

An Explorative Journey Through Hadith Collections: Connecting Early Islamic Arabia with the World

ORHAN ELMAZ (University of St Andrews)

Abstract

The present article offers insight into a fresh way to utilise hadith collections beyond criticising their material in terms of their authenticity or discussing their implications for Islamic law. It builds on a digital corpus of collections to represent the wealth of canonical Sunni, Shia and Ibadite traditions. In this first exploration of this corpus, the interconnectedness of early Islamic Arabia with other parts of world is highlighted through an analysis of travelling words, proper names, and concrete objects in a few case studies organised into five sections by geographical area. These include translation, a *Wanderwort*, and contact through commerce and trade. The methods applied to analyse the material are those of historical and comparative linguistics. The results indicate that exploring linguistic aspects of hadith collections— notwithstanding editorial revision and their canonisation—can inform studies of language change in Arabic and set the course to research the standardisation of Arabic.

Key words: Hadith Studies, historical linguistics, corpus linguistics, Middle Persian, Southern Arabia, Late Antiquity

The present article chooses to view hadith collections as worth exploring and studying for what they intend to be, namely collections of texts of the early Islamic world, potentially approximating a spoken form of Arabic.¹ Thus, it aims to contribute to the linguistic study of hadith collections across sectarian and disciplinary boundaries. It seeks to demonstrate the contact with different cultures through a study of objects and concepts that entered the region and Arabic before the time that the hadiths were canonised (*terminus ante quem*).

Hadith collections aim to document mainly the sayings of Prophet Muḥammad and his interactions with his community in the Ḥijāz. They are therefore an anthology of the *sunna*, Muḥammad's way of life. Yet, they were not collected and canonised until up to two centuries after Muḥammad's death in 11AH/632. Issues arising from this time gap were primarily confronted by adopting the methodological use of chains of transmitters (*isnād*) for each of the many thousands of different hadiths trying to seamlessly link the sayings back to Muḥammad. Thus, the so-called 'biographical evaluation' lies at the very core of hadith criticism: do the biographical data of consecutive transmitters overlap in terms of space and time and is it likely that a physical meeting between them occurred? Since the

1 I am grateful to Prof Gregory Lee for his thoughtful suggestions on an earlier draft of this article.

hadiths and their collection are embedded into a chronotope that we do not know many exact things about, researchers must rely largely on biographical compendia about hadith transmitters when dealing with questions of authenticity. The concept of ‘authenticity’ is, however, inseparable from the reliability of each transmitter per se, and sectarian differences between Sunni, Shia and Ibadī Islam have led scholars of different denominations to work with their own collections considered by each denomination to be reliable and canonical. Indeed, there is no shortage of studies dealing with hadiths but many of them are generally limited to such questions of authenticity or the relevance of specific hadiths to the various manifestations of Islamic law.

Leaving the *isnād* and sectarian differences aside to focus on the actual text (*matn*) of the hadith, there is yet another divide to note, namely within the Arabic linguistic tradition. Grammarians have shown little enthusiasm about this material; the noted grammarian Sībawayhi (d. 180AH/796) featured only seven or eight references to hadiths in his seminal five-volume formulation of Arabic grammar. In contrast, the classical Arabic lexicographical tradition has studied lexical items of the hadiths, with the aim of clarifying them, since its very beginnings (Baalbaki 2014: 30). There are also modern studies of loanwords and difficult words in the hadiths and one specifically about loanwords in Ibn Hishām’s (d. 218AH/833) compilation of the biography of Muḥammad (Hebbo 1984). Besides, there are even sources analysing the rhetoric (*balāgha*) of Muḥammad, which can be difficult to engage with on account of the problematic nature of the primary sources.

However, there are few sources to consult when it comes to non-lexicographical linguistic aspects of hadiths. Therefore, it is not surprising that in his linguistic history of Arabic, Owens refers to hadiths in only a single quotation of lexicographical sources when discussing the contrastive features of short vowels in Arabic with regard to the root ḤBB (2006: 65). Since there are many studies already intersecting with Northwest Semitic languages regarding cultural and linguistic contact, here, the focus will be on Middle Persian and marginalised Ancient South Arabian languages.

To this end, I have created a corpus for Sunni hadith collections relying on digitised collections uploaded by the Open-Hadith-Data-Project (originally provided by Islam Ware) onto the GitHub repository. These comprise the six canonical collections, namely Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī’s (d. 256AH/870) *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Muslim b. Ḥajjāj al-Naysābūrī’s (d. 261AH/874-5) *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān b. al-Ash‘ath al-Sijistānī’s (d. 275AH/888) *Sunan*, Muḥammad b. ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī’s (d. 279AH/892-3) *Jāmi‘*, Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nasā‘ī’s (d. 303AH/915) *Sunan al-ṣuḡhrā*, and Ibn Māja al-Qazwīnī’s (d. 273AH/886-7) *Sunan* or Mālik b. Anas’s (d. 179AH/795) *Muwatta‘*. In addition, they also include Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s (d. 241AH/855) *Musnad* and ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Dārimī’s (d. 255AH/869) *Sunan*.

In an attempt to diversify the sources and material, I also consulted the Twelver-Shia ‘Four Books’ as available in digitised form on ‘Shia Online Library’, namely Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb al-Kulaynī al-Rāzī’s (d. 329AH/941) *Kitāb al-Kāfi*, Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Bābawayhi’s (d. 380AH/991) *Man lā yaḥḍuruh al-faqīh*, and Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī’s (d. 460AH/1067) *Tahdhīb al-Aḥkām* and *al-Istibṣār*. Other than these collections, I also referred to the Ibadī collection *Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* compiled by al-Rabī‘ b. Ḥabīb al-Azdī (d. 175AH/791).

