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Prophets, Gods and Kings in *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*

An Intertextual Reading of an Egyptian Popular Epic

By

Helen Blatherwick



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For my parents, David and Clare



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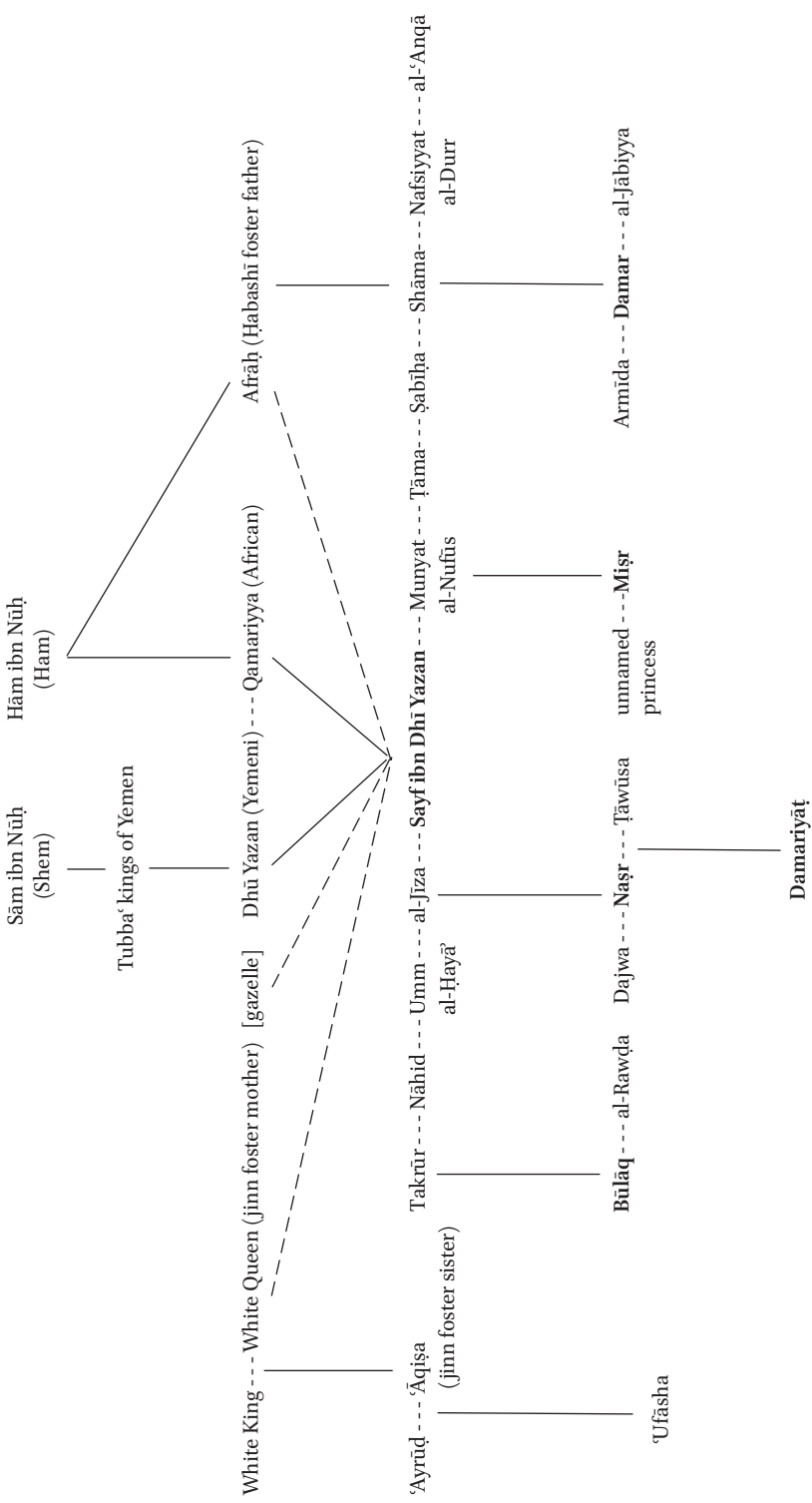
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Sayf's Family Tree



Introduction

Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan ('The Adventures of Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan') recounts the story of the life and adventures of Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan, son of the Yemeni king Dhū Yazan. It tells the story of how Sayf leads his people into Egypt, diverts the Nile to its current course, and then goes on to conquer the worlds of men and jinn in the name of Islam. Set in legendary pre-Islamic time, history is rewritten in the *sīra* to present Egypt as born out of an exodus led by a proto-Islamic, Yemeni king.

This study focuses on one variant of *Sīrat Sayf*, a widely available, four-volume printed edition.¹ The *sīra* begins before the birth of its hero, when a group of Yemenis set out on an exodus to pastures new under the leadership of their King.² During their journey they stumble across the Ka'ba, where Dhū Yazan converts to Islam and his vizier founds Medina, before finally arriving at a pleasant wadi in which they settle and build a city, Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' ('the Red City'). Their arrival sparks a dispute with the king of Ḥabash,³ Sayf Ar'ad, into whose lands they have inadvertently trespassed and who has been warned by his chief magicians, Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn, that the newcomers will cause his downfall and must be destroyed. In an attempt to avert fate Sayf Ar'ad sends his most beautiful concubine, an African slave girl called Qamariyya, to Dhū Yazan with instructions to poison him. The plot is discovered and averted but Dhū Yazan, besotted by Qamariyya's beauty, takes her as his wife. He dies

1 *Sīrat al-malik Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan fāris al-Yaman* (4 vols. Beirut: al-Maktaba al-Thaqāfiyya, 1407/1986). This is a reprint of the Būlāq edition, first published in 1294/1877.

2 More detailed summaries of this variant of *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* can be found in Malcolm Lyons, *The Arabian Epic* (3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), vol. 3, pp. 586–641.

3 I use 'Ḥabash' throughout (rather than 'Ethiopia' or 'Abyssinia', for example), both to reflect the text itself and also the historical reality of Habash, to which the term refers. Medieval Arabic writers often use the term loosely to refer to sub-Saharan Africa, but, strictly speaking, Habash was the designation for a region situated in modern-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. Its fluctuating borders sometimes incorporated parts of modern-day Egypt, and sometimes parts of the Arabian peninsula. See E. Ullendorff, E., J.S. Trimmingham, C.F. Beckingham and W. Montgomery Watt, art. 'Ḥabash, Ḥabasha' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn; and El Amin Abdel Karim Ahmed, 'Habasha, Abyssinia and Ethiopia: Some Notes Concerning a Country's Names and Images' in *University of Khartoum Annual Conference of Postgraduate Studies and Scientific Research: Humanities and Educational Studies February 2013, Conference Proceedings Volume One* (Khartoum: n.p., 2013), pp. 399–415, at pp. 399–406.

in mysterious circumstances soon after their marriage, having appointed his pregnant wife as regent until their child comes of age. Qamariyya gives birth to a son, Sayf, whom she abandons in the wilderness so that she can become the undisputed queen of Madīnat al-Ḥamrā'. Unbeknownst to her, the abandoned infant is rescued by a hunter and taken to the court of King Afrāḥ, one of Sayf Ar'ad's vassals, where he is brought up by the king. Once he attains adulthood, he embarks on a series of dowry quests to win the hand of his first wife, Shāma, and during these he meets a number of allies including his jinn foster sister, 'Āqiṣa, and 'Ayrūḍ, her jinn husband-to-be. By a twist of fate, he is sent at the head of an Ḥabashī army to wage war on Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' where he is recognised by his mother and acknowledged as king. Qamariyya affects to be overjoyed to see her son alive, but is determined to regain her throne and from now on makes repeated, unsuccessful attempts to kill her son until she is finally executed for her treachery.

There then follow a series of adventures, in which Sayf retrieves an errant wife, Munyat al-Nufūs, who has fled to her home in the City of Women on the Island of Wāq al-Wāq, undertakes a quest to Solomon's Treasury for the crown and wedding clothes of the Queen of Sheba, and is abducted by the evil sorceress al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā', who has amorous designs on his person. When he refuses her advances, she transforms him into a bird which she keeps in a cage, and Sayf has to be rescued by an expeditionary force of his allies. He is reunited with his people only to discover that they have been driven out of Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' by the Ḥabashīs, and that his three sons, Miṣr, Damar and Naṣr, have vanished. The *sīra* then relates the adventures of these three young heroes, all of whom have been individually abducted by the same magician and dumped in hostile lands. Following the eventual safe return of all three to the fold, Sayf and his people set off for the land of Egypt, where Sayf diverts the Nile to its current course with the help of various magical talismans, founds a number of Egyptian cities, and settles his people. 'Āqiṣa and 'Ayrūḍ marry and settle in the Qāf mountains, in the realm of the jinn, where they have three children: a son, 'Ufāsha, who has a removable third hand in the middle of his chest, and two daughters.

Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn make another attempt on Sayf's life. This time, the king takes the offensive. He gathers a huge army and marches to Sayf Ar'ad's city, al-Dūr, defeating everyone he meets on the way and offering them conversion or death. Once at al-Dūr he fulfils the magicians' predictions: the Ḥabashīs are trounced, and Sayf Ar'ad killed when he refuses to convert. Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn are captured but are secretly spirited away to safety by 'Ufāsha, who plans by this device to ensure the conversion of the worlds of human and jinn to Islam. The latter stages of the *sīra* are devoted to the Muslims' progress through the 'Seven Climes' (inhabited by ever more fearsome magicians)

followed by the Qāf mountains: whenever they capture the evil sorcerers, ‘Ufāsha ‘rescues’ them and takes them to unconquered territory. Eventually, when all the mountains of the Qāf range have been conquered, Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn are captured and ‘Ufāsha is crowned as King of the Jinn. With its objectives completed, the victorious Muslim army finally sets off on its homeward journey to Egypt after an absence of thirteen and a half years. Its arrival in Miṣr is greeted by general rejoicing, and Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn are ceremonially executed in short order. With his enemies finally taken care of, Sayf splits his empire between his sons, composes an epic poem on his adventures, and retires to the life of an ascetic in the Muqaṭṭam Hills outside Cairo. The *sīra* closes with the burial of his body by his son, Miṣr.

The written tradition of the *siyar sha‘biyya* (‘popular’ or ‘folk’ *sīras*) provides an extensive collection of narratives which are relatively under-researched and within which attention has focused primarily on the better-known *sīras* such as *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* and *Sīrat ‘Antar*.⁴ European *sīra* scholarship began in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the ‘discovery’ of works such as *Sīrat ‘Antar*. Initial enthusiasm and appreciation of the ‘Arabian epic’ waned and they quickly came to be regarded in a more disparaging light, as mere popular storytelling whose primary value was historical.⁵ This was due partly to a perception of popular literature as being inferior to ‘high literature’ (both in Europe and the Middle East itself), and partly as a result of the bent of the time towards historical philology.⁶ The historical tendency has been to regard *sīras* such as *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* and *Sīrat ‘Antar*, which inhabit the essentially realistic world of the tribal hero, as being more ‘authentic’ and somehow ‘better’. This is possibly because they have been viewed as being ‘older’ (i.e. closer to an uncorrupted hypothetical ur-text), and conform more to the ideals of the Homeric epic, or, more recently, to the rules of oral-formulaic composition laid out

4 For a brief introduction to the genre and its history and performative context, see Dwight F. Reynolds, ‘Epic and History in the Arabic Tradition’ in David Konstan and Kurt A. Raaflaub, *Epic and History* (Malden MA, Chichester, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 392–411; and also chapter 1 of Remke Kruk, *The Warrior Women of Islam* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014). For a survey of relatively recent scholarship, see Giovanni Canova, ‘Twenty Years of Studies on Arabic Epics’, *Oriente Moderno* 22(83): 2 (2003), pp. v–xxi.

5 For a more detailed survey of historical trends in *sīra* scholarship, see Peter Heath, *The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat ‘Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996), ch. 1; and Peter Heath, ‘A Critical Review of Modern Scholarship on *Sīrat ‘Antar ibn Shaddād* and the Popular *Sīra*’, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 15: 1 (1984), pp. 19–44.

6 A methodology according to which “beyond establishing the [‘correct’, ‘original’] text, the conscientious philologist attempts to construct a picture of its history, both in the sense of reconstructing probable manuscript stemmata and by collecting exterior information concerning the text’s author and time of composition” (Heath, *The Thirsty Sword*, p. 14).

by Albert Lord and Milman Parry.⁷ These attitudes have, in general, persisted and the majority of work since has continued to focus on historical, formal and socio-anthropological aspects of the material rather than its literary dimensions. More recently, some of the *sīras* (notably those with a still-living oral tradition such as *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*) have been the focus of various folkloristic studies,⁸ and the genre as a whole—both the oral and written traditions—has begun to be addressed from a more literary standpoint.⁹ Arabic scholarship on the *sīra* has mainly focused on the living, folkloric tradition, and the growth of interest in the genre, which (broadly speaking) began in the 1970s, has often coincided with an interest in reviving and recording indigenous tradition as part of a recovery and rediscovery of national and cultural identity.¹⁰

There have been a number of studies written on *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*. Summaries of the plot have been produced by Rudi Paret,¹¹ Marianna

7 Most famously in Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1960). See also John Miles Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

8 See, for example, the 'Sirat Bani Hilal Digital Archive' set up by Dwight Reynolds, at <http://www.siratbanihilal.ucsb.edu/>; Dwight Fletcher Reynolds, *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes: The Ethnography of Performance in an Arabic Oral Epic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Bridget Connelly, *Arab Folk Epic and Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and Susan Slymovics, *The Merchant of Art: An Egyptian Hilali Oral Epic Poet in Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

9 For example, in Heath's *The Thirsty Sword*, and Sa'īd Yaqtīn's *Qāla al-rāwī: al-bināyāt al-ḥakā'īyya fī'l-sīra al-sha'bīyya*, 1st edn (Beirut & Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabī, 1997).

10 For example, 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Abnūdī, whose work on the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* has been perhaps the most significant of recent times, was very clear about the extent to which his interest in Egyptian folklore reflected his personal political agenda. An overview of scholarship in Arabic on *Sīrat Sayf* can be found in Zuzana Gažáková, 'Remarks on Arab Scholarship in the Arabic Popular Sīra and the *Sīrat Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan*', *Asian and African Studies* 14: 2 (2005), pp. 187–195.

11 The earliest work on *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, Rudi Paret's *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan: ein arabischer Volksroman*, consists of a 67 page summary of the *sīra*, a section dealing with the historical background of the narrative, and comprehensive name and place indices (Rudi Paret, *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan; ein arabischer Volksroman* (Hannover: Orient-Buchhandlung Heinz Lafaire, 1924)). This has recently been translated into English as *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan: an Arabic folk epic* by Gisela Seidensticker-Brikay, Borno Sahara and Sudan Series, Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Maiduguri: University of Maiduguri, 2006). Paret has also written an article on *Sīrat Sayf* in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* which outlines the story, history and themes of the narrative (Rudi Paret, art. 'Sayf b. Dhī Yazan' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*) which, in my opinion, is a better introduction to *Sīrat Sayf* than that given in the second edition (J-P. Guillaume, art. 'Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan').

Klar,¹² and Malcolm Lyons,¹³ and an English translation of the first of the three main sections of the *sīra* by Lena Jayyusi has also been published under the title *The Adventures of Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan, An Arabic Folk Epic*.¹⁴ Further to these, previous scholarship on *Sīrat Sayf* has conformed to the overall pattern of *sīra* studies, and tended to centre on its history and origins and general themes,¹⁵ specific aspects such as the account of the diversion of the Nile,¹⁶

Paret's observations appear to have influenced all subsequent work quite strongly, in that some of them have become *a priori* truths about *Sīrat Sayf*. For example, every single article written since has repeated his description of *Sayf* as characterised by its preoccupation with the supernatural and the struggle between Muslim and magician.

- 12 M.O. Klar, 'A Study of MS BM 4274 Or. in Relation to the Printed Text of *Sīrat Sayf b. Dhī Yazan*' (unpublished MPhil thesis: Cambridge University, 1994), which compares the structure and plot of the more or less standard currently available printed variant of *Sīrat Sayf* to a British Museum manuscript variant dating from 1149/1736 which is probably also of a Cairene provenance.
- 13 A summary of the full plot can be found in Malcolm Lyons, *The Arabian Epic* (3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), vol. 3, pp. 586–541. Lyons has also published a more detailed summary of part of the final third of the *sīra*, the Hunt section, in Malcolm C. Lyons, *The Man of Wiles in Popular Arabic Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 88–94.
- 14 Lena Jayyusi, *The Adventures of Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan, An Arab Folk Epic* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996). She also uses the Būlāq, 1294/1877 edition.
- 15 Authors who focus on the historical aspects of *Sayf*, and its sources, are: H.T. Norris, 'Sayf b. Dhī Yazan and the Book of the History of the Nile', *Quaderni di studi arabi* 7 (1989), pp. 125–151; Giovanni Canova, 'Sayf b. Dhī Yazan: History and Saga' in Sabine Dorpmueller (ed.), *Fictionalizing the Past: Historical Characters in Arabic Popular Epic*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 206 (Leuven–Paris–Walpole MA: Uitgeverij Peeters en Department Oosterse Studies, 2012), pp. 95–105; and Thurayyā Manqūsh, *Sayf bin Dhī Yazan: bayn al-ḥaqīqa wa'l-ustūra* (Baghdad: Dār al-Ḥuriyya li'l-Ṭibā'a, 1980). Lena Jayyusi's translation of the first section of *Sīrat Sayf* also includes an introduction by Norris, in which he gives an overview of the place the narrative occupies in the genre, its sources, history and major themes (see Jayyusi, *The Adventures*, pp. ix–xix). In addition to the summary he provides in vol. 3 of *The Arabian Epic*, Lyons discusses the main themes of *Sīrat Sayf* in vol. 1. Kruk addresses the roles of three of the major female characters in *Sayf* (Qamariyya, Ṭāma and Munyat al-Nufūs) in chapters 11, 13 and 13 of *The Warrior Women of Islam*. Canova also references a work by Ulfat al-Adlabī, *Naẓra fī adabīnā al-sha'bi* (*Alf layla wa-layla wa-Sīrat Sayf bin Dhī Yazan*) (Damascus: Ittihād al-Kuttāb al-'Arab, 1974) in his 'Twenty Years of Studies', but I have not seen this.
- 16 Aboubakr Chraïbi's 'Le roman de *Sayf Ibn dhī Yazan*: sources, structure et argumentation', *Studia Islamica* 84 (1996), pp. 113–134, discusses the relationship of a sixteenth-century *Sayf* manuscript, which he calls the Ambrosiana manuscript, to the Islamic Moses legend.

and the role of myth, folklore and magic.¹⁷ Recently, Peter Phillips has devoted a chapter of his *Bravery and Eloquence: Poetry in the Arabic Popular Epics (siyar sha'bīyah)* to the role of poetry in *Sīrat Sayf*.¹⁸ However there has been no literary study undertaken of this *sīra* in its entirety.

When I first started working on *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, on the recommendation of my then PhD supervisor, Stefan Sperl (to whom I am grateful for pointing me in the direction of what turned out to be a fascinating, funny, and sometimes extremely strange text), I knew very little about this particular *sīra* other than that it had been described as being 'authentically Egyptian',¹⁹ as being characterised by its preoccupation with the magical and fantastic, and as containing identifiable Yemeni, Persian and Coptic elements.²⁰ I was

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- 17 Paret's work was followed, in 1967, by J. Chelhod, 'La geste du roi Sayf' (*Revue de l'histoire des Religions*, 171: 2 (1967), pp. 181–205). Chelhod's approach is influenced by historical philology and ethnology and he is very respectful of the material (which he classifies as a romance or geste), describing Sayf himself in heroic terms: "le ciel a doté son serviteur de toutes les qualités nécessaire au succès de ses entreprises: beauté, éloquence, intelligence, générosité, force, courage indomptable, longanimité, résignation devant les épreuves et surtout doigt, sincérité et confiance absolue en Allah" (p. 182). Chelhod, as with everyone else who has written on *Sayf*, omits to mention the humour that runs throughout the narrative, but describes it in terms of a courtly romance, full of bridal quests and strange, magical occurrences. More recently, there is Sa'īd Yaqtīn, *Dhakhīrat al-'ajā'ib al-'Arabīyya: Sayf bin Dhī Yazan* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī, 1994), a descriptive encyclopaedia of the magical and fantastic in *Sīrat Sayf*; Nabīla Ibrāhīm, *Min namādhij al-butūla al-sha'bīyya fī'l-wa'y al-'Arabī* (Dubai: Nadwat al-Thaqāfa wa'l-'Ulūm, 1993); Khuṭrī 'Urābī, *al-Bunya al-ustūrīyya fī Sīrat Sayf bin Dhī Yazan* (Cairo: Nawāra li'l-Tarjama wa'l-Nashr, 1416/1996), which focuses on the folkloric and mythological elements of *Sīrat Sayf*; and Aḥmad Khalīl Khalīl, *Naqd al-'aql al-sihrī: qirā'a fī turāth al-thaqāfa al-sha'bīyya al-'Arabīyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭālī'a, 1998).
- 18 In which he finds that poetry in the *siyar*, which has tended to be dismissed out of hand, "plays a central, if different, role in each *sīrah*" (Peter Phillips, *Bravery and Eloquence: Poetry in the Arabic Popular Epics (siyar sha'bīyah)*, Sources of Oriental Languages and Literatures, 114 (2 vols. n.p.: Published at the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University 2014), p. 247. This is based on his 2012 PhD thesis of the same name.
- 19 Chelhod, 'La geste du roi Sayf', p. 184. In his opinion, the narrative's themes find their origins in Indo-Iranian and Mesopotamian storytelling whilst the preoccupation with the supernatural is "authentiquement égyptienne".
- 20 Norris, 'Sayf b. Dhī Yazan and the Book of the History of the Nile'. Norris first addresses the history of the *Sayf* narrative, the historio-cultural background of medieval Egypt against which it grew up. He then traces the origins of *Sayf* in Yemen, from where it travelled to Egypt, and explores the dissemination of *Sīrat Sayf* in the area around Lake Chad, noting that "Egypt, (Fustāṭ in particular) almost as soon as the Arab conquest took place,

interested to see to what extent, if at all, *Sīrat Sayf* could be seen to give expression to a sense of ‘Egyptian’ literary identity. To this end, I began exploring the presence of various Islamic, Egyptian and Persian narrative elements²¹ in *Sīrat Sayf* through intertextual comparison with Islamic prophetic legends, Ancient Egyptian myths and stories, and Alexander narratives, the result of which is this volume. The primary purpose was not to establish the existence in *Sīrat Sayf* of the various cultural threads *per se*—as Peter Heath says in his study of *Sīrat Antar*, “Islamic civilization was full of pre-Islamic, Islamic, Persian, and Greek influences; it would be somewhat surprising if a long pseudo-historical narrative . . . did not reveal some trace of them”²²—but rather to undertake a purely literary exploration of what happens when one reads *Sīrat Sayf* in terms of an assumed intertextual relationship with various other texts, to see how it borrows from other stories and genres in order to become an expression of selfhood, and to what effect.

Methodologically speaking, the text is approached from a broadly comparative and folkloristic stance, in accordance with the ideas that “the margins of orality and literacy in Arabo-Muslim culture . . . are fuzzy. Scholars who separate the oral and the written too rigidly fall prey to the easy, false dichotomizations of our own logical categories”²³ and that material should not be disqualified from folkloristic analysis on the basis that it is not orally transmitted.²⁴

more especially via story-tellers of Coptic Egypt of Nubia, became a channel whereby South Arabian oral folk epic and story were to be diffused throughout extensive areas of the African continent” (p. 128). He goes on to discuss some specific narrative elements, namely the Book of the Nile and sea monsters, and the control of waters as a theme, and relates these to other medieval literature. In this he concentrates mainly on medieval Arabic geographical and historical works, but also refers to European narrative and the Alexander Romance. In his own words, he “[attempts] to show how, in the oral literature and in popular written folk epic of frequently un-lettered Islamised peoples, layers of a higher cultural tradition are concealed, yet still exert an important influence on their modes of thought” (p. 148). On the basis of his exploration of the intertextual links he finds between *Sīrat Sayf* and these works, he concludes that there are elements of Yemeni, Persian and Coptic material in *Sayf*; a result of the *sīra*’s being forged in the cultural melting pot of Mamluk Egypt.

21 The term ‘narrative element’ is used here to refer to either a motif, collection of motifs, or collection of motifs in connection with a certain theme or pattern, which can be identified as being in some way an essential building block of a particular narrative.

22 Heath, *The Thirsty Sword*, p. 16.

23 Connelly, *Arab Folk Epic and Identity*, p. 268.

24 “An insistence on [oral transmission as a guarantee of] the ‘purity’ of all folklore texts can be destructive in terms of folklore scholarship . . . folklorists who insist upon this criterion actually saw off the branch they are sitting on. They inevitably concentrate upon isolated

Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan does not fall into the category of ‘literature’, but likewise it can be said not follow the strictest definitions of ‘folklore’—it is impossible to say to what extent the printed version of the *sīra* has been subject to the attention of literary editing or determine the degree of individual editorial influence in the published text. It is obvious that there is some editorial input, but there are also traces of oral origins in the periodic shifts in vocabulary and narrative formulae. Further to this, because *Sīrat Sayf* is relying on symbolism, tropes and tale patterns that are culturally specific to convey meaning, it seems to make sense to try to approach the text through its intertexts,²⁵ to try to learn to speak its language. The reading undertaken here is therefore essentially intertextual, but relies on a combination of analytic paradigms, most notably a Girardian reading of the subtext in terms of the interplay of the forces

forms and ignore the real social and literary interchange between cultures and artistic media and channels of communication. In reality, oral texts cross into the domain of written literature and the plastic and musical arts; conversely, the oral circulation of songs and tales has been affected by print” (Dan Ben-Amos, ‘Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context’, *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971), pp. 3–15, at p. 18). Although he is here talking about the role of the written word in modern folklore transmission, his arguments are equally valid with reference to premodern material. For an opposing view, which prioritises the orality of the material, see Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices* (London: Routledge, 1992). In her opinion “Language as expression or as action means attention to context, including performance, non-verbal accompaniments, and audience interactions... A translation of ‘content’ alone cannot represent that text’s full import” (p. 188).

