 41/3, 1994, 352–87. For Salmān’s biography, see Savant, *The New Muslims*, ch. 2. It is interesting that the Prophet made him the “brother” of Abū l-Dardā’, whose piety was the subject of the hadith that Sībawayhi recited incorrectly. Salmān also served as the scout for the Muslim army at al-Qādisiyya (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh* 1:2226). Echoing Abū l-Aswad’s foundation narrative, Salmān declined to recite the Quran, reasoning that it was a task for Arabs (Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaḥ*, ed. S.A. Ḥ. al-Shatharī, 25 vols [Riad, 2015] 16.393 [no. 31920], 18.185 [no. 34647]).