The Ḥijāz & Mesopotamia

The idea to study cultural contact via foreign words and loan words as well as calquing is not novel or original by any means. However, the material presented in this article shall highlight both the connectedness of the Arabian Peninsula to other parts of the known world and the plurilingual nature of parts of the early Islamic world. Two hadiths recorded by Saʿīd b. Manṣūr (d. 227AH/842), numbers 2599 and 2600 (III/2: 230), buttress this idea as if they were summarising the nature of early plurilingualism. In the latter version, Saʿīd quotes Shaqīq—via Abū Muʿāwiya and al-Aʿmash—saying:

If a man says to another *lā takhaf*, then he reassures him; and if he says *maṭars* [*< ma tars*], he reassures him [as well], and if he says *lā tadḥal* [*< lā tedḥal*], he reassures him, too. Indeed God knows [all] the languages.²

All three phrases set in italics and left untranslated in the quotation above mean ‘do not be afraid’, yet, in three different languages, namely Arabic, and perfectly correct Middle Persian and Aramaic respectively. This should not come as a surprise since Pahlavi and Syriac were major literary languages widely used across the Near East and the Parthian and succeeding Sasanian Empire that included Eastern Arabia. This hadith suggests that at least rudimentary plurilingualism was an everyday reality in some parts of the early Islamic world.

When dealing with single and especially rare words or phrases or citations in foreign languages, it is of utmost importance to compare different editions of a work and consider not only revision but also copying mistakes in terms of dotting and interpretation. To elucidate this example of the human mind at work when copying texts, one example shall be provided here. In al-Khalīl’s *Kitāb al-ʿayn* (V: 245) we find the quadriliteral verb *shashqala* ‘to weigh up [currency]’ quoted as being *ḥimyarīyya ʿibādīyya* ‘a Ḥimyarite, ʿIbādite [word]’, unreservedly referring to the ʿIbād, a Christian Arab community in southern ʿIrāq. Since the verb seems to include a *ša*-performative prefix, it is likely to constitute an Aramaism. We can thus compare the Arabic verb *shashqala* to the Mandaean verb *šašqil* ‘to raise up high’ and ultimately to the Akkadian *š*-stem of the verb *šaqaḷu* ‘to weigh, pay’, *šušqulu* ‘to let weigh, make pay’. Hence, one should emend the consonant ⟨m⟩ in *ḥimyarīyya* in favour of the adjective *ḥīriyya* to relate to the city of al-Ḥīra, the center of the ʿIbādī community in ʿIrāq, rather than the South Arabian Ḥimyar, whose language puzzled many a Northern Arabic speaker (Elmaz 2014: 33-34). Since a *ša*-performative was not productive in Arabic, a copyist might have been surprised to read *shashqala* and put it down as Himyarite.

Considering the hadith above, one could imagine that the disambiguating diacritic dot above the ⟨d⟩ in Arabic script to reflect the expected /ð/ of the Aramaic *lā tedḥal* ‘do not be

2 An alternative version of this hadith was reported on the authority of Abū Shihāb [ʿAbd Rabbih b. Nāfiʿ al-Kinānī, al-Ḥannāt] (d. 171 AH), who lived in al-Madāʿin (Ctesiphon-Seleucia), an ancient world metropolis, yielding the almost identical transmission chain Saʿīd < Abū Shihāb < al-Aʿmash < Abū Wāʿil Shaqīq b. Salma. The Aramaic (ʿNabataeanʿ) is also reported as *lā tadhal* with incorrect /h/ (and even *tadhhal*), and the Persian *maṭars* with a nonemphatic /t/: *lā baʿs aw lā tadhal aw matars*.

afraid' (cf. Luke 1:13 in Peshitta) might have evolved into the circular zero-vowel diacritic *sukūn* above the <ḏ>, yielding *lā tadḥal* as quoted in the hadith in the above cited edition. The reason for this could be the semantic challenge an assumed denominal verb of Arabic *dhahl* 'seeking retaliation for a crime' would pose in the context of 'granting security' to a defeated enemy. However, the result of this hypothetical emendation **tadhḥal* > *tadḥal* still gave rise to definitions of this verb in the context of this hadith and its relationship to derivatives of the root DHL in many a lexicographical endeavour to follow.

Let us return to the actual hadith and what else it can tell us. To further elaborate on the specifics of this hadith, one can try to infer spatiotemporal information from the chain of narrators provided. Saʿīd was told this hadith by Abū Muʿāwiya, who in return quotes al-Aʿmash, who is reporting this ultimately from Shaqīq. To be able to retrieve any further information from this *isnād*, one has to consult the rich biographical compendia about hadith narrators and transmitters or Ikram Hawramani's excellent 'Hadith Transmitters Encyclopedia' online. Saʿīd b. Manṣūr (d. 227AH/842) grew up in Balkh in present-day Afghanistan and travelled in his pursuit to study and eventually settled in Mecca, where he died. He collected his material in Khurasān, the Hījāz, ʿIrāq, Egypt, the Levant, and the Arabian Peninsula. Coming to his transmitters, [Muḥammad b. Khāzim] Abū Muʿāwiya [al-Ḍarīr] (d. 195AH/c.810) was a local to Kūfa, so one possibility is that Saʿīd may have met him while he was collecting hadiths in ʿIrāq. The former's informant [Sulaymān b. Mahrān] al-Aʿmash (d. 148AH/764-765) was also a local to Kūfa as was Shaqīq [b. Salma] (d. 82AH/701-702) the originator of this hadith. Shaqīq was born during the lifetime of Muḥammad and he had learnt at the hand of companions of the Muḥammad (*ṣaḥāba*) in Medina. He had moved to Kūfa to work in the administration of taxes under governor ʿUbayd Allāh b. Ziyād (d. 67AH/686).