- 25 The term ‘intertext’ is fluid. It may be used to refer to a text or narrative (in which case it may also be referred to as the pretext), as defined by Mark Riffaterre: “An intertext is one or more texts which the reader must know in order to understand a work of literature in terms of its overall significance (as opposed to the discrete meanings of its successive words, phrases, and sentences)” (see Mark Riffaterre, ‘Compulsory Reader Response: The Intertextual Drive’ in Michael Worton and Judith Still (eds), *Intertextuality: Theories and Practice* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), pp. 56–78, at p. 56). Alternatively, ‘intertext’ may be used to refer to the collection of associations created between the pretext and another text or narrative, that is to say the dialogue between a given text or narrative and pretext(s). Obviously, in both cases “the identification of an intertext is an act of interpretation. The intertext is not a real and causative source but a theoretical construct formed by and serving the purposes of a reading” (John Frow, ‘Intertextuality and Ontology’, also in Michael Worton and Judith Still (eds), *Intertextuality: Theories and Practice* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), pp. 45–55, at p. 46).

of order and chaos,²⁶ but also ideas of dialogic narrative.²⁷ In literary-critical terms, the approach is flexible, in the hope that this will lessen the risk that the discourse be distorted to fit in with the demands of a particular paradigm, but will instead allow it speak for itself. Having said this, an important point that needs to be made at the outset is that the scope of this study is, necessarily, restricted and deals only with the presence of specific intertexts.²⁸ The aim is not to provide a comprehensive reading of the intertextual nexus that informs the text, or to ‘prove’ the existence of intertexts which are the only way to read the text, but rather to explore what happens *if* the text is read through a number of specific pretexts: to explore how these posited pretexts affect a reading of the text, and through this how intertexts function as narrative devices that convey meaning and theme, and the wider ramifications this might have for how we approach the genre. The pretexts selected are largely those that the *sīra* explicitly refers to itself in the course of telling its story. They provide a window into the text through which light may be cast on some of its more culturally specific, less accessible elements, and this has implications for a reading of the worldview and sense of identity expressed in the text.²⁹ The relationship posited between these pretexts and *Sirat Sayf* is not necessarily one of obligatory intertextuality, in which the author/narrator deliberately references a pretext (although this type of reference does definitely occur),

26 See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977).

27 As expressed in, for example, M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1981).

28 Thus, for example, it does not explore the presence of ‘Yemeni’ material which can very clearly be seen in the introductory preface recounting the life and adventures of the hero’s father, the Yemeni king Dhū Yazan. Nor does it explore the presence of any Berber/North African material identified by Norris in *Saharan Myth and Saga* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), even though there is undeniably a huge amount of such material in the text.

29 As Heath points out, “these epics as a whole hold a distinct and even important place in pre-modern Muslim cultural history . . . They offer a version of Islamic history that in general was probably more prevalent and more widely believed than that found in specialized studies of elite historians. Hence, if one wishes to ascertain how the general populace of late pre-modern Arabs understood Islamic history and their place in it, attention to the attitudes and viewpoints of this genre would reward further study” (Peter Heath, “Antar Hangs His *Mu’allaqa*: History, Fiction, and Textual Conservatism in *Sirat ‘Antar Ibn Shaddād*” in Sabine Dorpmueller (ed.), *Fictionalizing the Past: Historical Characters in Arabic Popular Epic*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 206 (Leuven–Paris–Walpole MA: Uitgeverij Peeters en Department Oosterse Studies, 2012), p. 10).

but is often one of optional, or even accidental intertextuality, in which parallels between the text and pretext are made at a more general level, or rely completely upon the reader and their prior knowledge of other texts. In other words, the relationship between text and intertext is often not reliant on a direct, linear connection between two specific texts or discourses, but operates at a more conceptual level.

The first chapter introduces the text, its major themes, and some compositional techniques used by its narrator. Chapter Two explores the presence of a number of Islamic *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* ('tales of the Prophets'), while Chapter Three reads the text through the lens of Osirian mythology and identifies a number of specific tales and motifs that can be traced back to Pharaonic, Graeco-Roman and Coptic Egyptian literary culture. Chapter Four reads the text against various recensions of the Alexander Romance, one of the most popular and widespread narratives of the medieval Mediterranean world. What emerges from this literary exploration is clear evidence that in this particular *sīra* intertexts perform as literary devices that convey meaning. They create subtextual tensions and complexity which fuel the plot and underpin the thematic framework of the entire narrative. This becomes particularly clear during the Conclusion, which looks at the ways in which intertexts identified in previous chapters interact not only with the text but also with each other within the text during the central climactic episode in which Sayf diverts the Nile and founds Egypt.

One of the things that will emerge as a side-product of the literary analysis undertaken relates to the question of genre: what kind of literary animal is *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*? The term *sīra* is one that has no direct correlation in English: literally meaning 'a going', 'path' or 'way', from which is derived 'way of conduct' or 'way of life' with reference to a person's behaviour, conduct and deeds, *sīra* can mean 'biography', 'romance' or 'epic'.³⁰ As Dwight Reynolds has recently pointed out "the term seems to have implied not simply a biography, but rather the narrative of an 'exemplary' life, the life of someone worthy of being imitated",³¹ most famously in the case of the *sīra nabawiyya*, the biography of the Prophet Muhammad. The *sīra* genre consists of a number of narratives which cover an extensive range of subject matter and geo-cultural situations and which each have a potentially infinite number of tellings.³²

30 See Heath, *The Thirsty Sword*, p. 254, n. 4. Also *Lisān al-'Arab*, Lane's *Lexicon*, and Kazimirski's *Le Dictionnaire*.

31 Reynolds, 'Epic and History', p. 395.

32 Lengthy summaries of all the major *sīras* have been published in Lyons, *The Arabian Epic*.

They are popular over a wide geographical area, of oral nature (whether in oral or written form), are of considerable length, and relate the legendary history of a hero, or heroes, and the social group to which they belong. Bridget Connelly has defined the genre as being fundamentally concerned with the anxieties of the social unit and that unit's struggle to maintain its integrity.³³ As a group they defy further collective categorisation.³⁴ Because popular narrative is by nature fluid, rather than existing as a fixed text, the same story can have many different variants which fall into totally different classifications in terms of preconceived terms such as 'romance', 'epic', and 'legend'.³⁵ Thus, although one can make the generalisation that the *sīra* is an epic form, it is impossible to state that all the *siyar* are epics.

The concept of narrative fluidity outlined above is equally applicable to the various permutations of individual *siyar* and is a result of the performance driven origins and dissemination of the genre. As Peter Heath says:

It seems likely . . . that individual *sīras* were simultaneously performed in various ways (sung or recited orally, read from a book, or recited orally with the book as an occasional reference or stage prop) in different parts of the Arab world. There also appears to be little doubt that over the course of time individual narratives could move from one performance medium to another . . . Audience response affected not only how competently a narrator would perform on any individual occasion, but

33 "The fear of strangers and fear of the out-group, anxiety about the unknown, is very real in the oral traditional cultures which maintain and generate the *sīra* tradition. Their history . . . is one of invasion and boundary transgression, conquest, and penetration by one foreign political power after another" (Connelly, *Arab Folk Epic*, p. 225). Although she is discussing *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* specifically, the principles she describes would seem to be relevant to any epic in the *sīra* genre.

34 In his study of *Sīrat Antar*, Heath reaches a similar conclusion: "These works form a cohesive genre by reason of their shared emphasis on heroes and heroic deeds of battle, their pseudo-historical tone and setting, and their indefatigable drive towards cyclic expansion: one event leads to another, one battle to another, one war to another, and so on for hundreds and thousands of pages." He defines *sīra* as being a long narrative composed of romances, tales and mythological elements (Heath, *The Thirsty Sword*, p. xvi).

35 For a discussion of the politically and socially influenced nature of genre fluidity "which places generic distinctions not within texts but in the practices used in creating intertextual relations with other bodies of discourse" (p. 163), see Charles L. Briggs and Richard Bauman, 'Genre, Intertextuality, and Social Power', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 2: 2 (1992), pp. 131–172.

also which parts of the narrative traditions flourished and which parts disappeared. Plot characters, and events especially popular with audiences would be duplicated as long as they remained effective... It is important to remember, therefore, that *sīra* narration was more than the act of recitation on the part of the storyteller and passive attendance on the part of the audience. It was a dynamic situation in which the histrionic recitation of the narrator interacted with the active emotional involvement of the audience...³⁶

Obviously this fluidity does have limits and each of the *ṣīyar* has its own set of characteristics which can be said to define the narrative (main characters, basic narrative pattern, and identifying theme being the most fundamental of these), but it does mean that it is dangerous to make any collective generalisations about *Sīrat Sayf* other than to say that it is a *sīra* about Sayf—even cursory comparison of, for example, the differences found between the variant studied here and the Ambrosiana MS addressed by Aboubakr Chraïbi, or the British Museum manuscript summarised in Marianna Klar's study, highlights this; the divergences are so marked that they must be treated as different tellings.³⁷ Although the printed variant of *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* which is the

36 Heath, *The Thirsty Sword*, p. 34 and p. 41. See also Giovanni Canova, 'Aspects de la tradition épique vivante en Egypte et Syrie' in Ayūb 'Abd al-Raḥmān (ed.), *Sīrat Beni Hilal: Actes de la 1ère table ronde internationale sur la Geste des Béni Hilal* (Tunis: Maison Tunisienne de l'Édition, Institut National d'Archéologie et d'Arts, 1989), pp. 29–39.

37 Chraïbi's article will be discussed in chapter 2. Klar ('A Study of Ms BM 4274 Or') finds that the theme of the diversion of the Nile, which plays a climactic part in the printed text, is left undeveloped. In terms of other content, the manuscript is considerably shorter than the printed text, with major differences occurring in the latter stages of the *sīra*. Klar finds that the initial stages of both narratives are very similar "with differences in detail but no major innovations in content" and matching development of the main characters. The two texts remain consistent until midway through the Wedding Quest section, after which the plots begins to diverge fairly drastically, as does some of the characterisation. Thematically, she finds that the latter stages of the MS are less developed than in the printed text: the theme of 'Ayrūd and 'Āqiṣa's betrothal, which dominates the Wedding Quest section in the printed text, is abandoned, and the narrative moves swiftly on to Sayf's invasion of the Seven Climes, which is likewise much less elaborate. A further, very interesting difference she finds is that of the eventual fate of the main characters in the two texts. Whereas in the printed text Sayf and his companions all eventually retire victorious to a life of leisure and ascetic contemplation, in the manuscript many of them meet a grisly end. In fact the final two folios dedicate themselves to the prophesy of Sayf's death at the hands of the daughter of one of his defeated enemies (in an episode reminiscent of his father's unfortunate demise) who is then in turn killed by Miṣr to avenge his

subject of this study is now the most widely available, and thus widely known, it is only one of a number of extant *Sayf* manuscript variants, none of which is definitive.³⁸

As will become clear, the variant of *Sīrat Sayf* being studied here is a popular epic. The attributes required of a narrative in order for it to be regarded as epic are the subject of current debate, and *Sīrat Sayf* is far from epic in the sense of the classical Homeric epic that has long been canonical in European perceptions of the genre, so the rationale for this classification here requires brief clarification.³⁹ There is currently a broad consensus that epic cannot be defined solely in terms of its formal aspects (although it is usually agreed

father's death. In contrast, the bad guys appear to survive—although Sayf Ar'ad, Saqardis and Saqardiyūn are killed, they mysteriously return to life later on in the narrative, after which their eventual fate is left untold. See also Heath's brief discussion of the differences between the two printed editions of *Sīrat 'Antar* currently available (Heath, 'Antar Hangs His *Mu'allaqa*', p. 21–2). He posits that these are both reliant on an earlier written tradition which has created an authorial conservatism that has 'fixed' the narrative parameters quite closely, but this does not seem to be quite as relevant to *Sayf*, especially given the level of discrepancy in the final third of the texts. It does seem that there is a much greater degree of difference between these three versions of *Sayf* than that found by Heath in the two versions of *'Antar* he discusses.

38 I have heard that *Sīrat Sayf* was being performed a few years ago by at least one narrator in the Nile Delta. It does also still seem to have some currency in popular culture, as in 2003 a graphic novella retelling some parts of the story was published under the title *Mughāmarāt al-amīr Sayf bin Dhī Yazan kamā 'ālajuhā 12 fannan Miṣriyyan shāban fī'l-qarn al-ḥādī wa'l-'ishrīn* ('The Adventures of Prince Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan as Reworked by 12 Young Egyptian Artists of the Twenty-First Century'). Generally speaking, however, the *sīra* is not widely known.

39 For an introduction to the problematics surrounding 'epic' as genre, see, for example, Richard P. Martin, 'Epic as Genre' in John Miles Foley (ed.), *A Companion to Ancient Epic* (Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), pp. 9–19, esp. pp. 9–11, in which he argues that the 'epic' "transcends genre", in that it may have different, culturally specific forms or formal aspects, but has a cross-cultural similarity in its "functionality" (p. 9); and Stuart H. Blackburn and Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, 'Introduction' in Stuart H. Blackburn, Peter J. Claus, Joyce B. Flueckiger and Susan S. Wadley (eds), *Oral Epics in India* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 1–11. For a more traditional definition of 'epic', in which the history of the epic form is traced from the Sanskrit and Perisan epics of the ancient Near East, through Greek and Roman epics, to medieval Europe and beyond, that clearly demonstrates a cultural appropriation of the 'Biblical' ancient Near East as part of European History, see S.P. Revard and J.K. Newman, 'Epic. 1. History (Revard) and 11. Theory (Newman)' in Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (eds), *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 361–375.

that it must be narrative, long, and poetic⁴⁰), but rather in its being a narrative form that, at its core, deals with issues of socio-cultural identity.⁴¹ As it has more recently been put, “Epic . . . is on the level of ideology a metonymy for culture itself.”⁴² Epics are perceived to arrive at this assertion of identity through the discussion and exploration of social tensions both within society and between social groups according to the idea, as put forward by Carl Lindahl (here talking about legend although the principle is also applicable to the epic), that the text “is now judged *a debate about belief*. The text is not a single statement reflecting a single point of view, but a dialogue, the meeting place of two warring voices, expressing opposed opinions on the existence of a reported phenomenon.”⁴³

Within the field of *sīra* studies, and Arabic popular literature more broadly, there is still ongoing debate about exactly how the group of *sīra* texts which includes *Sayf*—late-medieval, written manuscripts which fall somewhere on the continuum between what is judged to be ‘proper’ folklore (i.e. an actual oral performance) and ‘literature’—should be classified: are they romances, popular epics, or something else? And to what extent can we view them as ‘authentic’ folklore rather than ‘fakelore’ in the vein of the Kalevala or the Legend of King Arthur?⁴⁴ This discussion reflects a wider debate on the

40 ‘Poetic’ is usually intended as meaning ‘composed in poetic metre’. *Sīrat Sayf* could be called ‘poetic’ in that it is composed mainly in rhyming prose, with some poems at key points in the text, but this is admittedly stretching the point.

41 “Their value . . . derives less from their literal content than from their cultural context and function: they are seen in relation to something beyond their text, such as people’s perception of group identity, core values of the society in question, models of heroic conduct and human endeavour, symbolic structures of history and mythology” (Lauri Honko, ‘Epic and Identity: National, Regional, Communal, Individual’, *Oral Tradition* 11: 1 (1996), pp. 18–36, p. 21). See also John Miles Foley’s more recent ‘Introduction’ to *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, in which he opens with the following: “Epic is the master-genre of the ancient world. Wherever and whenever one looks, epics had major roles to play in ancient societies, functions that ranged from historical and political to cultural and didactic and beyond. As charters for group identity, ancient epics seem always to have been at the center of things” (John Miles Foley (ed.), *A Companion to Ancient Epic* (Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), p. 1).

42 Martin, ‘Epic as Genre’, p. 18.

43 Carl Lindahl, ‘Psychic Ambiguity at the Legend Core’, *Journal of Folklore Research* 23: 1 (1986), pp. 1–21, at p. 1.

44 This debate over genre definition can be clearly seen in such recent works as the recently published *Fictionalizing the Past*, a collection of papers on the *siyar* based in the proceedings of a conference held at the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo in 2007 in honour of Remke Kruk (Sabine Dorpmueller (ed.), *Fictionalizing the Past: Historical Characters*

categorisation of ‘epic’ and ‘oral epic’ that has been taking place at a comparative, cross-disciplinary level.⁴⁵ Leaving aside the co-existence of oral and written folkloric traditions, or the function of manuscripts as performance prompts, let alone the question of a division between an illiterate ‘folk’ and literate ‘middle-class’ audience and/or author, there is still debate over this issue, partly because of the (natural) tendency to try to fit all of these texts into the same generic box. Having said this, there is a general consensus that the *siyar* can, broadly speaking, be defined as ‘popular epics’, in that they are concerned with the retelling of history, but a history that functions within a sense of “‘epic reality’ that does not always correspond with history but indeed exposes how history in the view of the story-teller and their audiences should

in Arabic Popular Epic, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta*, 206 (Leuven–Paris–Walpole MA: Uitgeverij Peeters en Department Oosterse Studies, 2012)). See also Wen-chin Ouyang, ‘Romancing the Epic: ‘Umar al-Nu‘mān as a Narrative of Empowerment’, *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures* 3: 1 (2000), pp. 5–18, esp. p. 12. On ‘folklore vs fakelore’, see Alan Dundes, ‘Nationalistic Inferiority Complexes and the Fabrication of Fakelore: A Reconsideration of Ossian, the Kinger-und Hansmärchen, the Kalevala, and Paul Bunyan’, *Journal of Folklore Research* 22: 1 (1985), pp. 5–19; and Ben-Amos, ‘Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context’.

- 45 “Take the very category of ‘epic’: is there a single definition that can embrace the varieties of narrative poetry (and prose) produced in the several societies under consideration . . . ? . . . The notion of ‘oral epic’ is equally problematic. What survives from antiquity is texts, that come to us in written form. To what extent is it safe to infer that these compositions are the culmination of an earlier (or ongoing) oral tradition? Some ancient societies were very bookish, after all, and the profession of scribe was a noble one. Besides, even if one can safely infer that there was an oral phase of transmission, what form did it take? The legacy of Milman Parry’s researches, and those of others who investigated still living epic recitals or performances in the area of the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere, has generated the concept of oral composition: that is, epic poetry composed in the process of performance . . . Nevertheless, there are other traditions or oral poetry in which every effort was made to hand down the original with strict fidelity. The religious compositions of India are a case in point, in which huge swaths of verse were memorized exactly, and transmitted faithfully from generation to generation . . . Then again, the question of how oral traditions are fixed in writing is itself problematic . . . Did the poets dictate to scribes trained in stenography? Did they themselves become literate? Was fixation a sudden or gradual process?” (David Konstan and Kurt A. Raaflaub, ‘Introduction’ in David Konstan and Kurt A. Raaflaub, *Epic and History* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 1–6, at pp. 2–3). See also John Miles Foley, ‘Traditional History in South Slavic Oral Epic’, pp. 347–361, James L. Fitzgerald, ‘No Contest Between Memory and Invention: The Invention of the Pāṇḍava Heroes of the *Mahābhārata*’, pp. 103–121, and Jonas Grethlein, ‘From “Imperishable Glory” to History: The *Iliad* and the Trojan War’, pp. 122–145, in the same volume. For more on the wider debate on genre definition, see chapter 1.

have proceeded".⁴⁶ As has been pointed out by Abdel Rahman al-Abnudi, the popular epic inhabits a historical universe, and speaks of past events, but is at the same time profoundly of its time because it reflects the ideas of its narrators and audience.⁴⁷ During the course of this volume it should become clear that the primary function of this variant of *Sīrat Sayf* is, under its apparently frivolous surface, precisely its discussion of social and cultural tensions. This can be seen clearly in the subtextual, intertextual dialogue that runs through the narrative, and the way in which the text expresses these tensions through its retelling of history, its epic reality.

46 Dorpmueller, *Fictionalizing the Past*, p. 1. She goes on to observe that "In general, the heroic literature represents a way in which a large, but mainly inarticulate audience perceives, conceptualizes and commemorates history" (p. 3).

47 See 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Abnūdī, 'Sīrat Banī Ḥilāl bayn al-shā'ir wa'l-rāwī' in Ayūb 'Abd al-Raḥmān (ed.), *Sīrat Beni Hilal: Actes de la 1ère table ronde internationale sur la Geste des Béni Hilal* (Tunis: Maison Tunisienne de l'Édition, Institut National d'Archéologie et d'Arts, 1989), part 2, pp. 39–46, at p. 40.

The Text

The origins, history and dissemination of *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* have been explored in relative detail and will therefore only be discussed briefly here.¹ The *sīra* is believed to have developed from stories about the historical figure of the Yemeni Ḥimyarite ruler Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan, also known as Abū Murra or Mādhikarib, who fought against the Ḥabashī presence in the Arabian Peninsula in the late sixth century AD.² The general consensus amongst Persian and Arab historians is that the historical Sayf was a vassal of the Persian ruler Khusraw Anūshirwān, who ruled between 531 and 579 AD, and his campaign against the Ḥabashīs is generally dated to some time around 570 AD. There is written evidence of ‘heroic tales of the exploits of Sayf’ circulating in Yemen by the eighth century AD, which indicates that a flourishing oral tradition surrounding Sayf grew up in the area in the century following his death, however these seem to have been mainly historical accounts; for example a *Kitāb al-Yaman wa-amr Sayf* (‘the Yemen and the Rule of Sayf’) is mentioned in Ibn al-Nadīm’s (d. 385/995 or 388/998) *Fihrist*.³ These stories are presumed to have migrated to Egypt with Yemeni invaders and settlers who travelled there

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- 1 See Canova, ‘Sayf b. Dhī Yazan’; Paret, *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, 112–122; Norris, ‘Sayf b. Dī Yazan and the Book of the History of the Nile’, and his introduction to Jayyusi, *The Adventures of Sayf Ben Dhī Yazan*; Manqūsh, *Sayf bin Dhī Yazan*; and also Chraībi, ‘Le roman de Sayf ibn dī Yazan.
 - 2 Accounts of his exploits are given in medieval Arabic historical works such as al-Ṭabarī’s *Tārīkh* (‘History’) and Ibn Hishām’s *Sīra nabawīyya* (‘The Life of the Prophet’) and *Kitāb al-Tijān fi-mulūk Ḥimyar wa’l-Yaman* (‘Book of Crowns, Concerning the Kings of Ḥimyar and Yemen’). The historical accounts given in these and other works are discussed in Canova, ‘Sayf b. Dhī Yazan’; and H.T. Norris, ‘The Ḥimyaritic Tihāma (1): Evidence for a Multi-Racial Society in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Arabia’, *Abbay* 9 (1978), pp. 101–122, at pp. 104–106. See also al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-umam wa’l-mulūk* (6 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, n.d.), vol. 1, pp. 439–449, translated in C.E. Bosworth, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume v: The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 236–252; Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawīyya li-Abī Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām al-Ma’āfirī* (4 vols in 2. Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1994/1415), vol. 1, pp. 67–73, translated in A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishāq’s Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 30 ff.; and Ibn Hishām, *Kitāb al-Tijān fi-mulūk Ḥimyar* (Sana’a: Markaz al-Dirāsāt wa’l-Abḥāth al-Yamaniyya, 1347 AH), pp. 317–323).
 - 3 He is included in Wahb ibn Munabbih’s historical account as recorded in Ibn Hishām’s *Kitāb al-Tijān*, but not in the *Akhbār* of ‘Ubayd ibn Sharya, which is presumed to date from earlier.

during and after the Arab conquests, where a story cycle arose that seems to have reached a recognisable form as *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* sometime during the Middle Ages (there are no indications that the *sīra* has ever been in circulation in Yemen). The only known extant Egyptian manuscript versions date from the late medieval period⁴ but the *sīra* has been variously dated to ‘no earlier than the fourteenth century’;⁵ the fifteenth century,⁶ and the late sixteenth century;⁷ it seem safest to say merely that, on the basis of internal content of the text, it reached a recognisable form some time between the late fourteenth and sixteenth centuries (the consensus seems to currently be that a dating of the early to mid fifteenth century is most likely). Norris and Paret have argued that the use of the name of Sayfa Ar‘ad, historical ruler of Ethiopia between 1344 and 1372 AD, as the leader of the Ḥabashī enemy suggests that the *sīra*, as we know it, should definitely be dated to no earlier than the fourteenth century,⁸ and that the abundance of Egyptian names in *Sayf* indicates an Egyptian identity.⁹ However, the popularity of Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan as a hero was by no means confined to Egypt. Sayf was also a popular hero amongst the Berber peoples of North Africa, and stories about him have long been circulating in the area around Lake Chad where the Sayfawa dynasty of Kanem-Borno, founded in the eleventh century AD, claimed descent from the *tubbaʿī* king.¹⁰

4 Brockelmann lists 24 versions of *Sīrat Sayf* in manuscript form. Four are in the Königliche Bibliothek zu Berlin, nineteen in the Herzogliche Bibliothek zu Gotha, and one in the British Museum. Nearly all of these date from the nineteenth century AD, although the British Museum MS is dated as 1149/1736 (see Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur, zweiter Supplement Band* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1938) pp. 64–65, and Charles Rieu, *Supplement to the Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London: British Library, 1894), p. 740). The Paris catalogue lists ten manuscripts, six from the nineteenth century and four from the eighteenth, one of which is dated 1197/1783. Chraïbi’s article, ‘Le roman de *Sayf ibn dī Yazan*, studies a sixteenth century manuscript, which he acquired privately.

5 Norris, ‘Sayf b. *Dī Yazan* and the Book of the History of the Nile’, p. 129.

6 Paret, *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan*, p. 122; and Chraïbi, ‘Le roman de *Sayf ibn dī Yazan*’, p. 113.