Therefore, this hadith could be considered of Iraqi provenance by the merit of the biographical data of the transmitters involved and as such it would plausibly reflect the linguistic reality of southern Iraq in the second half of the seventh century. Yet, the actual author of this plurilingual snippet in the form of a letter (*kitāb*) was caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 13-23AH/634-644) himself as explicated in hadith number 2599 in Saʿīd's collection (III/2: 230). ʿUmar used to be a merchant and ruled from Medina but most notably it was during his caliphate that the Levant and almost the entire territory of the Sassanid Empire were annexed to the Islamic empire at the time, the so-called Rāshidūn Caliphate (11-40AH/632-661). Again, advising a simple phrase one could use in close encounters with the enemy to grant them security and put their mind at ease seems realistic after all.³ To return to the point of citing this hadith, whether it is authentic or not, and although it

3 To some extent, this hadith is also found in the canonical collection of Mālik, on the authority of a man from al-Kūfa, however, only the Pahlavi term is cited in it (1985: 348f., no. 12). In this context, one should note that the Aramaic phrase is also reported from ʿAlī b. Muṣʿab [b. Badr al-Lakhmī] in the lexicographical tradition (cf. Ibn Manẓūr s.r. DHL). There, we find a poetic quotation from al-Azharī (the lexicographer) and a few explanations that indicate potential Arabicisation of the verb in question, namely that the phrase *lā tadḥal* in (Nabataean) Aramaic means 'do not be afraid', while in Arabic the verb might have acquired the meaning 'to flee' by extension if this is not the result of lexicographers' guess-work or a simple misunderstanding.

certainly does not go back to Muḥammad, it indicates awareness of the linguistic reality of the expanding Islamic empire by acknowledging some rudimentary knowledge of Persian and Aramaic, albeit in the context of battle reassuring the opponent of their life (cf. Āl ʿĪsā 2002: 1098-1099).

The Sasanian Empire

Having touched upon copying mistakes, there is at least one other word that has been misinterpreted in later and even in recent literature, which occurs only in a hadith in the chapter about ‘levying *jizya* on the Zoroastrians’ (*bāb fī akhdh al-jizya min al-Mājūs*) in the collection of Abū Dāwūd (III: 523f. no. 3044). In this ‘weak’ (*daʿīf*) hadith a Zoroastrian man from the ʿsbḍyyn from Gerrha (Hajar) in Eastern Arabia is reported to have come to see Muḥammad on one occasion.⁴ When asked about the outcome of their meeting, the ʿsbḍyyn reported that Muḥammad offered him ‘Islam or death’, while ‘Abd al-Raḥmān reported that Muḥammad accepted his *jizya*.

What is interesting from a linguistic perspective, is the demonym ʿsbḍyyn. Ibn al-Athīr explains *asbadhiyyūn* as ‘rulers of ‘Umān in [Greater] Baḥrayn’ (*mulūk ‘Umān bi-l-Baḥrayn*) and that the denomination is of Persian origin meaning ‘horse worshippers’ as it was said that they used to worship horses, ‘isb’ in Persian (1963, I: 47).⁵ William Robertson Smith has included this information from other sources in his influential *Kinship & Marriage in Early Arabia* (1885: 208), and so does ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-ʿĀnī—more than a century later—in his book about Bahrain during the early Islamic period (2000: 73).

Yet, neither of them thought to investigate Iranian military titles since Eastern Arabia was under Iranian control for several centuries under Achaemenid and Sassanian rule. The two titles, Parthian (and Sasanian) ʿspṭy *asped* ‘master of horses, chief of cavalry’ and Sasanian ʿspḥṭy *spāhbed* ‘chief of an army, general’ are both found on a seal of a certain Wēh-Shāpur, describing him as ‘the *pārsig asped*, and chief of ... of the empire, (?) and General of the *kust* of Nēmroz (created by) the blessed Khosro who quartered Erān’ (Soudavar 2009: 433). If this should refer to Khosro II (r. 590-628), as Soudavar suggests, then the Asbadhiyyūn of the hadith could have been loyal to this very Wēh-Shāpur or one of his predecessors or successors. These considerations do away with any horse worshipping in Eastern Arabia around the time of Muḥammad or later.

⁴ This hadith has been classified as weak because biographers do not list any biographical details of one of its transmitters, Qushayr b. ‘Amr, who has only transmitted this single hadith.

⁵ Abū Mūsā al-Madīnī (d. 581AH/1185) adds to this an alternative reading of the demonym to denote the tribe of Azd (1986, I: 67).

The Silk Road

Several types of cloth and garments that were imported or fabricated elsewhere are mentioned in hadiths. Among them we find Yemeni or Yamānī merchandise, which Imru' al-Qays notably mentioned in his famed *mu'allaqa*. Muḥammad is said to have been shrouded in three white Yemenite garments from Saḥūl (e.g. al-Bukhārī 1997, II: 208, no. 1264). His second wife and caliph Abū Bakr's daughter 'Ā'isha is said to have owned four Yamānī *sanad* garments (*thawb sanad*, cf. Elmaz 2011: 85-88). Muḥammad also ordered a necklace made of *'aṣb* be bought for his daughter Fāṭima, which is said to denote a type of painstaking weaving (hence the name) made in al-Yaman. In the hadith collections, latter material is more often used to specify garments as in *thawb 'aṣb*, which is the type of garment a woman in mourning can wear according to the sunna (e.g. Muslim 2007, IV: 182f, no. 3740).

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In the context of this article, the most interesting fabric mentioned in the hadiths is silk since Muḥammad forbade men to wear it in various hadiths. This is a clear distinction from its use in the Byzantine world (cf. Shahīd 1995: 173f):

'Umar saw a silk suit being sold, so he said, 'O Allah's Messenger (ﷺ)! Why don't you buy it so that you may wear it when delegates come to you, and also on Fridays?' The Prophet (ﷺ) said, 'This is worn only by him who has no share in the Hereafter.' Afterwards the Prophet (ﷺ) sent to 'Umar a silk suit suitable for wearing. 'Umar said to the Prophet, 'You have given it to me to wear, yet I have heard you saying about it what you said?' The Prophet (ﷺ) said, 'I sent it to you so that you might either sell it or give it to somebody else to wear.' (al-Bukhārī 1998, VII: 399, no. 5841)

What makes this hadith interesting for the purpose of this article is that the word for silk used is not one used in the Quran. In the Quran, silk is mentioned as *sundus* 'fine silk' together with *istabraq* 'silk brocade' (Q 18:31, 44:53, 76:21; latter alone in 55:54), and *ḥarīr* 'silk' (Q 22:23, 35:33, 76:12). Silk occurs only in eschatological passages describing the fabric of the clothing of the dwellers of Paradise and in Q 55:54 as the fabric of the couches therein.

The first term, *sundus*, might have entered Arabic directly from Middle Persian (cf. Cheung 2017: 329, Rolland 2014: 105). The somewhat similar Greek *sandyx* 'designation of a bright red colorant, a bright red mineral color, a red transparent fabric' is probably a pre-Greek formation or loan from Anatolian (Beekes 2010: 1306, comparing it to *bómbyx* 'silkworm'). Indeed, dyeing clothes with *sandyx* 'madder' (*Rubia tinctorum*) had a long tradition in Lydia and diaphanous light-red sandyx dyed robes were called *sandykes* in Greek and *sandices* or *sandines vestes* in Latin (Benda-Weber 2013: 179). Eventually, Benvenuto (2018) completed the gap in documenting this word in Aramaic by identifying it as *sndst* in a Bactrian document. She also established an Old Iranian etymology, separating it clearly from the similar but unrelated Greek *sindōn* and Akkadian *s/shadinnu*, to which Arabic *sanad* (or *sind*), also mentioned in the hadith collections, belongs (Elmaz 2011: 87-88 with further references).

Similarly, Middle Persian *stabrag* ‘shot silk’ might have entered Arabic directly with a prosthetic vowel to avoid double consonance at the beginning of the word as *istabraḡ* ‘brocade’ (cf. Cheung 2017: 320f., Rolland 2014: 18). This word is also attested in the Syriac form *ʿestabraḡ* (Ciancaglini 2008: 109), while the etymology of the most common word for silk in Arabic, *ḥarīr*, is yet to be satisfactorily established (cf. Hassan 1986, Guth 2016: 82-87).

Notwithstanding these three terms, in hadith collections, we come across another term, *siyarāʿ*, the definition of which fills almost an entire column in Lane’s Arabic-English Lexicon (1863: 1484b). This word, syntactically a noun or an adjective, is related to English ‘Serian’ and its origin can be traced back to China. In some Aramaic dialects we find *šēʿrāy* for silk (CAL), which is derived from the denomination of China as *Šēr* in Bardaiṣan’s (d. 222) writings (Mingana 1925: 327). This is clearly to be connected with the Greek forms *Sēr* ‘China’, *Sēres* ‘Chinese (pl.)’ and *sērikós*, *-ē*, *-ón* ‘silken’ (and therefrom Latin *sericum*). These words in return have been suggested to go back to Old Chinese **sāy* ‘silk’ (modern standard Chinese *sī*), where the final consonant seems to have been interpreted as [r] (Pulleyblank 1984: 26), or to the great trading hub Shule (modern Kashgar) and thus to refer to Chinese Turkestan proper (Norman, Mei, and Coblin 2015: 316).

Upon comparison of the assumed Arabicised word *siyarāʿ* of ambiguous grammatical category with the Syriac noun *šēʿrāy* ‘silk’ and the Greek adjective *sērikós* ‘silken’, one notices the disparity in the vowel quality following the initial consonant. Outside the hadith corpora, the word occurs in a poem by al-Muraqqish al-Akbar (d. 573), recorded in al-Aṣmaʿī’s anthology of pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry, the *Mufaḍḍaliyyāt* (Lyll 1918: 178, v.9 and Lyall 1921: 481, v. 9). However, when scanning the verse in its context, it seems that the syllabic structure of *siyarāʿ* matches the preceding first half verse in the metre of Kāmil (*mutafāʿilun mutafāʿilun mutafāʿilun*). The syllable in question is underlined in the transliteration below:

- (8) *bi-muḥālatin taqīṣu dh-dhubāba bi-ṭarfihā || khuliqat maʿāqimuhā ʿalā muṭawāʿihā*
- (9) *ka-sabībati s-siyarāʿa dhāti ʿulālatin || tahdī l-jiyāda ghadāta ḡibbi liqāʿihā*
- (8) [Mounted] on a stout mare, strong in the backbone, that crushes the flies by closing her eyelids, with her joints all fashioned on the mightiest plan;
- (9) She is like a strip of the silk stuff of al-Yaman called *siyarāʿ*: she has large reserves of speed [when others flag]: she takes the lead of the thoroughbred steeds on the morning after the encounter.