7 Canova, ‘Sayf b. Dhī Yazan’, p. 109.

8 “Sayfa Ar‘ad was one of the kings of Ethiopia at a time when relations between Egypt and Christian Ethiopia, which was regarded as a distant ally of the Crusaders, were at their bitterest. Muslim kingdoms around Ethiopia, and Coptic clergy, were pawns in a power game which included the control and denial of the waters of the Nile as the ultimate weapon of deterrence” (Norris, ‘Sayf b. *Dī Yazan*’, p. 130).

9 Paret gives a comprehensive index of places and names in his *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*.

10 A recent MA thesis by Andrea Crudo makes a start in addressing the relationship between the Egyptian *Sīrat Sayf* and Sayf stories in the African tradition (see Andrea Crudo, ‘Identità e Conflitto nella *Sīra* di Sayf b. *Dī Yazan*’ (unpublished MA thesis: Università degli

Legendary accounts of the history of the dynasty can be found in the *Diwān Sultān Bornu* ('The Annals of the Kings of Borno'),¹¹ which probably dates back to the first half of the thirteenth century AD and is part of a narrative tradition surrounding Sayf that still survives in the area today.¹²

The variant of *Sīrat Sayf* addressed in this study consists of four volumes, each of roughly five hundred pages, based on an edition first published in Būlāq, Cairo in 1294/1877.¹³ The narrative is humorous throughout, sometimes

Studi "L'Orientale" di Napoli, 2011). I would like to thank Andrea for providing me with a copy of this thesis. Norris puts forward the idea that the presence of the *Sayf* narrative in this area might partly be due to close scholastic links between Egypt and these peoples during the early medieval period, at which time Kanem was a centre of Islamic learning with connections to Cairo, whose scholars were well respected in Egypt. He also notes that it is unclear whether the claim for descent from the *tubba'* kings pre-dates or antedates the popularity of the *Sayf* narrative (see Norris, 'Sayf b. Dhī Yazan', pp. 134–142). This view is supported by Dierk Lange, who posits that the original founder of the dynasty was another figure, and that the identity of the Yemeni Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan was a later transposition (see Dierk Lange, 'An Introduction to the History of Kanem-Borno: The Prologue of the *Dīwān*', *Borno Museum Society Newsletter* 76–84 (2010), pp. 79–103, at pp. 89–90 and p. 99).

- 11 On the 'Annals', see Lange, 'An Introduction to the History of Kanem-Borno', pp. 79–103, esp. pp. 84–94, and his 'The Kingdoms and Peoples of Chad' in *General History of Africa IV: Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century* (Paris and London: UNESCO and Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1984), pp. 238–265. The *Dīwān* has been translated in Dierk Lange, *Le dīwān des sultans du (Kānem-)Bornū: chronologie et histoire d'un royaume africain (de la fin du xe siècle jusqu'à 1808)* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1977); and in H.R. Palmer, *History of the First Twelve Years of the Reign of Mai Idris Alooma of Bornu (1533–1571)* (Lagos: The Government Printer, 1926). See also H.R. Palmer, *Sudanese Memoirs: Being Mainly Translations of a Number of Arabic Manuscripts Relating to the Central and Western Sudan* (3 vols. Lagos: The Government Printer, 1928), vol. 2, pp. 87–95. On the legendary history of the Sayfawa, see Abdullahi Smith, 'The Early States of the Central Sudan' in Jacob F.A. AdeAjayi and Michael Crowder (eds), *History of West Africa, Vol. 1*, 1st edn (London: Longman, 1971), pp. 158–183; and Abdullahi Smith, 'The Legend of the Sayfawa: A Study in the Origins of a Tradition of Origin' in Yusufu Bala Usman and Nur Alkali (eds), *Studies in the History of Pre-Colonial Borno* (Zaria: Northern Nigerian Pub. Co., 1983), pp. 16–56.
- 12 See, Tal Tamari, 'Les oeuvres orientales parmi les sources d'inspiration de la littérature orale ouest-africaine: un «roman de chevalerie» arabe en traduction bambara', *Journal des Africanistes* 83: 1 (2013), pp. 215–254, esp. pp. 233–246.
- 13 Canova ('Sayf b. Dhī Yazan', p. 107, n. 2), Jayyusi (*The Adventures*, p. 299) and Klar ('A Study of MS BM 4274 Or', p. 2) give a publication date of 1294/1877 in Būlāq, Cairo. My thanks to Giovanni Canova for confirming this edition. Guillaume (art. 'Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan') cites Cairo 1881–5, and Chraïbi ('Le roman de *Sayf ibn dhī Yazan*', p. 113) asserts that all currently available editions of the text are based on a text prepared in Cairo in 1322/1904, which is

bawdy and explicit, and is not heroic or epic in any Homeric sense of the term. The majority of the main characters are flawed and only too human, and Sayf himself is hardly the sharpest tool in the box, although he becomes wiser with age as the *sīra* progresses. He is, however, a hugely likeable character: although impetuous, he is in the most part kind, generous, quick to forgive, with a strong sense of justice and an unquenchable love of adventure.¹⁴ The text itself is oral in character: it is written in mainly informal style, is a mix of prose and rhyming prose interspersed with poems,¹⁵ is replete with oral formulae, and can loosely be broken down into a set of ring structures (see Fig. 1).¹⁶ There is no editorial

the one used by Paret in his *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Jazan*. The differences between the printed editions I have seen are very minor.

- 14 Sayf's immaturity and lack of judgement during the early stages of the story is, as will be discussed below, undoubtedly a narrative device. As in the *One Thousand and One Nights*, the point of the story itself is the learning of wisdom and judgement, a journey on which the reader or audience is also taken. Although in *Sīrat Sayf* the hero learns through the actual experience of lived adventure, whereas King Shahriyar learns through exposure to the stories told to him by Scheherazade, the principle is the same. See, for example, Jerome Clinton, 'Madness and Cure in the Thousand and One Nights', *Studia Islamica* 61 (1985), pp. 107–125, and Daniel Beaumont *Slave of Desire: Sex, Love and Death in the 1001 Nights* (Madison NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, and London and Cranbury NJ: Associated University Presses, 2002).
- 15 Appendix 6 of Phillips' *Bravery and Eloquence* gives a synopsis of the first 143 pages of *Sīrat Sayf* which includes information about the placement and length of poems, and gives text and translations for some of these. This gives a good general idea of the kind of presence poetry has within this *sīra*, and builds on his discussion of the characteristics of poetry as used in this particular *sīra* in vol. 1, ch. 7. See Phillips' *Bravery and Eloquence*, vol. 2, p. 377–403, and vol. 1, pp. 143–176, respectively. He finds ring structures also at work in the poetry.
- 16 Oral formulae were defined by Milton Parry as "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea" in M. Parry, *Les formules et la metrique d'Homère* (Paris: Société des Belles Lettres, 1928), p. 80, here cited in translation from Isidore Opewho, 'Does the Epic Exist in Africa? Some Formal Considerations', *Research in African Literatures* 8: 2 (1977), pp. 171–200, at p. 174. Much of this article is devoted to the discussion of formulae and themes (larger narrative units, of recurring nature, such as descriptions of preparations for battle, or describing the homecoming of the hero, which often have significant function in terms of plot) as founded in the theories of Lord and Parry, but it also deals with the significance of ring theory to the composition of oral epic (pp. 183–186). For a brief and accessible introduction to oral formulaic theory in an Arabic context, see Alan Dundes' flawed discussion of oral formulae in the Qur'an, *Fables of the Ancients: Folklore in the Qur'an* (Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003). See also Michael J. Zwettler, *The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry: Its Character and Implications*

comment, and no indication of the extent to which the text has been edited. Oral character is further indicated by several shifts in style and language during the course of the *sīra*, which suggests a change of narrator at various points. All of these factors point to the possibility that the narrative tradition from which this text originates (if not the manuscript itself) was, at some stage in its history, taken down either by a scribe compiling a text from a number of other texts, or from the recitation of narrators themselves—perhaps even as an *aide mémoire* to public narration.¹⁷ This co-existence of, and interaction between, the oral and written tradition is typical of the genre. Moreover, it coincides with Lane’s observations on the performance of the various *siyar* in late nineteenth-century Cairo. According to Lane, rather than being composed by the reciter and sung to the accompaniment of the *rabāb*, as was *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, *Sīrat Sayf* was read direct from a book (or perhaps performed with the aid of a manuscript prompt):¹⁸

There is in Cairo a third class of reciters of romances, who are called “Anátireh,” or “Antereeyeh” (in the singular “Anteree”); but they are

(Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1978); and, for a more general introduction to oral composition, the connection between orality and ring structure, and the interaction of orality (or traditionality) and textuality, see Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition*.

17 Without further investigation of the manuscript traditions, it is impossible to be clearer on this: it is possible to distinguish between manuscripts used as performance prompts and those compiled for private use on the basis of factors such as the amount of amendments and notes, but it was also established practice that the manuscripts could be compiled from written, incomplete, sections of the *sīra* from various pre-existing manuscripts, and then edited by the compiler. For more on this aspect of the manuscript tradition, see Claudia Ott, ‘Finally We Know . . . Why, How, and Where Caliph al-Ḥākim Disappeared! *Sīrat al-Ḥākim bi-Amrillāh* and its Berlin Manuscript’ in Sabine Dorpmueller (ed.), *Fictionalizing the Past: Historical Characters in Arabic Popular Epic*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 206 (Leuven–Paris–Walpole MA: Uitgeverij Peeters en Department Oosterse Studies, 2012), pp. 63–72; Claudia Ott, ‘From the Coffeeshouse into the Manuscript: The Storyteller’, *Oriente Moderno* 22(83): 2 (2003), pp. 443–451; and Marguerite Gavillet Matar, ‘Situations narrative et fonctions de l’extra-narratif dans les manuscrits des conteurs. L’exemple de la geste de Zīr Sālim’, *Oriente Moderno* 22(83): 2 (2003), pp. 377–398.

18 Lane devotes three chapters of his *Manners and Customs* to ‘public recitations of romances’ and describes performance setting, techniques and style. He also includes partial summaries of *Abū Zayd*, *Baybars* and *Dhāt al-Himma*. See E.W. Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (The Hague and London: East-West Publications, 1895 [1836]), pp. 386–420. His observations coincide with those described in Remke Kruk and Claudia Ott, “In the Popular Manner”: *Sīra*-recitation in Marrakesh anno 1997, *Edebiyat* 10: 2 (1999), pp. 185–198.

much less numerous than either of the other two classes before mentioned... the reciters of it read [*Sīrat 'Antar*] from the book. They chant the poetry, but the prose they read in the popular manner; and they have not the accompaniment of the *rabāb*. As the poetry in this work is very imperfectly understood by the vulgar, those who listen to it are mostly persons of some education.

The 'Anátireh also recite from other works than that from which they derive their appellation. All of them, I am told, occasionally relate stories from a romance called "Seerat el-Mugáhideen" ("The History of the Warriours"), or, more commonly, "Seeret Delhem'eh," or "Zu-l-Himmeh," from a heroine who is the chief character in the work. A few years since, they frequently recited from the romance of "Seyf Zu-l-Yezen" (vulgarly called "Seyf El-Yezen," and "Seyf El-Yezel"), a work abounding with tales of wonder; and from "The Thousand and One Nights" ("Elf Leylah wa-Leyleh").¹⁹

Lane goes on to report that "The great scarcity of copies of these two later works is, I believe the reason why recitations of them are no longer heard: even fragments of them are with difficulty procured; and when a complete copy of 'The Thousand and One Nights' is found, the price demanded for it is too great for a reciter to have it in his power to pay".

Although potentially the work of several narrators, *Sīrat Sayf* hangs together as a coherent whole. Despite a few minor discrepancies there is a high level of consistency in treatment of events, theme and tone throughout the length of the narrative, characters are never confused or misnamed and are often brought back into the narrative after considerable absences. This indicates a high probability of editorial influence on the published text.

Sayf bases itself loosely in historical fact by taking as its overall framework a war between Ḥabash and the Yemeni migrants led by Sayf. The story proper begins when Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn warn Sayf Ar'ad that Dhū Yazan and his descendants will carry out the curse of Noah, subjugating the Ḥabashīs. Sayf Ar'ad is persuaded to take steps to try and avert the prophecy, and thereby sparks a war that continues throughout the length of the *sīra*. This war has two aspects, one territorial and one religio-cultural. The former is embodied in the power struggle between Sayf and Sayf Ar'ad which takes place in several

19 Lane, *Manners and Customs*, p. 409. This performance technique could also explain the absence of earlier MS versions of *Sīrat Sayf* as manuscripts would have been expensive to procure, and would probably therefore only have been replaced by the narrators when worn out.

locations, initially Madīnat al-Ḥamrā', which is (in the *sīra*'s geography) to be found somewhere within Ḥabashī domains on the way to Egypt from Yemen (the starting point of Dhū Yazan's migration), and then Egypt, the final resting place of the Yemenis, and is resolved when the Muslim army invade and conquer al-Dūr, the capital of Sayf Ar'ad's empire. This narrative framework simultaneously reflects the attempts of the historical Sayf to expel the encroaching Ḥabashī presence from the Arabian Peninsula and expresses age-old tensions over the boundaries of the Egyptian and Ethiopian states.

The religio-cultural aspect to the war is primarily embodied in the struggle between Sayf and Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn. Although Sayf Ar'ad, Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn are initially presented as a group in *Sayf*, it becomes clear as the *sīra* progresses that Sayf Ar'ad is almost an incidental enemy. He is a pawn in the hands of the real villains of the piece, the magicians, who are behind every move he makes, and are the cause of all conflict, war and destruction. In fact this is made expressly clear in the closing stages of the story:

King Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan said to [his grandson Damariyāt], "Know, Damariyāt, my son, that ever since God Almighty created me, these two advisors have been behind every enemy that has crossed my path, and they are responsible for the destruction of all the kings against whom I have ridden out. It is these two accursed devils who have brought corruption upon the earth and sought the destruction of lands and peoples, and I will continue to hunt them down until I see them die in front of me with my own eyes."²⁰

As pagan magicians, they symbolise all beliefs held as abhorrent by Islam and are rendered irredeemable by their implacable opposition to all things Islamic—when, for example, Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn persuade Sayf Ar'ad to make his final, ill-fated attack on Sayf and his people, now settled in Egypt, they cite the rise of Islam and corresponding decrease of worship of their god, Zuḥal (Saturn), amongst the reasons for doing so:

... they saw that men of influence (*ḥukamā'*) and entire countries had pledged themselves to King Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan, that his army had swelled and multiplied, that his wives and sons grew numerous, that his fame and reputation had increased, that he had established the religion of Islam, and that he suppressed the worship of Saturn, above all other religions.²¹

²⁰ *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 4, p. 157.

²¹ *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 433.

Order cannot be restored to the universe until these two forces of ultimate evil are destroyed; Sayf's campaign thus becomes a holy war. Furthermore, it is through their role in the *sīra* that Sayf's crusade is elevated to a universal level—when Sayf pursues Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn out of the human world and through the Qāf mountains, he ends up conquering not only the human world but that of the jinn. The convention of the human realm as encompassing the dual worlds of human and jinn is an established Islamic one, referred to several times in the Qur'an, according to which man and jinn are natural counterparts created by God to serve and praise him.²² Sayf's final triumph, therefore, lies not in his defeat of Ḥabash or the establishment of an Egyptian Empire, but in his conquest of the whole human sphere in the name of Islam.

At a general level the persona of Sayf in *Sīrat Sayf* as a Yemeni national hero, embroiled in an ethnic conflict between the sons of Shem (the Yemenis) and the sons of Ham (the Ḥabashīs), and fighting for Islam conforms to the general heroic identity Norris finds in other narratives in which he figures.²³ However, for a great deal of *Sīrat Sayf*, the Ḥabashī war is relegated to the background as the narrative recounts how first Sayf, then his three sons, embark on a number of totally unrelated adventures in faraway lands. In fact, once the war is established at the beginning of the *sīra*, although it pops up at periodic intervals, it is not brought back into the forefront of the action until the very final pages of the third volume, that is, nearly three quarters of the way into the story. In addition to telling the story of the clash between socio-cultural groups, *Sayf* relates the personal trials and tribulations faced by individual heroes within the Muslim group. Though many of these stories are fantastical and might appear to be merely entertaining diversions, they are as intrinsic to the plot as the Ḥabashī war. *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* is not just a story of ethnic rivalry, but of mastery over internal socio-cultural forces (personal, familial and more broadly social), the foundation of a pre-Muhammadan Islamic Egypt, and world conquest in the name of Islam.

22 For example, Q. 51:56, *wa-mā khalaqtu'l-jinna wa'l-insa illa li-ya'budūni* ("I created jinn and men only to worship Me"). The phrase *al-jinn wa'l-ins* ('jinn and men') is used a number of times in the Qur'an, always in the context of this natural pairing (Q. 6:112, 128 and 130, Q. 7:189, Q. 17:88, Q. 27:17, Q. 41:25 and 29, Q. 46:18, Q. 51:56, Q. 55:39, 56 and 74, Q. 72:5 and 6). Fittingly, given the context here, these suras are all concerned with God's power and unity, the hereafter, the truth and vindication of His revelation, and the spiritual history of Islam passed down through the ancient patriarchal prophets.

23 See Norris' introduction to Jayyusi, *The Adventures of Sayf*, p. xiii. Shem, the eldest of Noah's three sons, is referred to as Sām throughout the edition of *Sīrat Sayf* addressed here.

Structural Diagram of the Plot of *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* by Section and Subsection

Introduction (Dhū Yazan stories) (1:1–28)	}	
Sayf's birth, childhood and upbringing (1:28–66)	}	Qamariyya section
Sayf's bridal quest's for Shāma's hand (1:67–192)	}	
Sayf and Qamariyya's power struggle (1:192–530)	}	
<i>Death of Qamariyya</i> (1:522)	}	
Sayf's quest to the City of Women (1:530–2:167)	}	Wedding Quest section
Sayf's quest to Solomon's Treasury (2:179–441)	}	
— Sayf's encounters with the al-Thurayyā' cousins, part i (2:442–489)	}	
— Miṣr's adventures (3:19–65)	}	
— Damar's adventures (3:67–114)	}	
— Sayf and the al-Thurayyā' cousins, part ii (3:114–163)	}	
— Nasr's adventures (3:163–202)	}	
<i>The diversion of the Nile</i> (3:205–259)	}	
<i>The marriage of 'Āqīṣa and 'Ayrūd</i> (3:260–394)	}	
Expedition to al-Dūr (3:432–4:110)	}	Hunt Section
<i>Death of Sayf Ar'ad</i> (4:103)	}	
Expedition to the Seven Climes (4:110–394)	}	
Expedition to the Qāf Mountains (4:395–444)	}	
Conquest of the world achieved (4:412)	}	
<i>Death of Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn</i> (4:444)	}	
Conclusion (4:444–455)	}	

NB. The narrative generally follows a linear temporal structure, but sections marked on the left hand margin (in the Wedding Quest section) occur in parallel.

Climactic plot points are in bold. There are concluding subsections at the end of each section, apart from the first section (but this ends with a series of marriages and births which follow immediately after Qamariyya's death), and these are accompanied by climactic plot points: the 'diversion of the Nile' episode serves as a central climax, in terms of a loose ring structure which can be read into the text, while the 'the death of Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn' subsection serves as the final climactic plot point in terms of the linear structure which can be seen to be simultaneously present.

Narrative Analysis

Sīrat Sayf falls naturally into three distinct sections (as indicated in Fig. 1), the boundaries of which are not clear cut, but merge into one another. This, in itself, might not be important but for the fact that each section deals with different themes within the context of the bigger picture. Furthermore, they each have their own frame stories and deal with different sets of events. It is therefore impossible to discuss *Sīrat Sayf* in any depth without first looking at each of these sections independently. Before doing so, explanation of some points of terminology used in this volume may be useful. *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, being oral literature, is constructed from incremental narrative units, the smallest of which are the 'motif' and 'narrative element'.²⁴ The next step up on the constructive ladder is an 'episode', or story. A 'subsection' is a collection of episodes which hangs together as an integral whole, while 'section' refers to one of the three main parts into which *Sīrat Sayf* can be divided. Thus, for example, 'the story of the origin of the ghouls' (vol. 1, pp. 288–290) is an episode in 'Sayf and Qamariyya's power struggle' (vol. 1, pp. 192–530), which is a subsection of the Qamariyya section.

The first section of the *sīra*, the Qamariyya section, deals with Sayf's early years and tells the story of his accession to his father's throne and the establishment of his power base. This section will be dealt with in the greatest detail, as it is arguably the most complex and because it has more relevance to the chosen intertexts. The second section, the Wedding Quest section, relates the adventures of Sayf and his sons as they undertake a series of expeditions and adventures, and the Yemenis' migration from Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' to Egypt. The final section, which will be referred to as the Hunt section, follows Sayf and his army on their hunt for Saqardis and Saqardiyūn, a quest which takes

24 By 'oral literature' is meant literature composed according to the conventions of oral discourse. This could reflect the fact that the narrative is of oral origin and has been recorded, as related, by an author/receiver. On the other hand, the presence of oral formulaic components may be the result of the narrative being composed along oral lines (as, for instance, many medieval English poems use oral conventions, but were undoubtedly written 'innovation', rather than the result of oral tradition). In either case the discourse relies on the manipulation of established oral narrative formulae according to a specifically oral set of rules in terms of all facets of composition, audience expectation and interpretation. See the section on compositional techniques later in this chapter for a discussion of *Sīrat Sayf* as oral literature. On the definition of 'motif' see Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 415–417; and Dan Ben-Amos, 'The Concept of Motif in Folklore' in Venetia J. Newell (ed.), *Folklore Studies of the Twentieth Century* (Totowa NJ: Rowman-Littlefield, 1980), pp. 17–36.

them through the realms of both humans and jinn. Analysis will focus on key themes addressed in the following chapters.

The first and third sections are roughly the same length, each occupying one volume, while the middle section is much longer, taking up volumes two and three. The narrative follows a predominantly linear time frame, with the exception of the Wedding Quest section, which has a more complex structure during which Damar, Mişr and Naşr's adventures take place simultaneously, while their father is also having problems of his own in the clutches of the iniquitous al-Thurāyya al-Zarqā'.

The Introduction

Sayf begins with the story of Dhū Yazan's expedition against King Ba'labak, inspired by the former's desire to be the mightiest king on the face of the earth. He succeeds in defeating Ba'labak in single combat (the defeated king then suffers the added indignity of being killed by a lion as he flees the battlefield) and leads his people in their migration to pastures new. On the way he comes across the Ka'ba, converts to Islam after learning about the One God from his chief advisor, Yathrib (who has discovered the true path from ancient books), and pauses again in his journey to allow Yathrib to found the city of Yathrib (or Medina) as a safe haven for the future prophet Muhammad. Having found the site of their new home somewhere in the region of Ḥabash, the Yemenis settle peacefully and build a city, Madīnat al-Ḥamrā', unaware that they are trespassing on the domains of the King of Ḥabash, Sayf Ar'ad. At this point the story proper begins when their idyll is disturbed by the machinations of Saqardis and Saqardiyūn, who persuade Sayf Ar'ad that he must intervene to prevent the fulfilment of the curse of Noah, which, using their powers of divination and knowledge of secret books, they have foreseen may come about at the hands of Dhū Yazan's progeny.

Although not strictly a section in its own right, the introductory section of *Sīrat Sayf* deserves attention because it performs several important functions. Rather than beginning the *sīra* with the arrival of the Yemenis at Madīnat al-Ḥamrā', the disturbance of the status quo that creates the fundamental disorder that drives *Sīrat Sayf*'s action, the narrator instead prefaces this with a small section detailing Dhū Yazan's adventures which acts as an extended *khutba*, or introduction.²⁵ These do not have any direct bearing on events later

25 The *khutba*, the passage following the introductory religious formulae (the *basmala* or *ḥamdala*) which open the text, indicate the primary themes and concerns of the text as a whole: "The passages following, called the *khutba* in which God is glorified tend to contain the bias of the book" (Ferial Jabouri Ghazoul, *The Arabian Nights: A Structural*

in the *sīra* and do not in themselves contribute to the disorder in the universe which Sayf, as the hero, must put right. This section does, however, serve several purposes. One of these is, obviously, to provide further background on the hero's identity and the situation in which the *sīra* is to be set; it allows Sayf to be presented as the son of a great king and leader (which has obvious implications for his own persona) and highlights the migrant nature of the Yemenis and the fact of their trespass into lands regarded by Sayf Ar'ad as his own. Moreover it acts as a preface to the *sīra*, setting out the course of the story ahead, signalling predominant themes of the story to come and providing a link into the main story by introducing the theme of the Ḥabashī war by means of the story of Noah's curse, called down by the angry prophet upon his son Ham:

[Noah] looked at his son [Hām] and called down God's curse upon him (and his prayers were always answered), saying, "May God blacken your face and your descendants, and make your descendants and all your progeny slaves to the progeny of your brother Sām, the son of your own mother and father."²⁶

When Dhū Yazan, inspired by his defeat of Ba'labak, wishes to embark on another military campaign Yathrib tells him that it is foretold in the ancient books that one of the *tubba'* kings will carry out Noah's curse, bring forth the

Analysis (Cairo: UNESCO/Cairo Associated Institution for the Study and Presentation of Arab Cultural Values, 1980), p. 61). This is a narrative convention of medieval Arabic texts which corresponds to the oral performance practices described by Connelly in *Arab Folk Epic and Identity*. The entire subsection in which Dhū Yazan plays a part could be viewed as an extended *khutba*. It is certainly true that the major themes and concerns of *Sayf* are laid out in these pages.

- 26 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 28. My translation here is a modified version of that given by Jayyusi in *The Adventures of Sayf*, p. 9. Noah's curse is discussed in detail in chapter 2. The curse is well known and is recognised as a motif—A1614.1, 'Negroes as curse on Ham for laughing at Noah's nakedness'. There are a number of other associated motifs, all of which fall under A1614, 'Origin of white and coloured races', which is identified as primarily African. (Unless specified otherwise, all motif classifications mentioned are taken from Hassan El-Shamy's *Folk Traditions of the Arab World: A Guide to Motif Classification* (2 vols. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995). This motif index follows the classification system used by Stith Thompson in his *Motif Index of Folk-literature*. § denotes a 'new' motif not found in Thompson's index. It should be noted that *Folk Traditions* is not comprehensive and only draws from samples of references to occurrences in the Arab World).

light of Islam and subjugate the lands of Ḥabash and Sudan. Yathrib performs the *raml* (divination by sands)²⁷ to discover whether this king is Dhū Yazan, and discovers that it will be one of his descendants. This prediction not only influences expectations of Sayf and the course of the story, but is the fundamental premise upon which *Sīrat Sayf* is built. As the story unfolds, it is built upon with a series of related predictions that foretell Sayf's diversion of the Nile, foundation of Egypt, and conquest of the world.²⁸ Furthermore, it introduces the thematic use of racial conflict and sexually charged imagery which runs through the *sīra*.