This gives rise to the question of the quality of this syllable as the verse strongly suggests that the shortening of this syllable could be a poetic license introduced by al-Muraqqish al-Akbar. The ‘standard’ pre-Islamic form of this word might well have been pronounced with a long vowel following the initial consonant, in accordance with its Aramaic and Greek cognates as **sīrāʿ*. Moreover, **sīrāʿ* seems to have been Arabicised from the Syriac and been likewise used as a noun denoting ‘silk’ as attested not only in the verse above but also in all 39 hadiths that it occurs in within the corpus analysed for this article. Within my

corpus, it only occurs as *ḥulla siyarā'* or—as a noun beyond doubt in—*ḥulla min siyarā'* (Ibn Ḥanbal 1995-2001, II: 117, no. 710), both denoting ‘cloak [made] of silk’, albeit in Sunni collections only. The fact that this word is well attested in the hadith corpus denies it the quality of being a *hapax heuremenon* of the documented pre-Islamic Arabic poetry otherwise. One might wonder why then it has become obsolete in Arabic, while its Indo-European cognates like the English ‘silk’ are still in use. I assume that the terms used in the Quran must have enjoyed a higher prestige and **sīrā'* must have been gradually given up in favour of *ḥarīr* which is the one word for ‘silk’ that is still used in Arabic. While only a diachronic study of the semantic field surrounding ‘silk’ will be able to tell how *ḥarīr* got established as the Arabic term for ‘silk’, it is telling that al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad used *ḥarīr* to explain **sīrā'* (VII: 291), and, interestingly, both terms co-occur in a few hadiths:

- (1) *ḥulla' ḥarīr aw siyarā'* ‘a *ḥarīr* or *siyarā'* cloak’ (al-Bukhārī 1997, VII: 399, no. 5841) and *ḥulla' siyarā' aw ḥarīr* ‘a *siyarā'* or *ḥarīr* cloak’ (Ibn Ḥanbal 1995-2001, VIII: 334, no. 4483), as well as *ḥulla' min ḥarīr aw siyarā'* ‘a cloak [made] of *ḥarīr* or *siyarā'*’ (Ibn Ḥanbal 1995-2001, X: 168, no. 5951) and *ḥulal min siyarā' ḥarīr* ‘cloaks [made] of *ḥarīr*-*siyarā'*’ (Ibn Ḥanbal 1995-2001, X: 412f., no. 6339),
- (2) *burd ḥarīr siyarā'* ‘a garment [made of] *siyarā'*-silk’ (al-Bukhārī 1997, VII: 399, no. 5842),
- (3) *qamīṣ ḥarīr siyarā'* ‘a shirt [made of] *siyarā'*-silk’ (al-Nasā'ī VIII: 395f., no. 9503),
- (4) *al-siyarā' al-muḍalla' bi-l-qazz 'siyarā'* [means] striped with *qazz*-silk’ (al-Nasā'ī VIII: 396, no. 9504).

Another reason for abandoning **sīrā'* might have been its nominal pattern *fī'āl* that rarely includes genuinely Arabic terms except for ‘original’ (*aṣl*) forms of the verbal noun *fī'āl* (cf. Baalbaki 2008: 99f.). The three most recurrent nouns of *fī'āl* in my corpus are indeed Latin *dīnār* (cf. above), followed by Greek *qīrāṭ* and Persian *dībāj*. Therefore, this term might have become obsolete in Arabic potentially due to linguistic purism, similar to Ibn Fāris’s disapproval of using the word *injār* or *ijjār* for ‘flat roof’ due to its Arabisation (cf. Aramaic *'eggār*), even though the Prophet himself uttered it according to al-Bukhārī’s *al-Adab al-Mufrad* (Elmaz 2014: 31).

The Mediterranean and Beyond

Let us now change the context and have a look at concrete, everyday items. In a hadith on the authority of Abū Hurayra (Abū Dāwūd 2008, III: 519, no. 3035; Muslim 2007, VII: 290, no. 7277 [2896]), Muḥammad prophesied that

“Irāq will withhold its *qafīz* and *dirham*, the Levant (*al-Shām*) its *mudy* and *dīnār*, and Egypt its *irdabb* and *dīnār* and you will return to where you set off from’.

Abū Dāwūd has included this hadith in the chapter on ‘tribute, spoils and rulership’ (*al-kharāj wa-l-imāra wa-l-fay'*), while Muslim lists it under ‘the turmoil and portents of the Last Hour’ (*al-fitan wa-ashrāṭ al-sā'a*). While the mentioned currency units *dirham* and

dīnār are well known to derive from Greek *drakhmē*⁶ and Latin *denarius*, respectively, the treatment of the other nouns, namely, measuring units, is worth looking into.

Fortunately, we can refer to Ibn al-Athīr's 'ultimate' compendium of difficult words in this matter. He explains the 'Irāqī *qafīz* to be equal to eight *makākīk* (IV: 90) and the Syrian *mudy* to fifteen *makākīk* (sg. *makkūk*), with one *makkūk* being one-and-a-half *ṣā'* or more (IV: 310). He equates the Egyptian *irdabb* with twenty-four *ṣā'* (I: 37), with *ṣā'* being the local Hījāzī choice of measure of capacity. The fact that these terms are referred to in a hadith and that conversions have come down to us suggest that they were in circulation in western Arabia at least, notably along the ancient trade routes—along which both Mecca and Medina are located—before this hadith was collected.