A slightly different issue, the theme of the quest for world domination, is introduced earlier in the introduction via Dhū Yazan's expedition against King Ba'labak, inspired by his desire to become the most powerful king in the world:

[Dhū Yazan] turned to his vizier Yathrib and said to him, "Yathrib, I know that you are intelligent, discerning and well-informed. Of all the kings of the world, great and small, do you think that you know of anyone greater or mightier, or who commands a vaster army, than me? One who has more fame and glory, or whose power rivals mine?"

"Mighty King", replied Yathrib, "Lion of Lions, Most Wise Ruler of Men whose wisdom and glory is known near and far, there is, in the East, a king called Ba'labak who is heroic, brave and strong, and is feared by both free men and slaves alike. He has men and warriors, knights and

27 The *raml*, or *al-khaṭṭ bi'l-raml*, is a type of divination (or, more correctly, geomancy) involving the interpretation of patterns or figures in the sand. See Toufic Fahd, *La divination arabe: études religieuses, sociologiques et folkloriques sur le milieu natif de l'Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), pp. 196–204.

28 Shortly after Yathrib foretells the coming of one of Dhū Yazan's line who will carry out the curse, Saqardīs tells Sayf Ar'ad that, according to the ancient books, Noah's curse will be implemented by a Yemeni king named Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan, who will go on to gain mastery over the worlds of both human and jinn through his ownership of the sword of Aṣaf ibn Barakhyā, Solomon's vizier (vol. 1, p. 50). During his adventures Sayf is also informed of his future by a number of ascetics such as al-Shaykh al-Jiyād, who is the first to acquaint the young hero with his true identity and who introduces him into Islam (vol. 1, p. 102, Jayyusi, *The Adventures*, pp. 33–36). Sayf's destiny as the king through whom the curse will finally be fully implemented is also linked with his role as the instrument through which the predestined diversion of the Nile will be achieved (for example, see the poem Yathrib declaims following his prediction to Dhū Yazan in vol. 1, p. 25, 'Aqīṣa's prediction in vol. 1, p. 147, and Shaykh Abū Nūr's prediction in vol. 2, p. 78). These three predictions are closely intertwined throughout the *sīra* to the extent that they act almost as one. However, in the initial stages the curse of Noah is the prediction given the most narrative stress.

champions, more numerous than grains of sand, who are like the lions of Dajjāl²⁹ and have no fear of death. This king has built a dome outside his city, beneath which is a treasury which he has filled with all kinds of jewels and treasures, silver and gold . . . Around it is a garden full of all kinds of fruit that grow by Almighty God's power, and in these trees are birds praising God in all tongues. To the side of this dome is a palace, such as removes all cares and sorrow [from anyone who beholds it], in which his womenfolk live . . .”

When King Dhū Yazan heard this from his vizier Yathrib, his eyes became dark [with rage] and he said, “By al-Lāt and al-‘Uzza, I must go to this mighty king . . .”³⁰

The final major theme highlighted in the introduction is that of religious identity; when Dhū Yazan comes across the Ka'ba he and his followers are converted to Islam.³¹ This is developed when Yathrib's prediction links the fulfilment of Noah's curse and the 'bringing forth' of Islam. The Ka'ba episode and Yathrib's prediction have dual implications for *Sīrat Sayf*. First, they introduce the Yemeni migrants as pre-Muhammadan Muslims and secondly, they introduce the theme of Islamisation which, although it remains somewhat in the background until the Hunt section of *Sayf* in terms of overt *jihād*, is nevertheless one of the main themes of the *sīra*.

Finally, the introductory section also establishes a relationship between the hero of *Sīrat Sayf* and the *tubba'* king Sayf of Yemeni oral history via a number of episodes. The most notable of these are the episode of the visit to the Ka'ba, which results in the conversion of the king to monotheistic faith and the establishment of the tradition of covering it with the *kiswa* (a ceremonial cloth), and that of the *tubba'ī* king asking his advisor if he is the most powerful in the world and being answered with a prediction that a *tubba'ī* king from the house of Dhū Yazan will defeat the Ḥabashīs and 'drive out the great snake that has taken over Yemen'. Both the story of the visit to the Ka'ba and that of the

29 al-Dajjāl is an Antichrist-like being (there is debate over whether he is human or not) who will appear at the end of the world as the apocalyptic opponent to Jesus and will have great powers of destruction. He is not mentioned in the Qur'an, but is in apocalyptic works and the canonical *ḥadīth*, and figures in folkloric and popular literature (see David R. Cook, art. 'al-Dajjāl' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three*; David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), ch. 2, pp. 92–136; and Neal Robinson, art. 'Antichrist' in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*).

30 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 7–8.

31 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, 9–14.

prediction that a *tubbaʿī* king can be found, for example, in al-Ṭabarī's history, in which they are part of the same integral episode.³² There are a number of other correspondences with the story of Dhū Yazan in the *sīra*, such as predictions of Muhammad's coming associated with a visit to the site of Medina, the role of two magician anti-heroes, and the theme of *jihād* and Islamisation. Thus, *Sīrat Sayf* uses Yemeni oral history at its very beginning to anchor itself in historical 'reality'. This is doubly important given that, from the point of Sayf's birth onwards, there is virtually no correspondence of any kind between the Sayf of *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* and the figure of oral history, except in the very broadest sense.

The Qamariyya Section

This section is, in some ways, the most interesting part of *Sīrat Sayf*. Sayf is presented as a far from perfect hero—impetuous, stupid at times, and fallible to the point of blindness when it comes to dealing with the machinations of his mother, who herself is a fascinating and entertaining character in her unrelenting wickedness. The section begins when the Yemenis arrive at Madīnat al-Ḥamrāʾ and incur the wrath of Sayf Arʿad. The Ḥabashī king sends Dhū Yazan one of his most beautiful slave-girls, Qamariyya, ostensibly as a gift but with instructions to murder him with poison secreted in tiny vials in her hair. These are discovered, but Dhū Yazan is so smitten by Qamariyya's charms that he marries her anyway, only to die shortly afterwards in somewhat ambiguous circumstances, having appointed the now pregnant Qamariyya as regent for their unborn son.³³ Qamariyya gives birth to a son, Sayf, whom she tries to starve to death for forty days. When this is unsuccessful she attempts to chop him in half with a sword but is caught in the act by Sayf's nurse, who persuades her that it would be less incriminating to expose him. Qamariyya follows her advice and secretly rides out into the wilderness, where she abandons her son under a tree with a jewelled necklace and a bag of treasure. The baby is rescued by a hunter and taken to the court of King Afrāḥ, one of Sayf Arʿad's vassals. Unfortunately for the infant hero, Saqardiyūn arrives soon afterwards. The magician recognises Sayf as the Ḥabashīs' predicted nemesis by the mole on

32 For these stories, see al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 1, pp. 426–449, and Bosworth, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume v*, pp. 165–183.

33 The ambiguity lies more in what is not said in the text than what is said. "[Qamariyya] continued [to bide her time] in this way for a number of days and nights. She fell pregnant, and after six months the king fell ill, by the will of the Almighty Lord. He sickened and nobody knew the truth of the matter except God; whether Qamariyya had worked some kind of wickedness, or if the matter rested with Him" (*Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 39).

his right cheek, and advises Afrāḥ to eliminate him. However, Afrāḥ refuses to kill the child, whom he names Waḥsh al-Falā ('Beast of the Wild')³⁴ and who is brought up by him and his queen alongside their newborn daughter, Shāma. During his stay at Afrāḥ's court Sayf is abducted by the jinn queen Umm 'Āqiṣa, wife of al-Malik al-Abyad (the White King), who fosters him for a number of years before returning him, thereby providing him with familial links to a character who will be one of his most important allies, 'Āqiṣa, his jinn foster sister.

When Sayf reaches the age of fourteen he is sent to the warrior 'Aṭamṭam to be trained in the martial arts, after which he returns to the court of King Afrāḥ, promptly runs into Shāma, falls in love with her at first sight, and rescues both her and the city from an evil *mārid*, after which he asks for her hand in marriage.³⁵ Saqardiyūn advises Afrāḥ that this marriage cannot be permitted as it has been foretold that it will bring disaster for the Ḥabashīs, and persuades him to send Sayf on a lethal bridal quest for the head of a fearsome bandit leader called Sa'dūn al-Zanjī. Sayf defeats Sa'dūn (with a little assistance from Shāma who disguises herself as a warrior and follows him in case he is in need of help) and returns to court with Sa'dūn's head as requested—but still attached to his shoulders. (Following his defeat in single combat Sa'dūn becomes a staunch ally). Saqardiyūn then tries again, and sends him on another quest, for the Book of the Nile. Sayf is successful again, this time thanks to the help of 'Āqila (the wise and powerful leader of the sorcerers who guard the Book), her daughter Ṭāma,³⁶ and 'Āqiṣa, who makes her entrance at this point. After a brief diversion to do a bit of purely gratuitous sightseeing, our hero returns to claim his bride. However, before they are married Sayf Ar'ad (in another plot to get rid of Sayf) calls on him to join an army going to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā', where Qamariyya is proving troublesome for her Ḥabashī overlord.

Qamariyya visits Sayf in his tent outside the besieged Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' to suggest that they settle the dispute in single combat, and recognises him by the necklace she left with him. After acknowledging him as her son and pretending to welcome him back with open arms she takes him out into the desert 'to search for his father's buried treasure', attacks him with his own sword, and leaves him for dead. Needless to say, Sayf survives. He wanders the wilderness having a number of adventures until he finds himself back at Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' armed with the sword of Shem and a talismanic tablet (*lūḥ*) that gives him control over a jinn called 'Ayrūḍ, one of his three most important jinn

34 I here follow the translation given by Jayyusi in *The Adventures*. A more literal, but very wordy, translation would be 'Untamed/Wild Beast of the Wilderness'.

35 A *mārid* is a type of jinn; usually evil, terrible and frightening.

36 For more on Ṭāma, see Kruk, *The Warrior Women of Islam*, ch. 12.

allies. Qamariyya is dismayed by his reappearance but pretends to welcome her son back for a second time and feigns abject repentance. Sayf retrieves Shāma from Sayf Ar'ad, who intends to wed her himself, and brings her back to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' where the two are finally married. However, on their wedding night Qamariyya persuades Sayf to give her 'Ayrūd's *lūḥ* 'for safekeeping' and immediately orders 'Ayrūd to dump Sayf and Shāma in the wilderness to die. Powerless to resist the control of his talisman, 'Ayrūd obeys her orders, but the couple escape and after a number of adventures (and the birth of Sayf's first son, Damar)³⁷ the family return to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā'.

Sayf is now persuaded to have Qamariyya imprisoned, but she pretends to be ill and he is moved by pity to release her, whereupon she immediately steals 'Ayrūd's *lūḥ* and has Sayf abducted again. On his way back to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā', where Qamariyya has now enlisted Sayf Ar'ad's help to wrest control from her son's allies, Sayf meets and marries the second great love of his life, Munyat al-Nufūs, a princess who owns a feather cloak that allows her to fly.³⁸ The couple arrive back at the city walls at the same time as Sayf Ar'ad's army and battle ensues. Qamariyya pretends (yet again) to repent her evil ways and convert, and creates a fake copy of 'Ayrūd's *lūḥ* which she gives to her son, while keeping the real one. Once the battle has been won, Sayf marries two more wives, al-Jīza (the daughter of Akhmīm al-Ṭālib, one of Sayf's wisest advisors) and Umm al-Ḥayā' (the daughter of the *muqqadam* Sābik al-Thālath, another of the allies he has picked up along the way). Furious at Sayf's increasing power and happiness, Qamariyya tricks another of his wives, the princess Nāhid (whom he rescued in one of his earlier adventures), into betraying her husband by stealing and handing over to her a protective talismanic girdle given to him by 'Āqila, which leaves him vulnerable. The situation is saved by Ṭāma, who kills Nāhid with her sword before she has a chance to hand the talisman over, and Qamariyya flees to China to seek refuge with Nāhid's father, the king of China. Barnūkh and 'Āqiṣa go after her and bring her back to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā', where she is killed by 'Āqiṣa. The section ends with the

37 It is difficult to know how to render this name, which has been rendered previously as both Dummar and Damar. Kazimirski defines the verb *damara* as follows: "Perdre, détruire, anéantir, exterminer; entrer brusquement, avec insolence, chez quelqu'un, sans s'annoncer, sans en demander la permission", and Lane's *Lexicon* gives *damr* with the meaning of 'without permission'. However it is spelt, the name sums up both the character's impetuous and aggressive personality and the conditions of his birth, to an imprisoned mother who laments having to give birth alone, without family and friends around her, and no father or husband to name the child according to custom.

38 For more on Munyat al-Nufūs, see Kruk, *The Warrior Women of Islam*, ch. 13.

birth of Sayf's son Naṣr (a truly wonderful character, more lover than fighter, whose name means 'victory'), followed in quick succession by his marriage to Ṭāma and the birth of his third son, Miṣr (the reliable, steadfast one, who bears the Arabic name for Egypt). By this time a number of champions and sorcerers whom Sayf has converted to Islam have made their way to Madinat al-Ḥamrā' and the young king has established a formidable assembly of allies and advisors.³⁹

As can be seen from the above synopsis, the Qamariyya section is concerned with Sayf's passage into adulthood and spiritual maturity. By its end Sayf has been transformed from an outcast child with no 'identity' to a king on a throne which is rightfully his, with wives and children. Having found his roots and destiny as well as maturity, he is equipped to embark on the task of founding a dynasty in the rest of the *sīra*. While much of the section is devoted to Sayf's bridal quests and the romance between him and Shāma, it is dominated by his troubled relationship with Qamariyya, which provides both the frame story and the main theme of the section. As their power struggle is one of the more unusual aspects of *Sayf* and provides the basis for much of the intertextual material dealt with in Chapter 3, the following narrative analysis will focus on this aspect of the story.⁴⁰

In this section of the *sīra* Sayf's passage to maturity is expressed on a personal level, in terms of the hero and his family unit. Immediately after Sayf is born, Qamariyya, in an instance of internal dialogue unusual to the genre, reveals her inner wish that her son might die because he is a threat to her power and position as queen—achievement of her initial mission to prevent the Arabs achieving supremacy over the Ḥabashīs has now been demoted to secondary importance in her list of priorities:

She said to herself, "If this boy lives, he will take the kingdom from me, and he will take possession of all the wealth and property, the champions, and the heroes that are now mine to rule. But, Qamariyya, have patience; perhaps Saturn will help you to good fortune through the death of this child."⁴¹

39 Notably Barnūkh, 'Āqila, 'Āqiṣa, 'Ayrūḍ, Akhmīm al-Ṭālib, Sa'dūn al-Zanjī and Sābik al-Thālath.

40 On Qamariyya, and her relationship with her son, see also Kruk, *The Warrior Women of Islam*, ch. 11.

41 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 41.

This stress on Qamariyya's fear of potential replacement by Sayf defines the conflict between mother and son. Its use here is interesting because, according to folkloric conventions, it is normally the child of the same gender (or a group of children of mixed gender) who comes into conflict with the parent (e.g. the wicked stepmother in Cinderella, or, on a more abstract level, the avenging father figure who orders the slaughter of all male children in the Moses and Jesus stories).⁴² However, this pattern is overturned in *Sayf* where it is the mother who feels threatened by her son. In these initial stages of the *sīra*, Qamariyya's animosity towards her son makes her a monstrously unnatural and threatening figure precisely because of the manipulation of the wicked stepmother motif: Qamariyya has broken with established gender-patterns of behaviour and is described in terms of a type which, in this context, should be male.⁴³ This idea of the mother as the 'cruel father' continues throughout the narrative, although it is later subordinated to a sexual, oedipal aspect to their power struggle.

When Sayf returns to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' as an adult and meets his mother again, the pattern of their relationship undergoes a change. Although the element of the wicked stepmother, or father-destroyer, is still present this is overshadowed by an oedipal dimension. This contains elements of both the Greek tale type and the Indian tale type described by A.K. Ramanujan in his article 'The Indian Oedipus'.⁴⁴ Ramanujan describes the Indian Oedipal form as being

42 See El-Shamy, *Folk Traditions*, for S11, 'Cruel father', and S11.4.4, 'Cruel father seeks to kill infant son'. El-Shamy also lists a 'new' motif, S12.2.0.1§, 'Mother kills own son', as a sub-component of S12, 'Cruel Mother' which he cites as found in the Nile Valley. Qamariyya is not the only mother to kill her son in the *sīra* genre: for a discussion of another murderous mother, see Remke Kruk, 'The Princess Maymūnah: Maiden, Mother, Monster', *Oriente Moderno* 22(83): 2 (2003), pp. 425–442. Maymūna is a very different character to Qamariyya: she descends into monstrosity whereas Qamariyya's character is consistently monstrous. However, the way this monstrosity is conveyed has notable similarities: for example, both women are greedy for wealth and power, and both marry foreign kings to further their ambitions, and persuade their husbands to wage war on the heroes' social groups. They both start off within the social unit, but by the time of their death have pushed themselves outside it through their own actions.

43 Qamariyya suffers from a moment of apparent narrative inconsistency when she abandons her baby son in the desert. She suddenly begins to follow the 'Mother of Moses' pattern of the mother trying to save her baby from some external threat by abandoning it: not only does she carefully leave him in the shade of a tree, but treasure is left with the child in the hope that he will be found and looked after, as Sayf in fact is. See *Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 43–4. This is dealt with in more detail in chapter 3.

44 A.K. Ramanujan, 'The Indian Oedipus' in Alan Dundes and L. Edmunds (eds), *Oedipus: A Folklore Casebook* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1984), pp. 234–261. It should

an inversion of the European tale type, the narrative point of view being that of the mother, with the son being ‘merely a passive actor, a part of his mother’s fate—unlike the Greek Oedipus’:

The tale is strikingly exact in its parallels to the Greek Oedipus, but the narrative point of view is entirely different. It is the mother, the Jocasta-figure, who is accursed, tries to escape her fate . . . The Greek and Kannada Oedipus-tales provide a very neat example of a pair of tales in which a *structure* is the same, but the narrative *point of view* is exactly in reverse.⁴⁵

In *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, as in the Indian tale type, it is the mother who drives the action and Sayf’s passivity in the face of his mother’s conduct is one of the most striking elements in this section of the narrative. It is also worth noting that there is no father present in *Sayf* and no element of patricide on the part of the son, another distinction from the Greek type made by Ramanujan. Furthermore, it is a common part of the pattern of Indian oedipal tales that the mother throws her child away, albeit to avoid the curse of marrying him. Ramanujan also asserts that there is a fundamental difference in the treatment of the subject matter in the two story types. Whereas the Greek oedipal tale is more concerned with the moral conflict and personal, emotional effects of the oedipal complex, the Indian type is more concerned with the breakdown of generational differences and resulting social chaos. In this sense *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* is again closer to the Indian type. The stress is not on the personal dilemma faced by either Qamariyya or Sayf, but rather on the broader ramifications of conflict between mother and son.

When Sayf first returns to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā’ as part of Sayf Ar’ad’s army, Qamariyya challenges him to a spot of naked wrestling, hoping to drive him mad with lust, distract him, and thereby win the contest. The oedipal pattern is prevented from reaching its logical conclusion, however, when Qamariyya recognises the necklace she left with Sayf, desists from her advances, and tells him of their relationship.⁴⁶ Through gritted teeth, she acknowledges her son and restores his throne to him. However, their power struggle is far from over and from this point onwards a pattern of abduction and attempted murder of Sayf by Qamariyya begins that runs through the *sīra* until Qamariyya’s death. The oedipal element to their relationship is continued *via* the fact that

be taken into account the two tale-types are not exclusive to each culture, merely predominant in them.

45 Ramanujan, ‘The Indian Oedipus’, p. 238.

46 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 201.

(with the exception of the first attempt on his life) these abductions tend to occur on Sayf's various wedding nights, as he sleeps after discovering that his new wife of the moment is "an unthreaded pearl, an unriden mare".⁴⁷ The erotic connotations surrounding this theme are emphasised when it is explicitly stated that Qamariyya is only able to have Sayf abducted because he is distracted by thoughts of the night to come and concerned about his lack of ritual purity, which is a necessary result of sexual activity. Because of this Sayf allows his mother to trick him into giving her his protective talisman to 'guard':

King Sayf stood up and began to make his way to the bridal chamber, but when he reached the door of the palace, his mother blocked his way. "My son, heart of my heart," she began, "Tonight is indeed a blessed night, which will enrage your enemies and bring joy to your brothers. I pray to God Almighty that you will overwhelm [your bride] with wealth and good fortune, and that she will shower you with many children, and that you have a long and happy life."

Sayf thanked her for her [kind] words, kissed her hand, and replied "May it all come to pass through the power of your blessings."

Qamariyya then spoke again, "My son, my heart fears for you because of this talisman. You have told me that only the pure can wear it, and tonight you go in to your bride. You must guard it carefully from your enemies, as it is a great treasure. Many kings have died because of its power, but you, my son, attained it without hardship or difficulty, and you must protect it from all impurity. But, you must go in to your bride to take her virginity and perhaps some ritual impurity might sully you if you are wearing the talisman, and because of this harm may befall you."

Sayf replied, "Mother, I keep a close guard over it, and I will never give it up, but you speak the truth and I also fear the consequence of ritual impurity if I keep it with me. I would like you to take it and look after it. Do not let it out of your sight until I have been in to my wife and consummated the marriage, and I will take it back from you when I am pure again and my mind has become calm. But, you must know that I cannot lose this talisman, and I trust no one but you with it."

Qamariyya assured him, "My son, I will guard it for you . . ."

47 *durra lam tuthqab wa-miṭa li-ghayrihi lam turkab*, on this occasion at vol. 1, p. 287. This is a standard narrative formula in descriptions of the wedding night in this *sūra*, as is the slightly offputting "he struck her with his mighty lance and the blood flowed like rivers". The oedipal theme to Sayf and Qamariyya's conflict is dealt with in more detail in chapter 3.

... and King Sayf carefully unfastened the talisman chain from his arm and handed it to the she-devil Qamariyya, giving no thought at all to the dangers or to the workings of fate, because his mind was busy with [thoughts of] his wedding night with Shāma.⁴⁸

In this way Sayf is cast out on a series of quests that provide the bulk of the adventures of the Qamariyya section, during which the process of his heroic struggle towards maturity is demonstrated by the continual separation–trial–return pattern.⁴⁹ The point of the theme is that Sayf becomes less and less vulnerable to his mother's tricks, through the acquisition of protective talismans and an assortment of less forgiving friends and allies, until the climactic point of Qamariyya's execution. The final straw in the separation of mother and son is Qamariyya's flight to China, conversion to fire worship, and marriage to Nāhid's father, King Ṣamṣām. Thus, as Sayf distances himself from Qamariyya during the course of the section, she is simultaneously distanced from him. She has re-adopted her rightful place outside the social unit, the proper generational boundaries have been reasserted and she is now estranged from Sayf physically, emotionally and spiritually. With Sayf having split away from his mother the time is right for her symbolic death.

The issue of Qamariyya's death is interesting in terms of its contribution to the idea of the mother-son relationship reflected in the narrative, and because it does not fit comfortably with narrative conventions, whereby the anti-hero meets his/her end at the hands of the hero. Qamariyya's demise comes about through the insistence of Sayf's companions, rather than at his

48 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 285–287. This episode is two and a half pages long, and, although Sayf agrees to hand over the talisman right at the beginning of the passage, much of it is devoted to Qamariyya's effusive protestations of happiness at her son's marriage and her love for him (on which she declaims a poem), which convince Sayf of her motherly love.

49 The first time Sayf is exiled by his mother he is carried off by 'Ayrūd on the night of his wedding to Shāma (*Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 287). Then, after the birth of Damar, Sayf has 'Aqīṣa fetch his sword from al-Ḥamrā' whereupon Qamariyya realises he is still alive and has him taken to the Wadi of the Wizards, leaving Shāma vulnerable to the unwanted advances of King Abū Tāj (vol. 1, p. 337). Sayf is next taken to an island half way to the Qāf mountains (vol. 1, p. 361). He then regains the talisman, only for Qamariyya to have a fake made which she swaps for the original, after which she has him taken back to the land of the sons of Plato (vol. 1, p. 391). She uses the talisman again to have Sayf brought to her so she can kill him herself after his marriage to Munyat al-Nufūs (vol. 1, p. 500). Finally, when Sayf marries al-Jiza and Ṭāma, Qamariyya tries to kill him for a final time, by tricking Nāhid into stealing his protective girdle and uses the talisman to flee and seek refuge with Nāhid's father when she is unsuccessful (vol. 1, p. 518).

own instigation. Despite the fact that she has repeatedly tried to murder him and he knows she must be dealt with, Sayf cannot bring himself to kill his own mother. She is finally put to death by ʿĀqiṣa, with help from Tāma, whom he has just married. ʿĀqiṣa has to blackmail Sayf into allowing her to deal with his mother, and although he has promised her she can kill Qamariyya because he cannot do it himself, Sayf ultimately tries to prevent her execution. For the second time in the *sīra* ʿĀqiṣa disobeys him and finds herself on the receiving end of his wrath.

Qamariyya's death is the climax of the first section of the *sīra* and it brings together several narrative threads. It is thus a complex issue with many different connotations and meanings. However, Sayf's inability to kill Qamariyya is highly relevant in terms of folkloric patterns. The murder of the antagonistic parent-figure by the child is often symbolic of the achievement of maturity and independence, and is, as such, a positive metaphor. In terms of this particular case Qamariyya's death is a virtually inescapable event in the pattern of the *sīra*. In terms of these expectations, the fact that it is left to his wife and sister to carry out the execution is one of the more puzzling elements of the *sīra*.