The etymologies of these terms offer more insight into the relations between the key players in the periphery of Arabia. The most obvious case is the Syrian *mudy*, probably mediated by Aramaic *mwdy* /*mōdī*/ denoting 'a dry measure' and going ultimately back to Latin *modius* (CAL s.v. *mwdy*, cf. English *muid*). In contrast, for similar historical reasons, the 'Irāqī measure *qafīz* suggests looking into Persian and Aramaic (rather than Latin or Greek). Indeed, it seems to be an Arabicisation of Pahlavi *kpyc* /*kabīz*/ 'a grain measure' (cf. Tāmeḥ 2019), which has also been adapted into—among many other languages—Greek *kapētis*, *kapétios* and *kapithē* (Beekes 2010: 638), and Demotic *kpḏ* (Tavernier 2007: 449). This Persian word probably entered Arabic via Aramaic *qpyz* /*qḡīz*/ 'a dry measure' (cf. Ciancaglini 2008: 250). The last measure in this hadith, the Egyptian *irdabb*, is obviously connected with the Greek *artábē* 'a Persian and Egyptian measure' according to Herodotus but likely to be of Old Persian origin (cf. Beekes 2010: 141). It might have also entered Arabic via Aramaic *'rdb* (*ardab*) 'a dry measure' and was already used in Elamite and Babylonian (Tavernier 2007: 449f.) as well as in Demotic (Ciancaglini 2008: 116, Chauveau 2018). Both terms, Demotic *kpḏ* and Aramaic and Demotic *'rdb*, seem to go back to Iranian forms and were introduced in Egypt in the Achaemenid period. However, their etymology has not been clarified to satisfaction, although it has been suggested that the underlying words might have been wandering words that entered Iranian (Vittmann 2004: 136-138 and 168). All three measures are attested in dated Arabic papyri of the seventh and eighth centuries: *mudy* is attested as early as 674 (P.Ness. 60 b), *irdabb* 694 (P.DelattreEntagion), and *qafīz* 771 (P.Khurasan 24). Latter term, potentially of Old Persian origin, has been used, via Arabic mediation, in Libya and as *qafīz* in Malta and as *cafisu* in Southern Italy to measure olive oil well into contemporary times (cf. Fiorini 1996: 412).

To this list of Mediterranean and Iranian terms, we can add a 'measuring-cup' from Southern Arabia from a non-prophetic 'hadith' or so-called *athar*. Ibn al-Athīr explains that *dhahab* (pl. *adhhāb*, pl. pl. *adhāhib*) is a known measure in Yemen (II: 148) in his commentary on a report of 'Ikrima [b. Abī Jahl] (d. 13AH/634) as a 'companion' or contemporary of Muḥammad (*ṣaḥābī*, pl. *ṣaḥāba*). Consequently, this report is not included in any of the canonical collections but it is found in Yaḥyā b. Ādam's (d. 818) book on 'taxation' (*kharāj*), where it is quoted in a passage about the *zakā'* tax. It relates to the question whether amounts of wheat (*burr*), barley (*sha'īr*), and pearl millet (*dukhn*),

6 According to Beekes (2010, I: 352), the word denoting the Greek currency *drakhmē* is pre-Greek.

measured in *adhhāb*, are to be added up if their sum would require taxation (al-Qurashī 1987: 177, no. 574, Ben Shemesh 1958: 100). ‘Ikrima replied in the affirmative, thus giving an unpopular answer.

Given the authenticity of this report, the question here is why ‘Ikrima knew this word. After converting to Islam, he was appointed a tax collector in 632 and commanded expeditions during the ‘Wars of Apostacy’ (*hurūb al-ridda*) under Abū Bakr, especially in Yemen. This report is likely to stem from his term in office, but unfortunately, we have no information about the circumstances and context of the report. One can imagine a local asking the question above—probably in Old Yemeni Arabic—but using the measure *dhahab* and ‘Ikrima making reference to it in his reply. However, having married Qutayla, the sister of al-Ash’ath b. Qays, the chieftain of the Kinda tribe in Ḥaḍramawt, ‘Ikrima might have well been familiar with this South Arabian term from everyday use. The measure in question is not only still used in modern Yemeni dialects (al-Selwi 1987: 94) but it is equally attested in South Arabian inscriptions denoting a unit of measure (cf. Stein 2010: 304.318), although only three occurrences are recorded in the Sabaean online dictionary (‘Sabäisches Wörterbuch’) of the University of Jena: CIH 73, FB-as-Sawdā’1, and MA85. Yet, all three occurrences correspond semantically to the report, mentioning barley and wheat in *dhb*-measures, namely as *š’rm b-dhbn* (MA 85/3, FB-as-Sawdā’1) and *brm b-dhbn* (CIH73), respectively.

South Arabia

Having covered the periphery of Central Arabia to the North, East and West above, let us have a closer look at Southern Arabia and point out cultural and linguistic contact as reflected in the hadith collections. The most obvious marker of South Arabianness is without doubt the monumental Ancient South Arabian script that was used to carve inscriptions into rock and which is referred to as the *musnad* script from early days on in Arabic scholarship (Elmaz 2011: 84f.). In fact, ancient north Arabian inscriptions in an area stretching from the Syrian desert into the Arabian Peninsula were written in very similar forms of this script. Most famously, caliph ‘Abd al-Malik is reported to have seen an inscription in one of those scripts that are deemed to be the ‘old Arabian script’ (Ibn al-Athīr 1963, II: 408). Even the South Arabian ‘minuscule’, cursive script that was used in mostly personal correspondence and incised into wooden sticks made of palm stalks, was known. In Arabic, this script was known as *zabūr*, supposedly derived from old Yemeni Arabic—or rather Sabaic—*zabr* ‘a writ’ (Ibn Durayd 1987, I: 308 s.r. ZBR; cf. Sabaic *zbr* ‘to write’, *pace* Ghūl 1993: 207).

South Arabian People

Yet, people in the early Islamic Ḥijāz not only encountered inscriptions in Ancient South Arabian script, they were even familiar with South Arabian historical figures like As’ad Abū Karib and Dhū al-Kalā’ Samayfa’ b. Nākūr. The former is said to be referred to by the metonymical indigenous title *tubba’* in a hadith listed in the *Musnad* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (2001: XXXVII: 519, no. 22880). In this hadith, al-Ṣāhibī Sahl b. Sa’d reports that

Muḥammad barred his community from swearing at *tubbaʿ* for—having embraced a monotheist belief—he had submitted himself to God [?] (*aslam^a*): *lā tasubbū tubbaʿan fa-innahu qad aslam^a*.⁷ In his commentary on difficult words in hadiths, *Nihāyat al-arīb* (I: 180), Ibn al-Athīr knows of another recension of this hadith giving another reason, namely that *tubbaʿ* was the first to have ‘clad’ (*kasā*) the Kaʿba, i.e. by covering it with its still so-called ‘*kiswa*’ cloth. Thus, Ibn al-Athīr gives the potential identification of *tubbaʿ* as Asʿad Abū Karīb (c. 400-445) and explains that this title was reserved for rulers of the kingdoms of Ḥaḍramawt, Sabaʿ, and Ḥimyar. Whether he is understood to be the *tubbaʿ* or either of the two *tubbaʿ*s (Ar. pl. *tabābiʿa*) occurring in the Quran (Q 44:37, 50:14) is hard to tell, given the lacunae in the epigraphic documentation of the history of Arabia.

Another important South Arabian person known by name is Dhū al-Kalāʿ, an influential Yemeni merchant, who converted to Islam together with his wife just before Muḥammad’s death (cf. al-Bukhārī, LXIV no. 385). He fought during the initial expansion wars under Abū Bakr (Ibrahim 1990: 164) and the conquest of Damascus (Scheiner 2010: 653) and on Muʿāwiyā’s side during his battle against ʿAlī at Ṣiffīn in 661. His name is given with varying vowelings as Dhū al-Kalāʿ, Dhū al-Kilāʿ or Dhū al-Kulāʿ with the following demonym al-Ḥimyarī in relation to the kingdom or tribe of Ḥimyar, his first name as Sumayfaʿ, and his father’s name as Nākūr (cf. Armstrong 2017: 212n71).

South Arabian Gems

Regarding specific objects of material culture from Southern Arabia, Sunni collections report a necklace in the possession of Muḥammad’s second wife, ʿĀʾisha. She is said to have had a necklace (*ʿiqd*) of onyx (*jazʿ*) from Ḍafār,⁸ an ancient city in Yemen famous for its onyx (Grohmann 1922, I: 178) and the capital of the Ḥimyarite kingdom (Robin 2015). Ḍafār is not to be confused with the homograph Ḍufār, which designates a region historically between Yemen and Oman.

What also comes to mind in this context is the word *ẓufr*, pl. *azfār* ‘fingernail’, which recalls the Greek term onyx ‘(lit.) nail’ and its etymology. While onyx ‘nail’ derives from Indo-European **h₃nog^h* ‘nail, claw, hoof’, onyx denoting a gem is explained by means of aetiology for the resemblance of the stone to a fingernail (Beekes 2010: 1086-1087). However, Beekes has called this etymology into question, suggesting it might have been ‘a foreign word reshaped by folk etymology’. He disregards the suggestion to link it to Egyptian *anak* or Assyrian *unqu* as ‘untenable’ (cf. Lewy 1895: 58). One could think of onyx being an echo of Ḍafār, a prime region to export the stone, understanding the place name to mean ‘nail’. Even if that were the case, the word denoting ‘onyx’ in Ancient South

7 The most renowned hadith critique of the twentieth century, Shkodra-born Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (1914-1999), lists this hadith in his collection of authentic hadiths (1995, V: 548, no. 2423).

8 See al-Bukhārī 1997, V: 280-289, no. 4141 and VI: 229-237, no. 4750; Muslim 2007, VII: 160-169, no. 7020 [2770]; Abū Dāwūd 2008, I: 203-205, no. 320; al-Nasāʾī 2001, I: 190, no. 296. Mālik only reports of one single onyx necklace (*ʿiqd jazʿ*) that some tribesman was hiding unlawfully (*ghulūth*) in his saddle bag (1985, II: 458f., no. 24).

Arabian languages is not yet known (cf. Sima 2000, Weisgerber 2006), although there is not a shortage of South Arabian artifacts made of onyx.⁹

In one of the versions of the hadith, the gem is indeed described as *jazʿ azfār* (al-Bukhārī LI: no. 25), which could either liken the appearance of the stone to a fingernail or simply be due to a copying mistake through association for the copyist was not familiar with *Zafār*. The same mistake seems to have occurred in a Shia hadith, where the provenance of the three shrouds of Muḥammad are described as two from *Ṣuḥār* and one from *ʿIbrī* or *Azfār* (for *Zafār*? see *Tahdhīb al-Aḥkām*, I: 292, no. 853).

South Arabian Words

Allegedly a Yamānī word that is found a few times, especially in the many versions about the confirmed marriage of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAwf, is *mahyam* (Wensinck 1936-1988, VI: 282). This word is understood to mean *mā amrukʿ* ‘What are you about?’ and Muḥammad is said to have used it in surprise upon spotting yellow marks [from saffron perfume] on the former in these reports.¹⁰ Different narrations and versions of this hadith are recorded in the Sunni canonical collections of al-Bukhārī, al-Nasāʿī, Abū Dāwūd, and Tirmidhī. However, in these texts, *mahyam* is only ever used by Muḥammad himself.