If one looks at the Qamariyya section of *Sayf* in terms of its discussion of social forces through gender conflict, the persona of Qamariyya takes on further meaning. In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard suggests that religion and mythology are expressions of the sacrificial crisis, i.e. expressions of the way that humans externalise and appease the violent tensions within the community through sacrifice of a surrogate.⁵⁰ The sacrificial crisis has been explored by other authors, perhaps most notably Hyam Maccoby,⁵¹ but Girard's specific take on the subject is fundamental to the reading of the order-chaos subtext of the *sīra* undertaken in this volume. His general thesis is that any society is a delicate balance of the essentially conflicting forces of order (which confers the benefit of stability, but if allowed to run unchecked leads to stagnation and decay) and those of chaos (which can lead to anarchy, but if harnessed can provide innovation and renaissance). These forces do not exist in harmony, but rub against each other, creating tensions which are exorcised through the symbolic sacrifice of a surrogate within the socio-cultural group. This allows the status quo to change to incorporate a new concept of the old (order) and the new (chaos). Although he is talking about how this is expressed through religion and religious mythology, his ideas can be seen to hold true

50 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977).

51 Hyam Maccoby, *The Sacred Executioner: Human Sacrifice and the Legacy of Guilt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982).

in a more general context, and the concept of the 'old' versus the 'new' is very similar to that of the 'self' (or 'us') versus 'them' (which he also addresses). In this context Qamariyya, as Queen, is a symbol of the community as much as an individual character. She is the "single victim [who] can be substituted for all the potential victims, for all the enemy brothers that each member is striving to banish from the community; [she] can be substituted, in fact, for each and every member of the community."⁵² She is also a symbol and reflection of the social crisis that the fledgling Muslim community has been cast into by, firstly, her usurpation of the throne and secondly, her continued resistance to the new social order as embodied in Sayf and his leadership: "This crisis is seen as a mysterious illness introduced into the community by an outsider. The cure lies in ridding the community of the sole malignant element."⁵³ And, as Girard also notes, this conflict often finds expression through the erosion of 'difference', often in terms of male and female behavioural gender boundaries (as in Qamariyya's appropriation of 'male' characteristics and aspirations), and through sexual metaphor: "Patricide and incest provide the community with exactly what it needs to represent and exorcise the effects of the sacrificial crisis."⁵⁴

The Wedding Quest Section

The Wedding Quest section is the longest and most structurally complex of *Sīrat Sayf*'s three sections. It takes as its frame story the betrothal and marriage of 'Āqiṣa and 'Ayrūḍ and tells of the individual adventures of Sayf and three of his sons, Miṣr, Damar and Naṣr, followed by the migration of the (now reunited) Muslims to Egypt where Sayf diverts the course of the Nile. At various points, the action returns to the Muslims at Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' and their ongoing war with the Ḥabashīs. The subsection dealing with Sayf's quest to the City of Women has been included in this section, even though it occurs before the introduction of the Wedding Quest frame story, as it is a sort of bridging episode during which the themes of the Wedding Quest section are brought into the story.

After Qamariyya's death, the Muslims enjoy a peaceful interlude which is broken when Munya manages to get hold of her flying cloak and runs away, taking her son Miṣr, to her home on the Island of Wāq al-Wāq where she is imprisoned by her twin sister, Queen Nūr al-Hudā.⁵⁵ Sayf rescues her and reunites the female inhabitants of the City of Women (also known as Madīnat 'Āṣim)

52 Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 79.

53 Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 83.

54 Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 84.

55 This island is sometimes referred to by an alternate name, Jazirat al-Malik Kāfūr.

with their male counterparts in Madīnat Qāsim by breaking an ancient spell, according to which no women can leave the City of Women and no men enter. Having retrieved his errant wife and son, Sayf makes his way back to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā', helping out a Muslim king, Shāh Zamān, in his fight against infidel sorcerers along the way (a struggle in which Munya's relatives join on the other side, and which sees her abducted by them). Sayf is joined by a number of his allies (led by Damar) during the course of battle, and it is at this point that 'Ayrūḍ is overcome with admiration for 'Āqīṣa and asks Sayf for her hand—to which he agrees. 'Āqīṣa is less than thrilled by her prospective husband and demands that he fetch Bilqīs' wedding robes from the Solomon's Treasury as a dowry. The Treasury is guarded by an army of Solomon's most fearsome jinn, and the expedition is one which will lead to certain death. Despite this, 'Ayrūḍ sets out, only to be captured as soon as he reaches the Treasury. When Sayf realises what has happened, he embarks on a rescue mission. On his way he is frequently distracted by events and contracts a number of disastrous marriages, several of which he barely escapes with his life. When he finally gets to Solomon's Treasury he frees 'Ayrūḍ and retrieves the wedding robes which, it emerges, have been kept by the queen for his future need. 'Ayrūḍ flies on ahead to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' with them, leaving Sayf to make his way home alone, during the course of which he has yet more strange and miraculous adventures.

Sayf's wanderings come to an end when he is shipwrecked near the city of the beautiful sorceress queen al-Thurayyā al-Ḥamrā', who falls instantly in love with him and who, by a strange stroke of fortune, has possession of Bilqīs' robes and 'Ayrūḍ (who is again languishing in a prison). All is looking well for Sayf until he is abducted by al-Thurayyā al-Ḥamrā's cousin and evil counterpart, al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā', with whom she has been embroiled in a long term dispute. Al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā' also falls for her captive and refuses to give Sayf up to her cousin, triggering a battle between the two queens. Sayf is transformed into a crow by al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā', who is determined not to lose him, and hidden in a garden.

Meanwhile, Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn have found out about Sayf's quest to Solomon's Treasury and persuade Sayf Ar'ad to send an army against Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' in his absence. After a pitched battle, the Muslims abandon their city through underground tunnels and flee to Wādī Saysabān, only to find that Sayf's sons have disappeared during the confusion. The narrative now moves on to tell of Damar and Miṣr's abduction by Bahrām al-Mājūsī, a magician who needs one of Sayf's sons in order to retrieve the seven-sided jewel of Kūsh ibn Kin'an from the treasury where it is hidden. Miṣr manages to outwit Bahrām, keeps the stone (which controls seven jinn) for himself and makes his way back to Wādī Saysabān, heroically rescuing the people of the Jazīrat al-'Amāliqa ('The Island of the Giants') from their enemies on the way.

When Damar (now rescued from the cave in which he has been imprisoned for the entirety of Miṣr's adventures) finds out about the jewel he becomes jealous and steals it. He magically transports himself to Damascus, where he falls in love with the beautiful princess al-Jābiyya and wins her father's consent to their marriage by using the jewel and its jinn servants to build a marvellous palace and create seven rivers to flow around the city. On their wedding night al-Jābiyya, now a pious convert to Islam, uses her feminine wiles to persuade Damar to tell her how he performed these miraculous deeds. Appalled by her husband's theft of the jewel from his own brother, she steals it herself and flees to Jerusalem where she devotes herself to good works. She has Damar dumped in the desert after which he wanders the wasteland, blundering across a number of cities with strange beliefs and practices which he frees from their respective curses and converts.⁵⁶ Finally, he is retrieved from his exile by Miṣr (who has encountered al-Jābiyya by chance on a visit to Jerusalem and regained the jewel) and forgiven for his original theft.

When the Muslims are reunited they set out on an expedition to rescue the still-missing Sayf—with the exception of Naṣr, who is left at Wādī Saysabān because his mother thinks him too young for such adventures. After a heated battle with al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā' and her allies, the Muslims emerge victorious and Sayf is transformed back into human form. The Muslim army returns to Wādī Saysabān and, on being reminded of a prediction that Sayf will change the course of the Nile and found the city of Miṣr, Sayf and his people migrate to Egypt while Miṣr sets off with a smaller group to re-establish Madīnat al-Ḥamrā'. On his way Sayf is reunited with his wife Takrūr, who had been abducted on al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā's orders and abandoned in the desert. Whilst there she gave birth to Sayf's fourth son, Būlāq and was befriended and adopted by an Arab tribe.

The narrative now digresses to the story of Naṣr's adventures. Despite being left at home, he was kidnapped on al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā's orders during her battle against the Muslims, taken to Wādī Yūnān and abandoned. After a number of encounters, he is rescued from certain death at the hands of an evil sorcerer, 'Ābid al-Nār, by his warrior daughter, Ṭāwūsa, who falls in love with Naṣr and defends the effete hero from all attacks, but is eventually recaptured

56 For example, he liberates one city from a plague of bedbugs, which means that they no longer have to leave it every night or run the risk of being sucked dry while they sleep (*Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, pp. 100–104). He visits another where the people have a curious custom of carrying caged chickens on their heads. These fowl are both the objects of religious veneration and status symbols, until Damar converts the people and has all the chickens rounded up and cooked (vol. 3, pp. 105–110).

by her father. After wandering alone for a while, Naṣr encounters some of Sayf Ar‘ad’s men and is imprisoned, only to be released by Dajwa, the Ḥabashī king’s daughter, another proficient warrior who falls in love with him. The couple flee, are married by al-Khiḍr,⁵⁷ and end up in the company of Qamar, a *tubbaʿī* king who becomes their friend and ally. Naṣr undergoes a startling transformation into a warrior-hero, acquires his own jinn-controlling talisman, and sets out to rescue Qamar’s beloved, Qūt al-Qulūb.

The action then cuts back to Sayf, who visits Miṣr and Naṣr at Madīnat al-Ḥamrā’ and takes them back to the new city of Miṣr, which is still being built. After going into battle with Nūt, a sorcerer-king whose city lies nearby, Sayf embarks on the diversion of the Nile. This is a complex task which involves freeing the mighty *mārid* al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad (‘The Black Devourer’) from the columns of Solomon’s Palace (where he has been imprisoned by the ancient prophet-king), the magical horse Barq al-Burūq and the use of a number of talismans: the Book of the Nile, Yāfith (Japheth) ibn Nūh’s pick, the sword of Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā, Miṣr’s seven-sided jewel of Kūsh ibn Kin‘ān, and Naṣr’s talisman of al-Khilijān and al-Kilikhān.⁵⁸ Al-Rahaṭ is persuaded to obedience when he falls in love with ‘Āqiṣa and is promised her hand (much to ‘Ayrūd’s discomfiture). However, this is merely a trick and Sayf is forced to kill the *mārid* after he has completed his task. Sayf demands that ‘Āqiṣa change her mind and marry ‘Ayrūd, she refuses again, and is banished from the Muslim court.

From this point until the end of the section, the *sīra* has a slightly less cohesive feel. The main events centre around ‘Āqiṣa’s abduction by one of al-Rahaṭ’s followers, after which she agrees to marry ‘Ayrūd if Sayf will rescue her. Brother and sister are reconciled and undergo a number of adventures on their return journey in which the theme of *jihād* comes into the foreground. When they get back to Miṣr, ‘Āqiṣa goes back on her word and again refuses to marry ‘Ayrūd, on the basis that he is a servant and she a princess. ‘Ayrūd, finally, gets his own heroic quest, then defeats a fearsome pretender for ‘Āqiṣa’s hand—

57 al-Khiḍr (F440.3§) appears to be a variant of ‘the green man’. He is an immortal servant of God who wanders the earth doing good deeds and embodies a beneficial, yet potentially threatening power. He crops up frequently in Arabic popular literature, and is often associated with conversion. Al-Khiḍr and his role in *Sīrat Sayf* are discussed in chapter 4.

58 Fortunately, the Muslims have already acquired five of the objects and only need to find the pick before they can put al-Rahaṭ to work. The magical horse Barq al-Burūq happens to have been given to Sayf during his quest to Solomon’s Treasury by King Shādhlūk, the ruler of the City of Mars, after Sayf helped rescue the city from a curse and recover it from the sea (*Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, pp. 375–400) and is exceptionally useful, as not only does it cover huge distances at supernatural speed, but it transforms itself into a luxurious pavilion, complete with manservant and feast, at the end of the day (vol. 2, pp. 401).

al-Samīdha⁶—and wins over his beloved. In fact, ‘Āqīṣa is so impressed that she refuses to marry anyone else.

Thus, the Wedding Quest section begins with three subsections (Sayf’s quest to retrieve Munya from the City of Women, the quest to Solomon’s Treasury, and his adventures with the al-Thurayyā cousins) in which Sayf is the primary hero. The next four subsections respectively deal with the establishment of Miṣr and Damar’s heroic identities, resolve the al-Thurayyā situation, and describe Naṣr’s transformation from insipid youth to fearless warrior. The penultimate subsection then deals with the diversion of the Nile, and the section culminates with the conclusion of ‘Ayrūḍ and ‘Āqīṣa’s betrothal and their marriage.

What is not clear from the summary above, which details only the main events of the Wedding Quest section, is that all of the action takes place against a backdrop of smaller episodes and encounters that rely on a relatively small number of image-sets.⁵⁹ Obviously the adventures of all the heroes have elements of both the personal heroic quest and the more general epic dialogue and there are episodes which belong strictly to the personal, heroic cycle and which do not rely on these image-sets. However, although the way in which they are depicted differs, and progresses as the *sīra* goes on, the background adventures of all of the heroes, Sayf, Damar, Miṣr and Naṣr, revolve around the general pattern of an encounter with a foreign culture in trouble which the hero then puts back on track, or of romantic encounters with the daughters of foreign kings which often result in the conversion of their father and his people. This approach to the exploration of the subject of order and chaos is established during Sayf’s adventures at the beginning of the section and is continued during the adventures of his sons. Thus, although the subsections are rites of passage stories in the context of their individual heroes, they are also a repeated, cyclical exploration of the same topic. There is also a sense of overall progression within this pattern. For example, during Sayf’s early adventures in the Wedding Quest section, he is often himself the cause of chaotic imbalance in the social groups he encounters. As his adventures progress, this situation changes as he learns from his experiences and he becomes the harbinger of order to an already disordered social unit. In the section dealing with the climactic diversion of the Nile, the lessons learnt from their adventures are put into practice as Sayf leads his people to their final home in Egypt, where they forge a new identity for themselves. Finally, the marriage of ‘Āqīṣa and ‘Ayrūḍ (which is explored in more detail in chapter 2) can be seen as a symbolic expression of the new balance of order.

59 The term ‘image-set’ is discussed below, pp. 53–55.

The Wedding Quest section begins with a number of subsections describing Sayf's adventures (the quests to the City of Women and Solomon's Treasury and encounters with the al-Thurayyā' cousins), in which the main themes of the narrative are still expressed through gender conflict, however in a different way. The changing nature of the underlying themes can, as in the Qamariyya section, be demonstrated by reference to Girard's ideas of narrative as an expression of social tensions. In his opinion sacrificial (i.e. social) crisis is brought on by the erosion of boundaries of cultural and social differences as a result of changing circumstances and ideas, and can only be resolved when these boundaries are re-established—through their being redefined either by innovation, or suppression of innovation, by the previous order. This concept is manifested in the Qamariyya section through the erosion of boundaries in the mother-son relationship, but finds a different means of expression in Sayf's adventures during the Wedding Quest section. Girard states that the theme of conflicting brothers in mythology and religion is a common one because it embodies the erosion of boundaries of difference perfectly:

Because in most societies the fraternal relationship implies only a minimum of differences, it obviously constitutes a vulnerable point in a system structured on differences. . . . We instinctively tend to regard the fraternal relationship as an affectionate one; yet the mythological, historical, and literary examples that spring to mind tell a different story: Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Eteocles and Polyneices, Romulus and Remus.⁶⁰

Although there are no warring brothers *per se* in this section of *Sīrat Sayf*, two of the first three subsections of the Wedding Quest section contain the central theme of conflict between two female relatives—Munyat al-Nufūs and her sister Nūr al-Hudā, al-Thurayyā al-Ḥamrā' and her cousin al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā'—thereby also retaining the concept of gender-related expression of social forces whereby women tend to symbolise chaos. The stories behind both of these conflicts is described in some detail in the text and these are also significant. The Munya-Nūr conflict originated from a disagreement between two brother kings, Qāsim and 'Āṣim, who were each left half of their father's kingdom. The two kings agreed that their son and daughter should marry and reunite the kingdom under their rule. However, King Qāsim's daughter refused to marry 'Āṣim's son (again, as with Qamariyya, because she does not wish to lose her throne) and her father supports her decision. In revenge King 'Āṣim has all the women from Madinat Qāsim magically transported to his city:

60 Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 63 and p. 61.

There were many sages (*ḥukamāʾ*), soothsayers (*kuḥān*) and sorcerers (*arbāb al-aqlām*)⁶¹ in that country. King ʿĀṣim summoned them all and addressed them, saying, “I want you to do something for me that no one else has ever been minded to devise, and this is to make all of the women in my brother’s city come to my city so that not one single girl remains with my brother, and [in return] I will give you anything you desire.”

“We hear and obey” came the response. The magicians retired from his presence and built themselves a house big enough for them all, and filled it with all the food and drink they needed, for they would not leave it until they had finished their task. They remained in this house for forty days, and then they emerged, bringing with them a statue made of white wax in the form of a woman. They placed the statue in the middle of the city and built a magnificent dome of marble over it which they engraved with magical script, and they drew seven magical circles around it. Next the magicians sat on ivory chairs and began chanting and muttering until half a day had passed. Then, suddenly, the doors of Qāsim’s city opened and the women came out, calling out and shouting “We come, Magicians of the Age”, and they kept on walking until all the women were inside the other city.⁶²

Once all the women are inside, the city is then then put under a spell which prevents any man from entering.

Likewise, behind the al-Thurayyā cousins’ conflict can be found another pair of brother kings, their fathers:

Know, my King, that this region, land and sea, is ruled by two [kings], the first of whom is called King ʿAmrūn, and the second is King Qamrūn. They are brothers and have appointed as their successors two women: King ʿAmrūn, his daughter al-Thurayyā al-Ḥamrāʾ . . . and, as for King Qamrūn, [he has appointed] his daughter whose name is al-Thurayyā al-Zarqāʾ.⁶³

Thus, the theme of sibling discord is emphasised during Sayf’s adventures in the initial stages of the Wedding Quest section. The erosion of differences underlying these conflicts is one of the signifiers of the advent of social chaos,

61 More literally, ‘those with command of secret knowledge of magical scripts’.

62 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 543–544.

63 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 448. The names al-Thurayyā al-Ḥamrāʾ and al-Thurayyā al-Zarqāʾ can refer to either the Pleides, or a specific kind of lantern (so, ‘Red Lantern’ and ‘Blue Lantern’).

which can only end in destruction. In both the City of Women and al-Thurayyā subsections the situation is resolved by Sayf, who reasserts the natural order and puts things back in their proper place, resolving the conflict, introducing Islam, re-integrating the genders and marrying off the queens to his allies.

The sibling conflict theme in Sayf's Wedding Quest adventures is, as with the mother-son conflict in the preceding Qamariyya section, accompanied by that of inappropriate gender roles and sexuality as an expression of social tensions. The most pervasive theme of this section is the depiction of the conflict between order and chaos through metaphoric use of gender roles. Situations in which 'normal' gender roles are overturned or disrupted, such as the segregation of sexes in the City of Women subsection, denote imbalance. The re-establishment of the correct boundaries of gender roles, as symbolised in this case by the re-integration of the sexes in the City of Women, can be seen as symbolic of the balance and reconciliation of the forces of order and chaos.

There is a more personal level to this idea of gender conflict which can be seen, for example, during the initial stages of the quest to Solomon's Treasury when Sayf marries some totally inappropriate brides. On one occasion Sayf has to flee for his life after only realising when about to enter the marriage bed that, in terms of the practicalities, it is perhaps not such a good idea to marry a giantess, whilst on another he is buried alive with his wife when she dies.⁶⁴ In terms of the *sīra* genre as a whole, which is greatly concerned with maintaining the integrity of the social unit, these marriages are disastrous. Although marriage into the Muslim group symbolises incorporation into the social unit, in these cases Sayf is marrying out, into another society: he is allowing himself to be assimilated into another society and culture.⁶⁵ In some cases, such as that of the giantess, the undesirability of this is stressed by the physical inappropriateness of the union. In the context of the portrayal of natural order in *Sīrat Sayf*, Sayf's only successful marriage at this time is to Takrūr, a human, Muslim princess—Sayf acquires the sword of Āṣaf with her help and she later bears him a son, Būlāq. The intimation is that to preserve the natural order one

64 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, pp. 204–206 and pp. 219–225 respectively. The latter story is examined in detail in chapter 3.

65 This reading of marriage as symbolic of assimilation accords with Ana Ruth Vidal Luengo's point that 'Adoption, patronage and the affiliation to a political-religious group are presented as the ways in which society harmonises the co-existence of different ethnic groups in the vast Arab Islamic domain, although these also implied forms of social subordination and stratification' (Ana Ruth Vidal Luengo, 'Conflict Resolution in *Sīrat Baybars*. A Peace Research Approach', *Oriente Moderno* 22(83): 2 (2003), pp. 465–484, at p. 474).

should marry an appropriate partner in terms of culture, religion and social status.

There is a sense of thematic progression in the stories in the three subsections of the 'Wedding Quest' section. Initially they deal with the balance of order and chaos on a personal level, that of the husband and wife, while stories later on in the subsection deal with the same issue on a larger scale, in terms of whole tribes or peoples. As Sayf's adventures unfold he gradually becomes more and more aware of how to manipulate social forces and of his place in the natural order as shown, for example, by the fact that he eventually learns that it is inappropriate for him to marry every woman he meets, regardless of who or what they are. Finally (in a feat of heroic self restraint) he even manages to turn one down:

[Sayf said to Raḍiyya], "On the one hand, perhaps fate will decree that I marry you, and if I were in my own country I would do so. But I am headed for the Treasury [of Solomon] to try and rescue my servant. Also," [he added,] "I married in the Land of Giants and it caused me difficulties, so I have sworn never to get married again."⁶⁶

It is not until he has learned total mastery over these forces that he is able to finally unite them under his control, establish a stable, permanent society for his people in the latter stages of the section, and divert the Nile to provide them with a fertile homeland.

Although the examples above are all taken from the early stages of the Wedding Quest Section, during which its major themes are established, the theme of familial conflict continues throughout the section and is also explored in the various adventures of Sayf's sons. However, in their case it is most generally to be found between the hero and their potential father-in-law, who is almost inevitably opposed to the marriage of his daughter for one reason or another.⁶⁷ Naṣr in particular has an infallible ability to attract women whose fathers are bent on killing him. What is extremely interesting is that although there is a constant theme of familial and gender related conflict running through the Wedding Quest section, it is portrayed in generationally specific ways. Sayf has been through his oedipal rights of passage conflict

66 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 399.

67 Sayf tends to be welcomed by the father-in-law, who offers his daughter as bride and makes Sayf his heir, rather than opposed. Conflict with the prospective father-in-law can be found in Sayf's adventures in the Wedding Quest section, but it is a much more predominant narrative element in the adventures of his sons.

with Qamariyya, and now moves on to a fraternal conflict theme. In contrast, his sons are depicted predominantly as engaged in conflict with a number of patriarchal figures. Casting their shadows over all this is the frame story of 'Āqīṣa and 'Ayrūd's romance and a multitude of anecdotes and minor stories which pad out the main events, all of which reflect the major issues of order and chaos through thematic use of gender and sexuality.

In summary, the primary concern of the wedding quest section of *Sīrat Sayf* is Sayf's gradual realisation of the necessary qualities of a good leader and his growing ability to recognise and manipulate the forces of order and chaos to achieve a balance essential for peace and stability. This concern is echoed in the later adventures of Naṣr, Miṣr and Damar, as they establish their own heroic identities, and is explored through the metaphors of familial and gender conflict. The section culminates in the Muslims' establishment of a settled society in Egypt, the diversion of the Nile and the marriage of 'Āqīṣa and 'Ayrūd. Structurally, there is a great deal of difference between the Wedding Quest section and the Qamariyya section. Whereas the Qamariyya section has a predominantly linear structure, the textual emphasis of the second section is slightly different and the various stories tend to be cyclical explorations into the subject of chaos and order (in much the same way as the Arabian Nights) rather than following the more strictly order–chaos–order structure of the Qamariyya section. This may be because the function of the first section is Sayf's heroic development via the departure–quest–return pattern,⁶⁸ whereas the function of this second section is to discuss the theme of order and chaos by addressing a variety of essentially similar, although apparently unconnected, situations from slightly different angles (i.e. through the use of patterned image-sets).⁶⁹ The section is given structural cohesion through the use of the frame story of 'Āqīṣa and 'Ayrūd's betrothal and marriage which, although it only becomes predominant in the opening and closing stages of the section, is referred to sporadically throughout: the romance of Sayf's two jinn allies can be seen to have a fundamentally cosmic significance as a metaphor for the social tensions within the Muslim social group.

The Hunt for Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn

The final stages of the *sīra*, in which Sayf, his sons, grandsons and army embark on world conquest, have been dismissed as being merely an excuse for repetitious expansion but, in the context of this variant at least, they serve as an integral part of the narrative, giving structural balance and demonstrating a

68 See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (London: Fontana, 1993 [1949]).

69 Again, see below, pp. 53–55.

further progression in general theme. Having said that, this section is less complex (thematically and structurally) than the others. Again, the demarcation between the end of the Wedding Quest section and the beginning of the Hunt section is not clear, but is marked by a bridging section consisting of several episodes. In these Sayf's old magician advisors become jealous of the status of his new favourite, al-Hudhād, and try to kill him; 'Ufāsha, is introduced (via his quest to rescue his sisters, who have been abducted by *mārids*); and Sayf and Ṭāwūsa (who has been reunited with her husband Naṣr) are temporarily abducted.

The final showdown between Sayf and his enemies begins when Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn persuade Sayf Ar'ad to take action against the upstart Muslims yet again. An enraged Sayf gathers his army and sets out for Madīnat al-Dūr, doing battle with anyone unfortunate enough to be in his way and offering them the choice between conversion or death. The Muslims encounter four enemy kings, Ahnās, the giant al-Rawḍ, al-Malik Hayyāj and the evil sorcerer-king Ramsīs, and it frequently falls to 'Ufāsha to deliver them from certain death. During their march south Sayf's youngest son, Būlāq, manages to find time for a little romance, seducing al-Rawḍ's daughter, al-Rawḍa—who has been locked away on an island by her jealous father to prevent her marrying—and one of her servant girls. Sayf's army swells with new converts as it makes its way south, eventually taking the city of al-Dūr and capturing Sayf Ar'ad, Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn. Sayf Ar'ad chooses to die rather than accept Islam, and is killed by Damar, after which his people convert. Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn, who are to be taken back to Miṣr for execution, are freed by 'Ufāsha and take refuge with a magician king named al-Jullanār. Sayf now begins a long pursuit of these two through the territories of six further rulers, whom he defeats and converts, capturing Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn only to have them slip out of his grasp on every occasion, thanks to 'Ufāsha, who moves them on every time they are captured, until they reach the Seven Climes. (During this time Sayf is joined by Damariyāt, Naṣr's son, who has become a powerful magician). The pattern of pursuit and defeat is repeated in each of the climes, culminating in a protracted battle against the sorcerer Rūmān al-Azraq and his brothers, and a bizarre series of episodes in which some of the Muslims have adventures inside a wooden chest which acts as a doorway to other worlds. Having run out of earthly climes to conquer, 'Ufāsha delivers Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn to the first mountain of the Jabal Qāf, admits his role in their serial escapes, and confesses that his true motive was to help in the spread of Islam. The Muslim army now dutifully plod through all thirty three regions of the Jabal Qāf, albeit in much less detail than their previous conquests. Their adventures culminate in a confrontation with al-Dihqān, the King of the Jinn, who converts and cedes

his throne to ‘Ufāsha. In the final adventure of the *sīra*, ‘Ufāsha then undertakes a perilous dowry quest for the hand of his beloved, Danahsha, and marries her. The story concludes with the Muslims’ return to Miṣr where Saqardis and Saqardiyūn are finally put to death. Sayf, now an old man, retires to the Muqaṭṭam Hills to a life of asceticism accompanied by those of his entourage who wish to stay with him.

As can be seen from the summary, this section has a very linear construction, which essentially relies on the repeated use of one image-set. The main theme of the section seems to be simply that of world conquest—the turning outward of the controlled aggressive (potentially chaotic) social forces. However, the section does give the impression of being quite cohesive and intentionally structured. For example, the theme of ‘Ufāsha’s marriage quest and crowning as King of the Jinn refers back to his parents courtship and its accompanying tensions, whilst simultaneously symbolically celebrating the Muslims’ conquests in the realms of both human and jinn.

In conclusion, *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* is fundamentally a tripartite discussion of the forces which govern society. The Qamariyya section addresses the personal passage of Sayf from infant to king, and the beginning of a new, Islamic social order. The Wedding Quest section then describes Sayf’s eventually successful struggle for the wisdom and experience to control the forces which his ascent to the throne has set in motion, and the development of his social group into the beginnings of a stable, settled, nation state. In the final section, Sayf channels potentially destructive, aggressive forces and unleashes the Muslim army on an unsuspecting outside world, bringing the whole world into his new, Islamic order.

Compositional Techniques

The purpose of this section is not to explore the tools and methods of oral narrative construction in detail, but to make some general points which will both be of relevance to later chapters and go some way to explaining the approach taken and terminology used.

Sīrat Sayf is composed according to the rules of oral narrative. By this I do not mean that it was necessarily orally composed or transmitted, but that it is composed broadly according to oral-formulaic conventions.⁷⁰ As mentioned

70 On the presence of oral-formulaic elements in written prose texts, and the composition of texts according to oral-formulaic conventions, see Alain Renoir, ‘Oral-Formulaic Context:

above, this is evident in its formal aspects such as the use of *sajʿ* ('rhyming prose') and narrative formulae, and also in its adherence to conventions such as the expression of character through action. It can also be seen in the overall structure of the narrative, which is composed, in a very loose sense, according to the principles of ring theory. The fact that a narrative is composed according to the principles of ring theory does not mean that it is an orally transmitted text, but it does denote a conceptualisation of the text that has a degree of orality in nature, and taking an oral-formulaic approach to such texts provides us with the means for understanding certain aspects of these texts which cannot be accessed using literary paradigms designed for use with modern literary texts.

The various rings that make up the structure of *Sīrat Sayf* consist of heroic adventures by Sayf and his sons, or other characters, that follow the departure–separation–return pattern as characterised by Propp and van Gennepe,⁷¹ and have both a circular structure, and a linear element. This can be seen at work at the global level in Fig. 1, in which it is clear that as well as the linear structure identified in the text above, there is a loose ring structure of mirroring elements surrounding the central climax of the *sīra*, the diversion of the Nile to create Egypt and the founding of the city of Cairo. The story effectively has two climaxes: the central one (which one can argue is thematically the most significant) and a final climax (the movement towards which is what gives the plot its linear sense, and facilitates a sense of narrative and thematic progression that allows the story to move forwards). This dual structure may be the underlying factor in why the various extant versions of *Sīrat Sayf* seem to maintain a high level of consistency up until the final third of the narrative: it is the central climax, the diversion of the Nile, which is the essential core of the story, rather than the final climax. The presence of this dual structure seems to be present in other works of Arabic popular literature. In the three sections that make up the *sīra* there are level upon level of nested rings: characters on adventures tell

Implications for the Comparative Criticism of Mediaeval Texts' in John Miles Foley (ed.), *Oral-formulaic Theory: A Folklore Casebook*, Garland Folklore Casebooks, 5 (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1990), pp. 313–336. See also Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologising of the Word* (London, New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1982); Lauri Honko, Jawaharlal Handoo and John Miles Foley (eds), *The Epic: Oral and Written* (Mysore: Central Institute of Indian Languages Press, 1998); and the more recent Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

71 See Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd edn, tr. Laurence Scott, ed. Louis A. Wagner, intr. Alan Dundes (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968); and Arnold van Gennepe, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).

or hear stories of the adventures of other characters that form their own rings, which can contain even smaller ring units.

Image-sets

The basic building blocks of oral narrative are motifs, tale patterns and symbols. These essentially interchangeable units are arranged by the narrator to create a coherent narrative. In the case of large, rambling works such as *Sīrat Sayf*, one of the main things that holds these disparate elements together is the fact that these individual units can be seen to express, even in their smallest incarnation, driving themes of the whole narrative. As Heath points out in *The Thirsty Sword*, writing on *Sīrat ‘Antar*, “Beneath the seeming multiplicity of its episodes and events, the *Sīra* tells only one story—or more precisely one series of stories”.⁷² Bridget Connelly notes a similar process at work in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*: “In the segmental mode of composition that the tradition and its poets use, the part contains the whole, the episode the larger *sīra*, and the most minute level of composition, the rhyme, incorporates the story.”⁷³ These observations are also applicable to *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*. It is impossible to reduce *Sayf* to a single trope such as world conquest, or single story such as the marriage quest (although it might be possible to reduce the third and second sections of the *sīra* down to these). However, it is very possible to pare the narrative overall down to a single concept—the discussion of the struggle between the forces of order and chaos in personal, social and cultural terms, primarily expressed through the medium of male-female relationships. Every single story, anecdote and symbol used in the construction of this variant of the narrative echoes this primary concern. Furthermore, it is also noticeable that although *Sayf* does not literally consist of a series of tellings of the same story, it does rely on the repeated use of a relatively small number of story patterns, motifs and symbols to convey its central themes in much the same way that Heath finds in *Sīrat ‘Antar*:

It is clear that repetition is a common compositional technique here, but it involves more than the random reiteration of motifs. Contending with a rival and winning a dowry are less haphazardly chosen incidents than selected elements of larger narrative patterns that the *Sīra*’s oral storytellers relied on to create the epic’s successive episodes. By means of this network of patterns, storytellers were able to create the episodes and stories that constituted individual oral performances of the epic. At the

⁷² Heath, *The Thirsty Sword*, p. 68.

⁷³ Connelly, *Arab Folk Epic and Identity*, p. 131.

same time, mastery of these patterns allowed them to expand the narrative endlessly, transforming the fragmented anecdotal account of 'Antar's life into a full-scale, voluminous epic cycle.⁷⁴

As Ulrich Marzolph has recently pointed out, this use of repetition and intertextual reference to themes, motifs and concepts that are familiar to an audience is a conscious narrative technique which allows the narrator (or author) to link their own story into the web of recognised tradition.⁷⁵ Against this familiar background, innovative twists in the story can often become more meaningful (in the same way that what is not said is often as important as what is said, innovative use of familiar patterns can be used, for example, to highlight specific themes), and in longer narratives such as the *sīra* intertextual references of this kind within the text itself bring in further layers of resonance to form, as I will argue in the following chapters, the backbone of the narrative.

This form of narrative construction, which he terms as 'image-sets', has also been identified by Harold Sheub in African oral narratives.⁷⁶ Sheub finds that, as in *Sīrat Sayf*, these image-sets rely on core images, which are replicated in slightly different form or juxtaposed (in which case he refers to them as patterned image-sets) to discuss a given issue, and concludes that "... the supremely important role played by repetition in the narrative tradition makes it possible for societal values to be communicated in a uniquely effective way".⁷⁷ This is definitely the case in *Sīrat Sayf*: in the Qamariyya section the image-set of the wedding night abduction is used repeatedly, whilst the Wedding Quest section has a whole subsection in which Sayf makes repeated, disastrous marriages to inappropriate females, and the Hunt section is composed almost entirely of repetition of the image-set of battle and conquest of enemy kings.

Sheub also finds the existence of a progression in this thematic exploration to create a linear narrative structure. In *Sīrat Sayf* this takes place both in terms of the actual image-sets, as illustrated above, and in terms of the underlying issues these image sets are used to address. This is found both within the sections themselves and between the three sections as they deal with different aspects of this struggle for balance: The Qamariyya section deals with Sayf's

74 Heath, *The Thirsty Sword*, p. 68.

75 Ulrich Marzolph, 'Making Sense of the *Nights*: Intertextual Connections and Narrative Techniques in the *Thousand and One Nights*', *Narrative Culture* 1: 2 (2014), pp. 239–258, at p. 240.

76 Harold Sheub, 'Parallel Image-sets in African Oral Narrative-performances', *Review of National Literatures* 2: 2 (1971), pp. 206–223.

77 Sheub, 'Parallel Image-sets', p. 207.

personal battle for mastery over destructive, chaotic forces as expressed most obviously in the oedipal power struggle between Sayf and Qamariyya for the throne of Madinat al-Ḥamrā', the Wedding Quest section uses gender relationships to discuss the necessity of balancing these forces to maintain social order within a given society, and the Hunt section depicts the externalisation of these forces, once they have been mastered, in conquest. There is a sense of linear progression in the treatment of the conflict between the forces of order and chaos, while it remains the primary concept of the *sīra*. Thus, through the use of theme and parallel and patterned image-sets the essentially fluid, ephemeral building blocks of oral narrative are given directed cohesion and transformed into a characteristic, individual story.

Frame Stories

The construction of *Sayf* is also given form and structure, much as in the *Thousand and One Nights*, by the use of frame stories such as that of the Ḥabashī-Yemeni war and, within this, the frame stories of each individual section. Just as the primary concept of the *sīra* is continually replicated in each of the smaller units of section, subsection and tale, there is a decreasing scale of frame stories within frame stories, giving *Sayf* narrative fluidity. These frame stories simultaneously guide the action and reflect the primary concepts of the *sīra* as a whole, and their individual section within it. Thus, for example, the frame story of the Wedding Quest section, the problematic betrothal of the extremely unwilling 'Āqīṣa and the besotted 'Ayrūd, not only acts as motivation for the plot, but also neatly encapsulates the major themes of the section.

Character Splitting and Multiplication

Sayf has a vast supporting cast of advisors, allies, wives, sons, magicians and enemies, many of whom are effectively interchangeable. There is also a generational aspect to characterisation in *Sīrat Sayf* which leads to some character multiplication in the primary characters. In the first section, *Sayf*'s main allies are all of his generation (or older), while in the Wedding Quest section *Sayf*'s sons take on primary roles, and in the Hunt section *Sayf*'s grandchild Damariyāt is brought into the action. Character multiplication is a compositional tool, generally recognised as universal in oral narrative, that works on the same basic principle as that of image-sets, according to which allies, enemies and lovers are (surprisingly) multiplied. The application of this tool on a vast scale to minor characters is a means by which the heroic status of primary characters can be enhanced. One has only to think of the hundreds of enemies defeated by the Muslim heroes in single combat and the collection of wives and allies accrued by *Sayf* to see its relevance in *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*. It is

also used in a slightly different way to provide the narrative with ever increasing opportunities for expansion; for example, by replicating the enemy time and time again as the previous one gets killed off.

Character splitting is a device by which the personae of main characters are given more depth by being presented as the focal point of a triadic relational structure which rests on the bases of two of their antecedents. More important characters are 'split' into triadic character structures which may themselves be split again:

A developing epic may have a simple structure and only one key triangle of personages. When the story becomes popular, however, there is a demand to tell it in more depth. Who were the hero's parents? How did the family get its land? The bard is thus inspired to flesh out his story by further 'splitting' a character . . . to create subsidiary contrasts . . . [for example] a need for the heroine to have female antecedents encourages the development of two opposing personalities positioned behind her . . . These two function like panels in a mural, providing a background scene against which any central figure looks more interesting. They add depth as well as a kind of interpretive code.⁷⁸

This principle of triadic splitting does occur in *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, in which it can be applied to, most obviously, the triadic structure of Sayf, Qamariyya (his mother) and Dhū Yazan (his father). However, there is a significant difference between the structure as described by Beck and those found in *Sayf*. In Beck's examples from Indian epics, she finds that the background characters in her Indian type triads appear to be generally of the same gender, whereas here, as demonstrated in the example of Sayf above, the background characters often consist of one male and one female. This may be a result of different cultural takes on a universal pattern, but is worth noting as it coincides neatly with the preoccupation of *Sayf* with the dualistic opposition of male and female.⁷⁹

78 Brenda Beck, 'Core Triangles in the Folk Epics of India' in Stuart H. Blackburn, Peter J. Claus, Joyce B. Flueckiger and Susan S. Wadley (eds), *Oral Epics in India* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 155–175, at p. 173–174.

79 On the significance of 'twos' and 'threes', see also Axel Olrik, 'Epic Laws of Folk Narrative' in Alan Dundes (ed.), *International Folkloristics: Classic Contributions by the Founders of Folklore* (Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 1999), pp. 83–98. Dundes introduces this paper, from one of the founders of modern folkloristics, with a preface which references further reading responding to and critiquing Olrik's (universalist) approach. The article contains many useful insights although it is

Finally, one further slightly different balance of the principles of multiplication and splitting as defined by Beck is also evident in *Sīrat Sayf*. Beck indicates that in Indian oral epics, straightforward ‘mirror’ multiplication does not occur among kinsmen of the hero. In *Sayf*, it does—to some extent. For example, it is reasonable to approach the various female characters to whom Sayf is related as multiplications of the protective, magical sister-mother-wife, each with slightly different characteristics highlighted by their juxtaposition with each other.⁸⁰ Likewise, Sayf’s sons and grandsons, although in some senses ‘split’ from him can also be seen as multiplications of his heroic persona.

Gender Roles

One of the most fascinating things about *Sayf* is the wealth of female characters who play a strong, active role, often appearing to be more proactive than their male counterparts. The prominence of the female role is much higher than in many other *sīras* and is one of its distinguishing characteristics. Active female roles in *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* can be put into several broad categories. Some, such as Shāma, (who falls broadly into the warrior woman type described below) are wholehearted supporters of Sayf and the Muslim cause. There are also several older sorceresses who are female counterparts to Sayf’s male advisors, and a vast number of minor female characters who help the Muslim heroes on their quest in a variety of ways. As well as these beneficent portraits of the female gender, the narrative abounds with examples of women overstepping the bounds of their perceived natural role and upsetting the natural balance of the world by usurping the patriarchal system (for example al-Thurayyā al-Ḥamra’, al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā’ and, last but by no means least, Qamariyya), rebelling against their husbands (Munyat al-Nufūs), and generally violating the natural order. These women are inevitably punished in *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, although there does appear to be a distinction between the irredeemably wicked (who die) and the temporarily misguided (who are redeemed). Furthermore, although they may suffer for their misdeeds, women do not appear to be subject to the gratuitous violence Lyons finds in the genre as a whole.⁸¹ This may be because *Sīrat Sayf* chooses to discuss the reconciliation of opposing social forces primarily through the theme of gender conflict. Indeed, much of the narrative appears to be concerned with the reconciliation of male and female forces and their re-adoption of their appropriate places in

problematic in that Olrik posits a universal human tendency to conceptualise in twos and threes (as Dundes points out in n. 26, this is currently thought to be culturally specific).

80 See chapter 3, pp. 190–196.

81 See Lyons, *The Arabian Epic*, vol. 1, pp. 35–42.

the world order. In these terms, women in *Sayf* are “suspect, full of mystery and potential danger in (their) reproductive capabilities (and serve) as the mediator between men and God, between man and his fate, between mankind and his history, a genealogy that embodies the past and future in the present new generation of offspring”.⁸² They tend to represent the forces of chaos, the alien ‘other’ which “stands outside and threatens to disrupt the conscious (rational) order” which, when properly harnessed by the (male) forces of order is essential for the well being of the universe as a whole. This sense of female dangerousness is often the case in folklore, especially in this kind of narrative where the audience and narrator can be assumed to be predominantly male. It is one of the bases of all anthropological, folkloristic and literary critiques that the outsider, the undesirable, or the surrogate victim be essentially different from the protagonist, with whom the audience or reader identifies. The resulting presentation of gender roles reflects the idea of woman as some kind of elemental force to be feared and guarded against as well as revered. In this aspect *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* is similar to folklore the world over. What makes its approach to gender issues interesting is the central role this conceit plays in the narrative; in *Sayf* woman is an essential force that must be assimilated rather than conquered.

Two main aspects to female characterisation in *Sīrat Sayf* are of particular relevance in the light of discussion of gender roles. The first is the role of women as symbols of social integration, the second is the trope of the warrior woman. In *Arab Folk Epic and Identity*, Bridget Connelly puts forward the idea that, in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, women are symbols of land and power because of their regenerative ability and that “Penetration of the female by a foreign group means penetration of the group and the dissolution of group boundaries. As such, it threatens ethnic and racial identity; it threatens the genealogy.”⁸³ This would appear to be equally applicable to *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*. Sayf’s various marriages, as well as those of his sons, allies and companions are obvious metaphors for the assimilation of alien cultures and societies into the Muslim world order. (In fact, all the women in *Sayf* originally belong to ‘alien’ social groups). However, whereas the concept of intermarriage with outside societies appears to be viewed unfavourably in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, it is often depicted in a very positive light in *Sayf*. While *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* depicts a world in which life is a constant struggle for survival between tribal groups, *Sīrat Sayf* is a

82 Connelly, *Arab Folk Epic and Identity*, p. 144.

83 Connelly, *Arab Folk Epic and Identity*, p. 208. Although here she is discussing Sudanese versions of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* it is evident from her discussion that this idea is also applicable to Egyptian versions, although the concept is given less importance in these.

celebration of the all-embracing power of Islam and its heroic champion and so intermarriage reflects victory rather than danger. Not only does Sayf marry a number of women from a variety of social groups himself, but he gives many of his female captives (usually the daughters of defeated kings) away in marriage to his allies, thus cementing ties in the context of the larger, Muslim socio-cultural unit. Having said that, there is a distinction made between the beneficial incorporation of (usually friendly or defeated) external socio-cultural units into the Muslim one, and the detrimental concept of marriage by members of the Muslim unit out into an alien, non-Muslim external unit. This is regarded as threatening and dangerous and it is noticeable that the one prominent example of a woman marrying out of the Muslim group, Qamariyya's defection to King Şamşām of China, has strong negative associations and results in conflict between the Muslims and the Chinese.⁸⁴ Likewise, when Sayf allows himself to be distracted into marriage to non-Muslim women on his travels, this represents his incorporation into a foreign social unit and the relationship is depicted in a negative light.⁸⁵

The trope of the female warrior may appear to be the most obvious example of female appropriation of a male role in the *sīra* genre, and as such, is important to the concept of the chaos-woman. It is also important in its relation to the concept of appropriate female sexuality. In a large number of cases the motif of warrior woman who duels with the hero appears to be an accepted metaphor for courtship, rather than true appropriation of male characteristics.⁸⁶ As soon as the woman is won over, and married, she is immediately transformed into the perfect housewife whose only further contribution to the story is in the form of offspring. This use of characterisation as metaphor is, in some cases, expanded into what may be termed as the warrior woman type.

In her various writings on warrior women in Arabic popular literature, Remke Kruk points out several such female warriors in *sīra* literature who are accepted as good Muslim women fighting for the forces of order (i.e. the forces of Islam) and continue their martial career throughout their lives with

84 Qamariyya defects vol. 1, p. 518. After she tells Şamşām of his daughter's murder he sets out for Madinat al-Ḥamrā' with an army to avenge her death. During the subsequent battle with the Muslims he is captured and told of his daughter's treachery by Sayf, upon which he instantly apologises for his hastiness and converts to Islam (vol. 2, pp. 171–178).

85 A good example of the consequences of marrying *out* of the Muslim unit, rather than incorporating others *into* the unit through a symbolic marriage can be found in the story of Sayf's encounter with the King of Death. See chapter 3, pp. 155–160.

86 N725#, 'Hero defeats valiant warrior in combat; warrior proves to be a beautiful maiden (girl, woman) masking as man and they fall in love'. T174#, 'Marriage to woman (girl) masking as man-warrior after defeating her in duel (combat)'.

no apparent censure, even after marriage.⁸⁷ Most of her examples are taken from *Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma* which is unusual in that its main protagonist is female, as are a relatively large proportion of the secondary characters. This retention of warrior characteristics does not seem to be the case in *Sīrat Sayf*, where female characters usually either lose their 'male' characteristics on losing their virginity, as do Shāma, Ṭāma and al-Jīza, or keep them by denying their femininity, i.e. their sexuality. Such rejection of sexuality appears to express these women's abandonment of their threatening and potentially destructive feminine aspect—the truly sinister and evil women in the *sīra* often have voracious sexual appetites or are depicted in an otherwise sexually charged manner.⁸⁸ This link between female sexuality and proactive behaviour is a constant theme of female characterisation in the *siyar*. In general terms, female sexuality is only acceptable, and controllable, when governed by a man within the lawful bounds of marriage. The overall assumption in the *sīra* genre appears to be that the female role is characterised by deference to one's masculine betters. Within these limits there does seem to be room for creative, proactive and independent women who are not perceived as usurping the masculine role, but rather complement it—as long as they limit their ambitions to the Islamic cause and are obedient to their male superiors. Thus, both the warrior woman motif and type can generally be classified as conforming to an established female stereotype, rather than being examples of dangerous female usurpation of male activity. In this light, it is significant that Qamariyya's essential evilness is characterised by her complete lack of subservience to men and her strong sexual associations. Her character is threatening and 'unnatural' precisely because she uses her sexuality and femininity to wind Sayf Ar'ad, Dhū Yazan, Ṣaṣṣām and Sayf himself around her little finger. This combination of independence and ability to accept and use her sexuality, rather than deny or be governed by it, means that, in *sīra* terms, she is breaking

87 See, for example, Remke Kruk, 'Warrior Women in Arabic Popular Romance: Qannasa bint Muzahim and Other Valiant Ladies: Part 1', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 24: 3 (1993), pp. 213–229; 'Warrior Women in Arabic Popular Romance: Qannasa bint Muzahim and Other Valiant Ladies: Part 2', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 25: 1 (1994), pp. 16–33; 'The Bold and the Beautiful: Women and *fitna* in the *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*: The Story of Nūra' in Gavin R. Hambly (ed.), *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage and Piety* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 99–116; 'The Princess Maymūnah'; and *The Warrior Women of Islam*, especially ch. 2 and chs 11–14.

88 Two good examples of sexually voracious, evil women can be found in the Queen of Georgia in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* (see Lyons, *The Arabian Epic*, vol. 3, p. 315) and 'Anfara, a nymphomaniac jinn princess encountered by Sayf in *Sīrat Sayf* (vol. 3, pp. 284–288). Both of these characters come to an appropriately sticky end.

with audience expectations of female stereotypes, displaying gender confusion, and appropriating male characteristics. In *Sīrat Sayf*, as in the rest of the genre, when perceived gender boundaries are broken by a female character, as they are by ʿĀqiṣa's refusal to acquiesce to Sayf's demands she marry ʿAyrūd,⁸⁹ these women become threatening and destructive, and male reassertion of the 'proper' boundaries between the sexes is inevitable.

In the following chapters, this version of *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* is compared with a number of texts and intertexts for traces of their narrative legacy with the aim of exploring what various posited pretexts, and the intertextual webs these can be seen to reflect, bring to a reading of the text. This comparison of texts is not intertextual in the strictest terms, in that specific texts are not compared directly to each other (i.e. a given episode in *Sayf* is not compared solely to al-Kisāʿī's account of the legend of Abraham, or to one particular version of the story of Alexander the Great). Rather, a more folkloristic attitude is taken, in which narrative episodes in *Sayf* are examined in the light of a composite version of several variations of, for example, the legend of Abraham, according to the idea that "As a genre, legend rarely exists in any one single version in any community in the world. Rather, a cluster of legends surrounds an important political or religious figure. It may be that no one individual in a community can relate the entire legendary life history of a particular figure. For this reason, a folklorist normally collects as many versions of a legend as possible before trying to re-construct a composite notion of a legendary figure's life story."⁹⁰ This practice of compiling a composite story, or intertext, is carried out (as much as is feasible) on the control texts to which *Sayf* is compared. Where possible it is drawn from a variety of well-known variants of the pretext, in an attempt to establish the essential elements of the discourse. This composite provides a characteristic narrative structure which encapsulates the essential

89 ʿĀqiṣa undergoes a significant character change after her refusal to marry ʿAyrūd (*Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 182). Whereas previously she has been Sayf's most loyal and effective helper she becomes unpredictable, wilful and dangerous. She attempts to secure ʿAyrūd's death by sending him on an impossible mission, throws the sword of Āṣaf into the sea in a fit of pique (vol. 2, p. 431), throws tantrums and argues with Sayf, and is generally disruptive and abusive. Although she does still extricate Sayf from some difficult situations, she plays a relatively insignificant role in this section of the *sīra* compared to her instrumental role in the first section. This characterisation does not change until her marriage to ʿAyrūd, after which she takes on the passive non-existence in the *sīra* shared by many women after their marriage.