There is only one other canonical hadith that contains this word, recorded by Muslim, in which Muḥammad talks about the three times Abraham lied in his life (2007, VI: 216-218, no. 6145 [2371]). Sarah is said to have been of outstanding beauty and Abraham was afraid that the tyrant (cf. Pharaoh in Genesis 12) would snatch her away and thus, he instructed her to say that she was Abraham’s sister rather than his wife, as she was his sister in *islām*. The tyrant’s men abducted Sarah and he could not resist stretching out his hand towards her when he saw her, but divine intervention rendered the latter unable to touch her. In Muḥammad’s rendering of this episode in Abraham’s life, Abraham said ‘*mahyam*’ to mark his surprise upon seeing Sarah returning with Hagar (cf. Firestone 1990: 31-38).

Although there is no further corroboration for Muḥammad’s habitual use of this interrogative particle or exclamation of surprise, there is a statement to this effect in a non-canonical version of a hadith recorded by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (1995-2001, LXV: 562, no. 27580), about Muḥammad warning his community about the advent of Dajjāl at the end of days. In this version, the narrator Shahr added that Muḥammad used the particle *mahyam* in questions: *wa-kānat kalimatʿ rasūlʿ llāhʿ ṣallā llāhʿ ʿalayhʿ wa-sallamʿ ʿidhā saʿalʿ ʿan shayʿn yaqūlʿ mahyam* ‘and when the Prophet (peace and blessing be upon him) asked something he would say *mahyam*’.

In this hadith, Muḥammad described Dajjāl to a group of people present at Asmāʿ bint Yazīd’s house and left for a short time. When he came back to join the group, he found them terrified and worried, whereupon he asked what the matter was with them by

⁹ The word *jzʿ* occurs in at least one Sabaic inscription, CIH292, however, the context of the damaged inscription does not suggest that it denotes a gem (cf. Robin 1979: 187).

¹⁰ In the Shia collection of Shaykh Ṣādūq, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAwf is mentioned as the only man allowed to wear silken clothes for being afflicted by lice (I: 253, no. 775).

addressing the host with *mahyam yā Asmā*.¹¹ Interestingly, this word is not recorded in any of the four principal Shii collections or the one principal Ibadi collection.

This supposed Yamānī word, *mahyam*, seems to have been extremely rare or indeed proprietary to Muḥammad. In al-Ṭabarī's monumental history in over 1.6 million words, the word only occurs four times, in the context of seventh century events. Muḥammad's second wife 'Ā'isha starts her dialogue with 'Abd b. Abī Salama [Ibn Umm Kilāb] regarding Caliph 'Uthmān's assassination in 656 with this particle (I: 246, and IV: 448 and 459), which Brockett translated as 'What news?' and 'What is the matter?' respectively (XVI: 38 and 52). 'Ubaydallāh [b. Ziyād] opens his dialogue with Ḥumrān [b. Abān] following the death of caliph Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya in 683 the same way (V: 506f.), which Hawting translates as 'How goes it?' (XX: 11). Other than these, there is also the abovementioned hadith about Abraham and Sarah (I: 246), in which Brinner translated *mahyam* as 'What is the matter?' (II: 64).

In terms of etymology, one suggestion is to see *mahyam* as contraction of *mah yā mru* 'What is it, man?', in analogy to *aysh* for *ayy shay* 'what (thing)' (al-Suhaylī 1992: 153). Ishāq Binyāmīn Yahūdā suggested an alternative etymology via phonetical changes characteristic to assumed [old?] Yemeni Judaeo-Arabic and subsequent contraction from Hebrew [in Arabic script] *mā hayyūm miyyāmīm* '(lit.) what is today among the days?' (Ar. *mā al-yawm min al-ayyām*) used for 'what is new today?', which equally suits the context of the hadiths in which *mahyam* occurs (Yahūdā 1913: 488, cf. Levy 2007: 115n29). The latter explanation, nice as it is, seems far-fetched, since *mah yā* <PN> 'what is it, oh <PN>' occurs four times in canonical hadiths (Muslim 2007, VI: 20f., no. 5659; Abū Dāwūd 2008, V: 339, no. 4962; al-Tirmidhī 2007, IV: 118f., no. 2037, and Ibn Māja 1998, V: 118, no. 3442). Ibn Māja and al-Tirmidhī record the same hadith (on account of Umm al-Mundhir), however, in latter collection the particle *mah* is repeated: *mah mah yā 'Alī* 'what, what is it, oh Ali?', which suggests that *mahyam* could indeed have been a contracted or reduplicated form of *mah yā* <PN> 'what is it, oh <PN>' (cf. Hebrew *mahi*) with an Arabic etymology rather than potentially South Arabian, Judaeo-Arabic or Hebrew as suggested elsewhere.

Conclusion

In this preliminary exploration of hadith collections with a view to find linguistic corroboration for the connectedness of Western Arabia with different parts of the world, a few words took us on journeys across time, space, and different languages. We came across a textual snippet teaching how to say "do not be afraid" in Syriac and Persian, and an example where rudimentary knowledge of Persian yielded 'horse worship' rather than denoting loyalty to the Sasanian General (*asped*), who was governing Eastern Arabia. The etymology of 'silk' took us all the way to China and different currencies and measures of capacity (and conversions supplemented in commentaries) suggest familiarity with such

11 In another version of this hadith recorded by al-Marwazī (1991: 526f., no. 1484), Muḥammad intensified his surprise with a three-fold *mahyam* by adding *thalāth*^{am} 'three times *mahyam*!'.

units used across the Mediterranean up to the present time. Moreover, a few actual connections to Southern Arabia could be established by locating mentions of proper names, although the assumed Southern origins of an exclamation of surprise could be refuted by utilising the very corpus that was designed to study the language of hadiths and upon which this article is based. Further research into the vocabulary and grammar of hadith collections could very well inform studies of language change in the context of Arabic.

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