90 Alan Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 235.

thematic and motifal elements of a given narrative and which allows the differences between the various recensions to be seen more clearly on the basis that although there are basic, universal patterns which are followed by nearly all narratives, what keeps them alive in any culture is not their universal aspects but the individual aspects and meaning brought to them by each particular culture in which they circulate: “Structures are not meanings, but carriers of meaning, signifiers that are rendered into signs by the given culture (in space, time, or society). Even the ‘deepest’ structures have to be interpreted culturally or individually”;⁹¹ and “the network of minor motifs carries no less weight than the epic itself . . . these motifs often modify and sometimes even change radically the aspect of the legend”.⁹²

Although, as will be seen, there are some examples of straightforward structural intertextual references between *Sayf* and the various pretexts, on the whole the importance of the structural intertext lies in the fact that it highlights differences between the various versions of the pretexts, and between them and any intertextual presence in *Sīrat Sayf*. Narrative structures themselves do not define meaning, rather they allow the audience or reader to access it—how the various threads are then interpreted depends on personal perception. As Wendy Doniger has much more aptly put it: “The archetype is like a Barbie doll that you dress in different moral values; but the story itself has no moral values, it is just a narrative, and image of *what happens*, and it is up to the interpreter to ask *why* it happens. In turn, the nonexistent archetype lets us ‘see’ the myth that is built around it, just as the hole in the doughnut is what lets us see the doughnut as a doughnut”.⁹³

As mentioned in the Introduction, issues of genre categorisation (not just of ‘epic’, but of other forms such as ‘legend’ and ‘myth’) are currently the subject of much discussion in world literature, and have been debated in folkloristics for some time. Broadly speaking, there are two approaches, one which views genre as universal and cross-cultural (the theory of primary forms and the theory of ideal types), and the second, which views genre as a culturally-specific category of discourse.⁹⁴ The following chapters use both approaches in con-

91 A.K. Ramanujan, ‘Hanchi: A Kannada Cinderella’ in Alan Dundes (ed.), *Cinderella: A Folklore Casebook* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982), pp. 259–275, at p. 269.

92 Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi, ‘Legend and Belief’ in Dan Ben-Amos (ed.), *Folklore Genres* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), pp. 93–110, at p. 101.

93 Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Other Peoples’ Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995 [1988]), p. 34.

94 For a brief introduction to these two approaches, see Dan Ben-Amos, ‘Genre’ in Charlie T. McCormick and Kim Kennedy White (eds), *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs,*

junction, taking the premise that some elements are cross-cultural, but that there are also elements that are culturally specific. (A good example of this problem surrounding genre definition is the term *sīra* itself: it defies definitive categorisation by terms such as ‘epic’ or ‘romance’ precisely because *sīra* is a culturally-specific genre denomination that expresses a conceptualisation of its own genre definition which encompasses both terms, because it reflects the culturally-specific reality of what the *sīra* genre is.⁹⁵ But, this does not mean that a specific *sīra* variant is not, ‘universally’ speaking, an epic, or that the *sīra* cannot be an epic form.) Thus, this study takes as its basis the concept that content, not structure is essential to meaning, but uses structural correspondences to highlight convergences and differences in the content of *Sīrat Sayf* and the various pretexts, in accordance with the idea expressed by Alan Dundes that “It is more likely that content rather than structure will be oicotypical. Structures appear to be cross-cultural (though not necessarily universal) whereas content seems to be more often than not culturally relative”.⁹⁶

Tales, Music, and Art, 2nd edn (3 vols. Santa Barbara CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010), pp. 617–623. See also William R. Bascom, ‘The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives’, *Journal of American Folklore* 78: 307 (1965), pp. 3–20 (for a key introduction to the ‘universalist’ approach); Bruce A. Rosenberg, ‘The Genres of Oral Narrative’ in Joseph P. Strelka (ed.), *Theories of Literary Genres*, Yearbook of Comparative Criticism, 8 (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978), pp. 150–165 (for an overview of the issues); Lauri Honko, ‘Folkloristics Theories of Genre’ in AnnaLeena Siikala (ed.), Susan Sinisalo (tr.), *Studies in Oral Narrative*, special issue of *Studia Fennica*, 33 (1989), pp. 13–28 (in which he critiques Dan Ben-Amos’ culturally-specific, context-based approach); Linda Dégh’s discussion of the issues surrounding genre definition of ‘legend’ in her *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), ch. 2 ‘Is There a Definition for the Legend’, pp. 23–97; the various articles in Dan Ben-Amos (ed.), *Folklore Genres* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976); Briggs and Bauman, ‘Genre, Intertextuality, and Social Power’ (on the culturally-specific, shifting nature of genre); Vilmos Voight, ‘A Theory of Theory of Genres’ in Linda Dégh, Henry Glassie and Felix J. Oinas (eds), *Folklore Today: A Festschrift for Richard M. Dorson* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 485–496.

- 95 At the risk of stating the obvious, as Voight puts it “Presumably if the folk does know a genre, it has a name for it; thus native terms attest the existence of genres” (Voight, ‘A Theory of Theory’, p. 490). And, as Bruce Rosenberg comments, genre classifications among the ‘folk’ of different cultures can often be different, and follow different criteria, to that of folklorists and literary academics (Rosenberg, ‘The Genres of Oral Narrative’, pp. 153–154).
- 96 Alan Dundes, ‘Structuralism and Folklore’ in Alan Dundes, *Essays in Folkloristics* (Meerut: Ved Prakash Vatak Folklore Institute, 1978), pp. 178–205, at p. 190. Dundes uses structural analysis to define genre, but not to the exclusion of culturally specific or ethnographic

Although this focus on content as the culturally specific carrier of meaning should help with the exploration of the way that intertexts function within the text, how they interact with the themes of the *sīra*, and what they bring to the text, this methodology obviously does not claim to be a ‘culturally valid’ interpretation of late medieval Egyptian ideas, if indeed there is such a thing. However, it does surmount some of the problems presented in a study of this kind, and acts as an aid to the interpretation of thematic material on the basis that “A myth [or any other narrative] cannot function as a myth in isolation; it shares its themes, its cast of characters, even some of its events with other myths. This supporting corpus glosses any particular myth, frames it with invisible supplementary meanings, and provides partially repetitious multiforms that reinforce it in the memory of the group . . . the broader context also supplies a partial corrective to the distortions produced by inevitable interpretation.”⁹⁷

Last but not least, it must be pointed out that comparison between *Sayf* and the various pretexts is undertaken on the basis that this version of *Sayf* can be treated as one ‘performance’ fixed (by the narrator/author) in written form; it is not the definitive form, but one variant of the discourse form. Obviously, as only this variation of *Sayf* is being looked at, one can draw no far-reaching conclusions about the entire *Sayf* discourse but must limit any conclusions to this particular variant. Likewise, the various texts to which it is compared are also the record of one variant of a particular narrative discourse. However, in all cases the discourse draws on the cultural heritage which informs each particular tale, legend, or myth—that is to say, the intertext. The discussion of the text of *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* undertaken in this chapter has discussed how, at a fundamental level, it is a discussion of the forces which govern society. Social rules contain elements of both universal and culturally specific human perceptions. The following chapters will seek to examine how these forces are depicted in *Sayf* by intertextual reference to various narratives, assuming the existence of a hypothetical ‘audience’ who is aware of them. Through this, it will attempt to reach some conclusions about how intertexts work to inform a reading of the text; how (or indeed if) they reflect or convey a specific sense of cultural identity expressed in the text; and what implications this might have on our understanding of the mechanics and meaning of *Sīrat Sayf* itself, and the *sīra* genre as a whole. It is about this hypothetical audience that references to ‘audience expectation’ or ‘reactions’ in this study are made.

concerns. In this sense, his approach is very similar to that taken here. See the comments on the ‘ambiguity’ of Dundes’ writings on the structuralist approach in Briggs and Bauman, ‘Genre, Intertextuality, and Social Power’, pp. 137–138.

97 Doniger, *Other Peoples’ Myths*, p. 31.

The Prophets: Islamic Legend in *Sīrat Sayf*

The conquest of the worlds of humans and jinn in the name of Islam is one of the central themes of *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*. However, whilst it is true that Sayf and his Muslim army do undertake a great deal of conquest and conversion, the *sīra* as a whole is not overtly religious in tone and Sayf is portrayed as more warrior-king than religious leader.¹ Explicit religious content in *Sayf* is limited and takes the form of a handful of prophetic tales told by various characters during the course of the action, a number of wandering ascetics encountered by Sayf, the occasional presence of al-Khiḍr, and allusions to religious myth and legend. Indeed, it could be argued that, as the most prevalent Islamic concept to occur within this *sīra*, the concept of *jihād* is merely a justification for Sayf's expansionist designs and that the conversion of defeated infidels is primarily symbolic of their incorporation into the socio-cultural unit.² Conversion in *Sīrat Sayf* as a literary topos functions in a way that has been identified by Richard van Leeuwen in the stories of 'Umar al-Nu'mān and 'Ajīb and Gharīb, two *sīra* narratives included in eighteenth-century versions of the *Thousand and One Nights*, in that conversion is a motif that symbolises transformation, specifically the transition from one form of history to another, from pre-Islamic chaos to Islamic order.³ Conversion thus also becomes a way

1 As Renard says of another Islamic hero, al-Amīr Ḥamza: "One does not get the impression that the hero functions primarily as the bearer and embodiment of essentially religious values. He speaks rather of a spirit of adventure than of a spiritual tradition or experience" (John Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image: Themes in Literature and the Visual Arts* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), p. 62).

2 According to the same general ideas put forward above in the Introduction, according to which marriage is often symbolic of socio-cultural integration.

3 "It represents the transition from one form of history dominated by chaos, strife, contingency, and the unfulfilled desire of the hero, to another form of history which is impregnated with the faith, moral values, harmony and the 'arrival' of the hero at his destination. Needless to say, the second form of history reflects the pattern of the divine scheme of creation and should therefore be considered the only 'true' history, ordered by the acknowledgement of God's supreme power" (Richard van Leeuwen, 'Conversion as a (Meta-)Historical Concept in the Epic Stories of the *Thousand and One Nights*' in Sabine Dorpmueller (ed.), *Fictionalizing the Past: Historical Characters in Arabic Popular Epic*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 206 (Leuven-Paris-Walpole MA: Uitgeverij Peeters en Department Oosterse Studies, 2012), pp. 125-113, at p. 135.

of establishing the historicity of a narrative: “By transposing the act of conversion, or proto-conversion, to pre-Muhammadan times, the stories show us what may be characterized as the ‘dawn’ of history, and thus the story actually represents the transition from non-history to history”.⁴ Having said this, the Islamic intertext, although not prominent, plays a key role in the narrative and reference to the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (‘legends of the prophets’) underpins a great deal of the subtext, not least in the way that they anchor the proto-Islamic world of the *sīra* in Islamic legendary world history. The aim of this chapter is therefore to explore the intertextual resonances brought to the *sīra* by the stories and personae of a number of Islamic prophets whose pretexts are explicitly referenced in the text: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Solomon. The focus will be on how these intertexts function within the text rather than using them to attempt to define Sayf as a hero in terms of the prophetic-heroic pattern (although, to a certain degree this will be a necessary, unavoidable and not undesirable consequence).⁵

The prophetic intertext in *Sayf* tends to take one of three basic forms. A minor portion of the material consists of religious tales recounted to one character by another. These stories are usually ostensibly told to explain the presence of a particularly significant relic or occurrence. For example, at the very beginning of *Sayf*, Dhū Yazan happens upon the Ka’ba during his military expedition to the lands of the king of Ba’labak. As Dhū Yazan marvels at the sight before his eyes, Yathrib tells him the story of the Ka’ba’s creation and related tales about Adam and Noah.⁶ On other occasions the names of prophets are attached to magical weapons or talismanic objects discovered by the *sīra*’s various heroes. As discussed by Renard in *Islam and the Heroic Image*, these act as ‘emblems of identification’, a narrative device used in folklore the world over, and are one of the means by which the nature and character of the hero is denoted to the audience.⁷ In the case of inherited weapons, the type of weapon seems to serve as specific identification of the hero in question and

4 van Leeuwen, ‘Conversion as a (Meta-)Historical Concept’, p. 135.

5 For a comprehensive overview of the various permutations on the Islamic heroic pattern, see Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image*.

6 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, 9–10.

7 “Several identifying features play major roles. Especially important are the names bestowed on a hero, the heirlooms passed down from one hero to another, certain physical traits, and implements or weapons used by specific heroes . . . Narrative and iconographic conventions link nearly all the great heroes with some specific emblems of identity. One of the several types of emblem is the heirloom, a kind of heroic hand-me-down” (Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image*, pp. 140–141).

thus is often individual in nature. In *Sīrat Sayf* the most commonly occurring magic or talismanic weapon is the sword (D1081, 'Magic sword').

The creation of a line of descent from prophet to hero furthermore draws on the Islamic idea of prophetic inheritance, or *waṣīyya*, according to which both concrete heirlooms and esoteric knowledge are passed down through a designated heir.⁸ The best known *waṣī* is probably 'Alī, a favourite figure in popular Islamic culture, whose claim to have been appointed heir to Muhammad is well attested by tradition, and who, according to Shī'ī tradition, inherited the ring, sword, armour and knowledge of Muhammad. It is intriguing that when an object is inherited from a religious figure in *Sayf* the connection between recipient and prophet is usually indirect. For example, Sayf inherits two swords, the first is left to him by Shem, Noah's son, rather than by Noah himself, and the second by Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā, Solomon's vizier.⁹ The latter is a mighty sword which is not only useful in battle, but can be used to test the sincerity of conquered converts: when laid upon the neck of an unbeliever it slices off his head or wounds him horribly, but a true Muslim remains unharmed:

King Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan drew the sword of Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā, and said to the sorcerer al-Shāhiq, "Take this sword, kiss it, and place it against your neck.¹⁰ If your faith is sound it will cause you no pain and you will not be wounded, and what you have said [about your conversion to Islam] is true. But if it is otherwise, you will die."¹¹

In addition to the above two types of material, *Sayf* also includes a variety of tale patterns, themes and motifs which, however common, have their most universally recognised Semitic incarnation in the legends of the prophets. The use of these themes and motifs adds to the Islamic content of the *sīra*, and a number of them will be discussed in this chapter.

Before moving on to discuss the prophetic intertext, the relationship between *Sīrat Sayf* and the *Sīra nabawiyya*, the traditional account of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, must be mentioned. The Muhammad-Sayf intertext is not dealt with in detail in this study, primarily because the nature of the

8 This concept, itself, relies on the Shī'ī belief that all esoteric prophetic knowledge was passed down from Adam. See Uri Rubin, 'Prophets and Progenitors in the Early Shī'a Tradition', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 1 (1979), pp. 41–65, for a more detailed explanation of both concepts.

9 See *Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 225–236 and vol. 2, pp. 256–269, respectively.

10 Lit. *alā ra'sik*, 'on/over your head'.

11 *Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 131.

relationship is such that a meaningful assessment of it would really only be possible through a detailed comparative study of *Sīrat Sayf* and a number of variant canonical and non-canonical accounts of Muhammad's life at a level of detail that would necessarily go far beyond the scope available in this volume. Muhammad is mentioned by name a number of times, as the prophet of the coming days (for example, when Yathrib asks permission of Dhū Yazan to build a city for Muhammad to shelter in, at the beginning of the *sīra*). But no stories are related about him within the text, and there are (obviously) no heroic heirlooms related to him. Muhammad's intertextual presence lies primarily in broad parallels in plot progression (i.e. in the actual sequence of events) and Sayf's characterisation and heroic progress—it is, one could say, superficial at the same time as being profoundly significant. These correspondences in plot are not surprising, given that Muhammad is the ideal man and prophet who provides the standard against which all Islamic heroes are measured, and whose *sīra* is an exemplar. Although the Muhammad-Sayf intertext will not be addressed specifically, the major points of reference should be outlined briefly as they are clearly of immense relevance to the general prophetic intertext in terms of Sayf's characterisation and heroic progress.

Although direct reference to Muhammad in *Sayf* is limited to only a few mentions of his name, there is a substantial level of intertextual association between the two narratives. The *Sīra nabawiyya* has two basic forms, the orthodox, Sunnī narrative, which is relatively fixed in form, and a further corpus of less orthodox *sīras*.¹² With regard to the orthodox *Sīra nabawiyya*, *Sayf* mirrors the structure and some of the distinctive motifs and narrative elements of the Muhammad legend. The intertext is brought in at the beginning of *Sayf* when Dhū Yazan rediscovers the Ka'ba and later visits Medina where Yathrib founds a settlement for Muhammad's future sanctuary. Following the birth of Sayf, it continues to be present at a global level. First, the overall structural pattern of *Sayf* can be related to that of the *Sīra nabawiyya*. *Sayf* can be split into three sections; the Qamariyya section, the Wedding Quest section and the Hunt section. Likewise, the *Sīra nabawiyya* falls naturally into three parts:

12 This is partly because all of the extant Sunnī biographies of the Prophet refer back to two early sources Ibn Ishāq and, to a lesser extent, al-Wāqidi. Ibn Ishāq's account, based on oral accounts (mainly from people whose elders were there at the time), has not survived, but the material is replicated in other works. The main source used here for the Muhammad legend is Ibn Hishām's *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, available in translation as Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*. For a discussion of one less orthodox variant of the *Sīra nabawiyya*, see Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 23–39.

the Meccan period, the Medinan period and the Conquests. There is also a correspondence in the general themes of these sections. In both cases the discourse begins with the struggle of the hero against the threatening forces in his own immediate society. (It is worth noting that in both cases the figure from whom most persecution generates at this stage is a family member: Abū Lahab and Qamariyya respectively.¹³) When these forces have been defeated, the hero then embarks on the establishment of a new base and the unification/conversion of the cultural group of the surrounding area, including the group that originally caused the hero's exile. During this time, both heroes' role as leader can be read as primarily a force for social cohesion. Once this has been achieved, the conquests are turned against the outer worlds of alien races. The religious aspect of this struggle becomes more important, with both heroes insisting on the conversion of their defeated enemies and potential allies. The fact that this theme of conversion only really occurs during this last section is one of the more noticeable aspects of *Sayf*.

Further to the parallels in overall structure, there are some fairly distinctive similarities and a mass of corresponding elements which occur in identical chronological order. To give just a few examples from the early stages of their respective *sīras*: both Sayf and Muhammad rely on foster mothers during their infancy and are subsequently brought up by foster fathers; both discover their heroic identity and destiny through encounters with cave dwelling ascetics; in both cases the first person they convert is their wife (Muhammad's first convert to Islam was Khadija, his first wife, whilst Sayf's first convert is Nāhid, who later becomes his second wife).

The intertextual references are further built on by a number of common themes—such as the central importance of female characters and the predominance of female anti-heroes (which echoes the role of Hind in the *Sīra nabawiyya*).¹⁴ The use of marriage as a political tool both in terms of the hero's marriages and his practice of arranging the marriages of those around him and the large (but not Solomonic) number of wives each have is also common to

13 Also, Sayf's first enemy is the magician 'Abd Lahab. In a story resembling the opening stages of 'Aladdin', 'Abd Lahab sends Sayf down into a cave to fetch a magical whip, planning to leave him there for dead once he has his hands on the treasure, but Sayf outwits him and kills him with the whip, which he then keeps. See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 64–67.

14 Hind bint 'Utba, the wife of Abū Sufyān, was one of Muhammad's fiercest and most vindictive opponents. She famously mutilated the Muslim dead following the battle of Uḥud and ate part of the liver of Ḥamza, at whose hands her father died. See Lings, *Muhammad*, p. 189.

both Sayf and Muhammad. It is also worth noting that the magical horse on which Sayf leads the diversion of the Nile bears the name Barq al-Burūq, a name which recalls to mind that of the Prophet Muhammad's horse al-Burāq. These implicit parallels between Sayf and Muhammad's stories enhance Sayf's status as a prophet-hero, helping him conform to the ideal Islamic prophetic type, and create a situation in which the Hunt section contains echoes of the Islamic conquests of Muhammad, recreating the *sīra* as the foundation of an Islamic Empire.

In this study, five collections of prophetic tales have been used to determine the fundamental patterns and motifs associated with each particular prophet. The choice of these collections has been somewhat complicated by the fact that, in contrast with, for example, the long-established interest of Judaic theologians in religious folklore and Midrashic material, the Islamic popular prophetic legends, or *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, are relatively under-researched. Furthermore, such late medieval (and modern) collections as there are tend to rely on previous written works rather than current oral traditions of their time. Given that the version of *Sayf* addressed here dates from the late nineteenth century, this presents obvious problems. Simply addressing *qiṣaṣ* collections which primarily function as an explication of Qur'anic references to a given prophet, or rely on an earlier collection for their material, may treat only one variation of a prophetic legend and could present a distorted version in terms of the relevance of this variant to oral and popular culture. However, by using a mixture of early collections that draw heavily on oral sources, it is hoped that the range covered should be disparate enough to allow identification of key motifs and themes of the various prophetic stories. There are a number of different medieval *qiṣaṣ* collections which have been drawn on here: 'Umāra ibn Wathīma's *Kitāb Bad' al-khalq wa-qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* ('The Beginnings of Creation and the Stories of the Prophets'), al-Tha'labī's *Arā'is al-majālīs fī qiṣāṣ al-anbiyā'* (generally just known as 'Lives of the Prophets'), and the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* ('Prophetic Legends') of al-Kisā'ī and of Ibn Kathīr. In addition, there are two historical works, al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh al-umam wa'l-mulūk* ('History of Peoples and Kings') and Ibn 'Asākir's *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq* ('History of the City of Damascus').¹⁵ All of these works would appear to draw heavily on the ocean of Semitic oral tradition of their times. It should be noted that, although the brief summaries of the legends provided in this chapter are compiled from

15 For an introduction to the *qiṣaṣ* genre and prophetic legends in Arabic historiography, see Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2002), pp. 128–164.

these sources, they are more of a guideline to the general pattern of each narrative than a rigorous comparative analysis.

The *Kitāb Bad' al-khalq* is attributed to 'Umāra ibn Wathīma (d. 289/902), but is believed to have been written by his father, Wathīma ibn Mūsā ibn al-Furāt al-Fārisi, a silk trader and author of the well-regarded *Kitāb Fī akhbār al-ridda* (a history of the *ridda* ('apostasy battles') that arose with the secession from Islam of various tribes following the death of Muhammad), who spent most of his life in Egypt. It is said to have existed in two volumes, but only the second survives, in two manuscripts, one of which is the basis for the Khoury edition used here.¹⁶ The text begins with the story of al-Khiḍr, which is included within the story of Moses, is drawn from primarily Egyptian sources and informants, and is the earliest collection of Islamic prophetic legends we have.

The second medieval *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* is al-Tha'labī's *'Arā'is al-majālis*,¹⁷ which dates from the fifth/eleventh century. Al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035) was a famous Qur'anic exegete of his time, and is best known for his *tafsīr* although his *qīṣaṣ* seems to have also been generally well received.¹⁸ The *'Arā'is* had a major influence on later *qīṣaṣ* collections and was popular throughout the premodern era, as is attested by the survival of a relatively large number of manuscripts. It is currently available in print in several languages, including an English translation by William Brinner, under the title *'Arā'is al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, or *'Lives of the Prophets' as Recounted by Abū Iṣḥāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Tha'labī*,¹⁹ and is the subject of a recent monograph

16 Raif Georges Khoury, *Les légendes prophétiques dans l'Islam. Depuis le Ier jusqu'au III^e siècle de l'Hégire. D'après le manuscrit d'Abū Rifā'a 'Umāra b. Waṭīma, K. Bad' al-ḥalq wa-qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*. Avec éd. crit. du texte, Codices Arabici Antiqui, 3 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978). See also Klar, *Interpreting al-Tha'labī's 'Tales of the Prophets'*, pp. 8–10; and R.G. Khoury, art. 'Wathīma b. Mūsā' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn.

17 Abū Iṣḥāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Nīsābūrī al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā' al-musammā 'Arā'is al-majālis* (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-Thaqāfiyya, n.d.).

18 It is cited by such later personages as Ibn Khallikān, Ibn Kathīr and Sahāwi. See Klar, *Interpreting al-Tha'labī's 'Tales of the Prophets'*, pp. 1–4; Norman Calder, 'Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham' in G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (eds), *Approaches to the Qur'ān* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 101–140; and C. Brockelmann, art. 'al-Tha'labī' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

19 William M. Brinner (tr. and annot.), *'Arā'is al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, or *'Lives of the Prophets' as Recounted by Abū Iṣḥāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Tha'labī* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002).

by Marianna Klar.²⁰ Although the main intention of this work may have been the furtherance of the quest for moral instruction through the lives of the prophets, al-Thaʿlabī seems to have felt the importance of reproducing tradition, rather than reworking it: he cites his sources, and subordinates theological considerations to the actual storytelling.

The third medieval *qīṣaṣ* collection referred to here is the *Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisāʿī* (fl. sixth/twelfth century). This is thought to be a collection of tales of oral origin, intended as popular entertainment rather than as improving literature, the earliest version of which was compiled at the end of the twelfth century and accredited to the persona of al-Kisāʿī.²¹ There are numerous extant manuscript versions of *al-Kisāʿī*, many of which differ in length, content and story material, and there are three print editions available in Arabic.²² These three print editions are all based on different manuscripts, or groups of manuscripts and, although they demonstrate a high degree of textual stability overall, each have additional or missing episodes and changes in wording.²³ The 1922 Eisenberg edition²⁴ primarily draws on a 781/1379 Leiden manuscript, but has been criticised for a lack of transparency in the way Eisenberg reconstructed the text with the help of other manuscripts. Al-Ṭāhir ibn Sālma's 1998

20 M.O. Klar, *Interpreting al-Thaʿlabī's 'Tales of the Prophets': Temptation, Responsibility and Loss* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

21 See T. Nagel, art. 'al-Kisāʿī', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn; and Klar, *Interpreting al-Thaʿlabī's 'Tales of the Prophets'*, p. 11.

22 On the merits or otherwise of these editions, see Roberto Tottoli, 'New Sources and Recent Editions of *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* Works and Literature' in Raif Georges Khoury, Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala, María Jesús Viguera Molins (eds), *Legendaria medievalia. En honor de Concepción Castillo Castillo* (Cordoba: Ediciones El Almendro, 2011), pp. 525–539, esp. pp. 525–528.

23 My thanks to Marianna Klar for providing me with her analysis of the differences between the three printed editions, which was presented as a research paper 'Textual Stability in al-Kisāʿī's Shuʿayb Narrative' at the 'Islamic Stories of the Prophets: Semantics, Discourse, and Genre' conference held at Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale October 14 and 15, 2015, to be published in the conference proceedings. She notes in a personal communication that "However, while the amount of variation between the three texts, on the lexical and often the sentential level, is indeed striking, even more striking perhaps is the degree of textual stability that is nonetheless maintained. This is evident in the consistent reproduction of individual episodes and motifs, with all three printed editions including the same narratives, in the same order, with almost 100% uniformity, but it also displays itself in the presence of countless instances of overlapping vocabulary."

24 Isaac Eisenberg, *Vita Prophetarum auctore Muḥammed ben Abdallāh al-Kisāʿī ex codicibus, qui in Monaco, Bonna, Lugd. Batav., Lipsia et Gothana asservantur* (Lugdun-Batavorum: E.J. Brill, 1922).

edition²⁵ relies on sixteen manuscripts, the earliest dating from 877/1472, but is mainly based on a 1220/1805 manuscript. The most recent edition, published in 2008 by Khālid Shibl,²⁶ relies on only one manuscript, dating from 1274/1857, about which he provides very little information. There is also an English translation of the Eisenberg edition, by Thackston Wheeler.²⁷ Al-Kisā'ī's collection is one of straightforward storytelling—there are no variants given in any of the stories, and although authorities are occasionally cited, this would appear to be merely for cosmetic effect. Al-Kisā'ī's stories are significantly shorter than al-Tha'labī's and those of the historiographer al-Ṭabarī (partly because of the lack of variants) and take a more humorous approach to the material. They also have a higher content of magical and fantastic elements, a reflection of the folkloric nature of this tale collection; the primary function of this version of the lives of the prophets seems to have been entertainment rather than moral or historical instruction.

The *qīṣaṣ* collection of Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) also deserves mention because it is, nowadays, one of the best known collection of prophetic tales.²⁸ In addition, Knappert's *Islamic Legends*, a compilation of modern tales collected from oral sources throughout the Middle East, is taken into consideration.²⁹ Knappert himself says in his introduction that these tales “do not belong to the official canon or to the orthodox, received collections”, and they seem to be drawn from folklore and popular storytelling.³⁰ Although he gives little detail on his sources, few notes on the popularity or transmission of the stories, and the tales appear to be too heavily edited to be useful for more detailed analysis, they contain the essential motifs and themes necessary here.

The material in the historiographical sources is presented somewhat differently to that in the *qīṣaṣ* collections. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) was a widely respected, reliable scholar whose *tafsīr* was a standard work upon which later

25 al-Kisā'ī, Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān, *Bad' al-khalq wa-qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā' li'l-Kisā'ī*, ed. al-Ṭāhir ibn Sālma (Tunis: Dār Nuqūsh 'Arabiyya, 1998).

26 al-Kisā'ī, Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān, *Qīṣaṣ wa-mawālid al-anbiyā'*, ed. Khālid Shibl (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2008).

27 Wheeler M. Thackston Jr (tr.), *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisā'ī* (Boston: Twayne, 1978).

28 Ibn Kathīr, *Qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā'*, ed. 'Alī 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Abū'l-Khayr, Muḥammad Wahbī Sulaymān and Ma'rūf Muṣṭafā Zurayq (Beirut: Dar al-Khayr li'l-Ṭibā'a wa'l-Nashr wa'l-Tawzī', 1998/1417). Roberto Tottoli's edition of Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī, for example, has not been consulted (Ibn Muṭarrif al-Kinānī, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad, *The Stories of the Prophets by Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī*, ed., intr. and annot. Roberto Tottoli (Berlin: Schwarz, 2003)).

29 Jan Knappert, *Islamic Legends: Histories of the Heroes, Saints and Prophets of Islam* (2 vols. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985). All future references are to vol. 1.

30 Knappert, *Islamic Legends*, vol. 1, p. 3.

Qur'anic commentators drew. Likewise, his *History*³¹ remained a standard in the Islamic world for centuries, and was built on by later historians such as Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Miskawayh. This enormous and ambitious work chronicles the legendary history of the ancient Semitic prophets and peoples and the history of the Islamic Empire up until 302/915. Al-Ṭabarī relied on a wide variety of written and oral sources and, in accordance with scholarly convention, recorded (often contradictory) variant accounts of each episode of a given tale rather than presenting the story as a linear narrative.³² This means that although al-Ṭabarī provides much of the same information as the *qiṣaṣ* collection of al-Tha'labī, his narrative is characterised by the inclusion, and discussion, of variant accounts. Although this has resulted in a broken narrative in which the story often takes second place to the listing of variants, making the plot somewhat disjointed, it does have the advantage of including many, if not all, of the major variants in circulation amongst scholars at the time. A second major difference between al-Ṭabarī's *History* and the *qiṣaṣ* collections is that the latter contain a larger number of supernatural and fantastic motifs. In other words, even the more scholarly *qiṣaṣ* collections are plot-led and contain more folkloric motifs than al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh*.

The second historiographical source, Ibn 'Asākir's *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*,³³ is, again, more scholarly in its form. Its author (d. 571/1176) was a well-educated scholar of *ḥadīth* from a wealthy and well-connected family. This vast work, composed in 80 books, each of 10 sections of 20 folios, is essentially a biographical dictionary of everyone of note who had lived in Damascus (and also Ḥalab, Ba'labak, Ramla and Ṣaydā), either permanently or briefly, up until the time of its author.³⁴ Like al-Ṭabarī, Ibn 'Asākir recorded all the variant

31 al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-umam wa'l-mulūk* (6 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya n.d.). For a translation of the relevant material see Franz Rosenthal (tr.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī, an Annotated Translation. Volume I: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); William M. Brinner (tr.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī, an Annotated Translation. Volume II: Prophets and Patriarchs* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); and William M. Brinner (tr.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī, an Annotated Translation. Volume III: The Children of Israel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

32 On al-Ṭabarī's life and work, see Rosenthal, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, pp. 5–134; and Claude Gilliot, 'La formation intellectuelle de Tabarī (224/5–310/839–923)', *Journal Asiatique* 276 (1988), pp. 203–244.

33 Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. Muḥibb al-Dīn Abī Sa'īd 'Umar ibn Gharāma al-'Amrawī and 'Alī Shīrī (80 vols. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1995–2001).

34 See N. Elisséeff, art. 'Ibn 'Asākir', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn; Suleiman A. Mourad, art. 'Ibn 'Asākir' in David Thomas (Gen. ed.), *Christian-Muslim Relations 600–1500*

akhbār ('accounts') he could find for the lives he recorded, providing full *isnāds* ('chains of transmission') for each one, and the *Tarīkh* contains much material from earlier works that are now lost to us.

Adam

Reference to the Adam myth in *Sīrat Sayf* occurs only twice, in the form of short recounted tales, both in the introductory subsection. Adam is included here because, although brief, these references are significant. The myth is made up of three basic episodes; the creation of Adam and Eve, their expulsion from the garden of Eden and the story of Cain and Abel, and is recounted with a high degree of consistency in the sources.³⁵

God creates the heavens and earth, fills them with his creations, and finally turns his hand to creating man. He makes Adam's body out of clay, and gives him a spirit. Adam is then taken on a tour of the seven heavens and displayed to the angels, who are expected to bow down to him. All do so, apart from Iblis, who is banished in disgrace. God creates Eve from a rib taken from Adam while he sleeps, and gives her to him as his wife. The couple are sent to Paradise, where they live in blissful luxury subject to only one prohibition: that they not eat from the fruit of a certain tree.³⁶ At that time the snake, who used to have four legs like a Bactrian camel and be one of God's most beautiful creatures,³⁷ walked upright on two legs like a human, was respected among creation and, in some accounts, was a friend of Eve's. Iblis manages to enter Paradise by hiding

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- (Leiden: Brill Online, 2015); and James E. Lindsay, "Alī Ibn 'Asākir as a Preserver of "Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā": The Case of David b. Jesse", *Studia Islamica* 82 (1995), pp. 45–82, esp. pp. 45–58.
- 35 For the various accounts, see: al-Tha'labī, *Arā'īs al-majālis*, pp. 21–42; Brinner, *Arā'īs al-majālis*, pp. 41–57; Eisenberg, *Vita Prophetarum*, pp. 23–59; al-Kisā'ī, *Bad' al-khalq*, pp. 109–141; al-Kisā'ī, *Qīṣaṣ wa-mawālīd*, pp. 23–57; Thackston, *The Tales of the Prophets*, pp. 23–85; Ibn Kathīr, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, pp. 13–56; Knappert, *Islamic Legends*, vol. 1, pp. 35–41; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 1, pp. 62–103; Rosenthal, *The History*, pp. 257–334.
- 36 The prohibition violated by Adam and Eve differs. This variant has been used here because it is the one mentioned in *Sayf*.
- 37 She is described in the Eisenberg edition of al-Kisā'ī thus: "Kaab said that at that time the serpent was shaped like a camel and, like the camel, could stand erect. She had a multicoloured tail, red, yellow, green, white, black, a mane of pearl, hair of topaz, eyes like the planets Venus and Jupiter, and an aroma like musk blended with ambergris. Her dwelling was in the aqueous Paradise, and her pond was on the shore of the River Cawthar. Her food was saffron, and she drank from that river; and her speech was exaltation of God, the Lord of the Universe" (Thackston, *The Tales of the Prophets*, p. 38).

in the serpent's mouth, between her teeth and, when the serpent encounters Eve, Iblīs speaks from its mouth and tricks Eve into eating the forbidden fruit. Eve persuades Adam to partake of the fruit, following which their garments fall from their bodies and they become aware of their nakedness, which they try to hide. The couple are thrown out of Paradise by an angry God. The serpent is cursed with losing its legs and becoming man's greatest enemy, which man will hunt down and kill, while Eve is usually cursed with difficult and painful childbirth, and/or menstruation, and occasionally with the blunting of her intellect.³⁸ The angel Gabriel pleads their case before God, and is sent to Earth to help Adam build the Ka'ba, in which is placed a white stone (which turns black during Noah's time because of the sinfulness of his people, and is raised to heaven during the Flood, then returned at the time of Abraham). Gabriel also teaches Adam his religious duties, and shows the sinners the arts necessary for survival.

Over time, Adam and Eve have many children, including Cain and Abel. Cain becomes jealous of Abel and kills him, committing the first murder. Adam and Eve mourn the loss of Abel, until God sends them another son, Seth, to take his place. The myth concludes with the death of Adam and his burial by Seth, his heir, who is taught the burial rights by the angels. Shortly afterwards, stricken by grief, Eve dies.

Dhū Yazan's Adornment of the Ka'ba

The Adam intertext is first called upon at the beginning of *Sayf* when, four days after Dhū Yazan and his army have set out upon their military campaign against the king of Ba'labak, they come across the Ka'ba in the desert. Yathrib relates the story of how God ordered Adam to build a sacred building around it and sent Gabriel down to help him in its construction:

Know, O Mighty King, that Almighty God commanded Adam to go to the Ka'ba and build the Bayt al-Ḥarām (the Holy House). With the strength granted to him by Gabriel, by God's leave, Adam took stone from the nearby mountain. He laid the foundations and Gabriel put the supports in place and taught Adam how to build. And Adam continued to build, with Gabriel teaching him, until the House was finished. Then Gabriel told him, "Adam, this House has been established in accordance with God's will," and ordered him to perform the Hajj every year, and the angels accompanied him . . .³⁹

38 See Rosenthal, *The History*, pp. 274–281.

39 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 9. See also Jayyusi, *The Adventures of Sayf*, p. 3.

He then goes on to mention that the black stone was taken up to heaven by God at the time of the flood. Dhū Yazan is overcome with awe and, after a series of attempts to dismantle the Ka'ba in order to take it with him are met with his affliction by divinely inflicted elephantiasis, becomes convinced of the existence of one true God. He converts to the monotheistic faith of Abraham and decorates the Ka'ba, clothing it in silk and brocade.

This episode effectively creates an origin tale for the tradition of providing the *kiswa*, the brocade covering which was provided annually for the Ka'ba. The *kiswa* was originally provided from within the Arabian Peninsula, but from Mamluk times (mid 7th/13th century) was sent annually from Egypt to Mecca with the caravan of Hajj pilgrims.⁴⁰ Its inclusion in *Sayf* serves a dual purpose; by backdating the beginnings of this tradition to pre-Islamic times, and to the father of the hero of the *sīra*, the founder of Egypt, history is rewritten and pre-Islamic Egypt is both Arabised and Islamised. Yathrib's account of the origins of the Ka'ba introduces the intertext of the Adam myth and associates Dhū Yazan's provision of the original *kiswa* with the prophetic tradition of the building of the Ka'ba. Furthermore, the association of the Ka'ba with Adam, Noah and Abraham lends personal authority to Dhū Yazan's renovation of the holy building by associating him with the tradition of monotheistic patriarchs who are closely associated with it: the *sīra* here only references Adam and Noah in the context of their connection with the Ka'ba. This episode, effectively the first adventure of *Sayf*, thus helps create for the *sīra* a historical reality in which Egypt can trace its cultural roots back to the Arabian Peninsula and its Islamic roots back to pre-history.

Yathrib's Poem

The second allusion to 'Adam' is also made by Yathrib. After Qamariyya inherits the throne, she expels many of those who were loyal to Dhū Yazan, her mercenaries run unchecked, and many people leave the city. Yathrib unsuccessfully appeals to her to put right the situation, after which he retires to Yathrib/Medina in despair. Before disappearing from the *sīra* entirely, he composes a long poem of 151 lines on the history of the prophets, his own life, the founding of the town of Yathrib, and predictions of the future arrivals and

40 Lane gives a detailed account of its preparation and the celebrations accompanying the departure of the caravan from Cairo in *Manners and Customs*, pp. 475–481. Both he and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, writing in 724/1326, describe the coverings as made of black silk brocade embroidered with inscriptions (see also H. Gibb (tr.), *The Travels of Ibn Battuta* (3 vols. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1993), vol. 1, p. 195). As of 1962, provision of the *kiswa* has moved to Saudi Arabia.

achievements of Sayf and Muhammad.⁴¹ He addresses it to the Prophet Muhammad, of whose coming he has learned from ancient books, and places it in a box, which he seals with a magical seal which can only be opened by Muhammad and places it above the city gates.

As with the previous reference, the actual allusion is fleeting: it occurs right at the beginning of the poem and refers to Adam in the context of his relationship with Eve and their expulsion from Paradise. Yathrib begins his poem with eighteen lines in which he describes the creation of Eve from Adam's rib, then mentions the couple's marriage and Eve's role in tempting her husband into eating the forbidden fruit:

And she became Adam's wife, and he her husband // and their nourishment was the fruit of all the other trees
 Except for the seeds⁴² which they had been warned not to taste // and take nourishment from, for eating them would cause harm
 But Iblīs tricked Eve into eating; // then she said to [Adam], "Eat, do not be afraid O Abū'l-Bashar ('Father of mankind')"
 And when he tasted it, their garments fell from them, // they became bewildered,⁴³
 And they each departed everlasting Paradise, crying, // cast out, with tears pouring down their cheeks.⁴⁴

The intertextual significance to *Sayf* of this reference to Adam lies in the context within which the poem is set. In terms of *Sayf*'s internal timescale, Yathrib returns to Yathrib/Medina shortly after Qamariyya's accession to the throne of Madīnat al-Ḥamrā', when Sayf is still an infant in exile. However, we do not actually discover this until much later in the *sīra*, when Sayf has made his way back to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' as an adult. Just after the point at which Sayf

41 For the poem, see *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 211–217. It is discussed in Phillips, *Bravery and Eloquence*, pp. 172–174.

42 The Arabic term used here, *hinṭa*, is usually used to refer to wheat, or ears of wheat. In the Arabic sources, the exact nature of the forbidden fruit does vary, but it is usually a kind of seed rather than an apple. For example, al-Tha'labī describes the tree and its fruit as follows: "It had innumerable branches, and on each branch were ears that contained seeds like Tell Hujur (or, as it is also said, like ostrich eggs). They had a fragrance like musk and were whiter than milk, and sweeter than honey" (Thackston, *The Tales of the Prophets*, p. 40).

43 The text has *mushtanī al-fikr* here, which must be an error. In the printed edition used in Phillips, *Bravery and Eloquence*, this has been corrected to *mushattat al-fikr*.

44 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 211.

and his mother have been reunited the narrator breaks into the story with a short section of narrative recounting the story of Yathrib's departure, which is effectively a flashback to the time immediately after Qamariyya has seized the throne and abandoned her baby. In thematic terms, the placement of this flashback section in the text is significant: this poem comes just at the point where the subsections dealing with Sayf's youthful adventures at the court of Afrāḥ have come to an end and the 'Sayf and Qamariyya's power struggle' subsection begins. Poems narrated by characters within *Sīrat Sayf* are often used to highlight certain themes, or to signal changes in theme, and these kind of poems tend to occur at strategic points such as the shift from one section or subsection to another.⁴⁵ This poem has added importance in that it is the second longest in the *sīra* and "is narrative poetry of the grandest kind, which places the events of the *sīrah* in the context of mankind's history since the creation of the world and adds passages of prophecy and expressions of faith".⁴⁶

In the version of the Adam and Eve story Yathrib tells here he depicts Eve as responsible for the expulsion from Paradise. The aspects of the Adam story Yathrib chooses to present in the opening lines of his poem chime with events in the *sīra* in such a way as to create parallels between Eve's role in the exile of humanity from Paradise and Qamariyya's in Sayf's exile into the wilderness. This in turn, reminds the audience of Qamariyya's untrustworthiness. Islam does not recognise the concept of Original Sin, and the Qur'an does not ascribe responsibility to Eve for the Fall, in line with which the majority Islamic theological position is that Adam and Eve are equally culpable. There are differing accounts of who is cursed by God in the *qiṣaṣ* material: some accounts have Eve and the serpent cursed, while in others Adam is also cursed. In the version told by Yathrib here, Eve's role in the Fall is foregrounded and she is presented as culpable: although she herself is tricked into eating, she then persuades Adam to break God's prohibition and eat the forbidden fruit (she does not even share the blame with the serpent in this account). The way in which the Fall is referenced here thus serves as a device through which audience expectations of Qamariyya's character and the dominant themes of the relationship

45 Other conventions around the use of poetry in *Sīrat Sayf* are that when the *sīra* diverges to follow the adventures of an individual, narrative flow is maintained by having characters give a brief summary of their experiences to each other when they return to the main group in the form of short poems which also reintroduce themes. In his study Peter Phillips finds that poetry in *Sīrat Sayf* seems to be characteristically used to express appeals to God to find the courage to confront the blows of fate (Phillips, *Bravery and Eloquence*, p. 175).

46 Phillips, *Bravery and Eloquence*, p. 172.

between Sayf and his mother are re-established by reintroducing themes of female deception and betrayal.

Noah

'Noah' material occurs in two forms in *Sayf*: recounted tales and heirlooms. Various characters relate Noah stories (of the flood and the curse of Ham) in the very early stages of the *sīra*, whilst later on in the Qamariyya section Sayf inherits the sword of Shem, Noah's son, and uses Japheth's pick to break up the cataracts that block the new course of the Nile. The form of this mythological corpus is relatively fluid in that the different variants show a degree of disparity in the initial background events against which the stories are set and in the details of Noah's life. Comparison of the five variants indicates that there are three intrinsic episodes to the Noah legend; the flood story, the cursing of Ham, and the division of the world by Noah before his death. These show a large degree of consistency of both tale pattern and motif.⁴⁷

The narrative begins with (varying) accounts of Noah's birth and childhood and then moves on to Noah's prophetic mission. Humanity has lapsed into idolatry and Noah is sent to call them back to the path of righteousness. He summons his people to God in vain until, losing patience, he calls on God to send down the flood. God instructs Noah to build an ark onto which he must take a pair of every kind of animal when the rains begin to fall. Noah, his wife, and his sons Japheth, Ham and Shem and their wives board the ark, but Canaan (another son) refuses to do so and drowns in the rising flood water. Noah also takes on board the body of Adam, which he has removed from its resting place, and which is used to 'separate' the men and women whilst they

47 For the various accounts, see: al-Tha'labī, *Arā'is al-majālīs*, pp. 46–52; Brinner, *Arā'is al-majālīs*, pp. 92–104; Eisenberg, *Vita Prophetarum*, pp. 85–102; al-Kisā'ī, *Bad' al-khalq*, pp. 155–167; al-Kisā'ī, *Qīṣaṣ wa-mawālīd*, pp. 65–76; Thackston, *The Tales of the Prophets*, pp. 91–109; Ibn Kathīr, *Qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā'*, pp. 59–87; Knappert, *Islamic Legends*, vol. 1, pp. 41–44; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 1, pp. 112–120; Rosenthal, *The History*, pp. 353–370; Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, vol. 62, pp. 240–288. Despite differences in the details of the variant texts, they all have a recognisable narrative structure in common. The two Noah stories recounted in Knappert differ completely and come from the corpus of tales that have grown up around the central legend. Rather than dealing with the life of the prophet itself, they deal with the building of the ark. Knappert follows the above two tales with an account of the ancient kings of Egypt, descendants of Ham, who were the first builders of pyramids. For a comparative discussion of the variant accounts of the Noah story in the *qīṣaṣ*, see Klar, *Interpreting al-Tha'labī's 'Tales of the Prophets'*, pp. 142–148.

are on the ark. In some accounts Ham approaches his wife despite a prohibition on sexual activity whilst aboard.⁴⁸ At intervals Noah sends out a raven to look for land, but when the water does start to recede after nine months, the bird is side-tracked by some corpses and stops for a snack. When it doesn't return Noah curses it and sends out a dove which returns to the ark with an olive branch, signalling that the flood is over. On finding land, everyone disembarks and Noah laments the death of his people and the loss of his son, Canaan, to God. Adam's coffin is returned to its resting place, and Noah and his surviving relatives set about their lives.

One day, when Noah is taking his siesta in the presence of his remaining sons, his garments are blown up by the breeze, exposing his genitals, upon which Ham laughs. Shem and Japheth are appalled at his disrespectful behaviour and, averting their eyes, replace their father's clothing and berate their brother. The resulting commotion wakes Noah up and, when he is appraised of Ham's transgression, he becomes furious and curses him that all his descendants will be black and will serve the descendants of Shem.⁴⁹

In the final episode of the legend Noah divides the earth amongst his sons before he dies.

The Curse of Noah

With the exception of the reference to the removal of the black stone to Heaven at the time of Noah mentioned above, all references to Noah in *Sīrat Sayf* relate to the episode in which Noah invokes a curse on Ham that his descendants be black and be slaves of the descendants of his brother Shem.⁵⁰ This curse is a narratorial device which underpins the whole Yemeni-Ḥabashī conflict. It is repeatedly mentioned in the early stages of the *sīra*, where it is also elaborated upon to provide an origin tale for the Ḥabashī people, by means of a story related to King Afrāḥ by Saqardiyūn of the marriage of Ham and Princess

48 This is not included in all variants but has been included in the summary here because of its relation to the cursing of Ham, a motif which plays a significant role in *Sīrat Sayf*. According to al-Tha'labī and al-Ṭabarī, at this point Ham is cursed by Noah that his descendants be black. In all cases, there is a second episode in which Ham is cursed by Noah.

49 al-Tha'labī does not mention this episode of the legend at all. As mentioned above, in his variant, Ham is cursed by Noah after he 'approaches his wife' in the ark. Al-Ṭabarī includes both curses, on the basis that the first curse was that Ham's descendants be black, and the second was that his descendants be slaves of the descendants of Shem.

50 For the variant of the Ham story as told in *Sīrat Sayf*, see vol. 1, p. 49. Noah's curse is more usually referred to as 'the Curse of Ham', but I have chosen to keep the wording of the *sīra*, which consistently refers to it as 'Noah's curse'.

Qamar Shāhiq.⁵¹ According to this story, after the death of Noah, Ham travelled through his lands to the court of King Karkār, whose daughter fell in love with him at first sight, entranced by the beauty of his black skin. The two were married, and Qamar Shāhiq handed over the kingdom to her husband on her father's death. It was through the offspring of this marriage that the first half of the curse was implemented:

As for what became of Queen Qamar Shāhiq, she became pregnant, and when the time came she gave birth to a boy as black as coal,⁵² after which, by the blessings of God, she bore a girl as black as the darkest night. Qamar Shāhiq rejoiced and, after a while, she bore another boy, as black as darkest night. When they grew up and sought to marry, the boy married a white girl from the city, and the girl likewise, and their children were black, by God's will. As the months and years passed, all of the people of the city became black and they married their neighbours from the surrounding lands, and they in turn intermarried, until all the lands became black . . .⁵³

The curse is first mentioned by Yathrib at the very beginning of the *sīra* when, after casting the sands and performing various other acts of divination, he informs Dhū Yazan in a poem that one of his line will be the king destined to bring forth the religion of Islam to the world, conquer the lands of Ḥabasha and Sudan, and subjugate their people to the descendants of Shem, son of Noah.⁵⁴ Simultaneously, over in Ḥabasha, Saqardīs and Saqardiyyūn are also aware of the threat that Dhū Yazan poses to the Ḥabashīs through his descendant. Only two pages after Yathrib makes his prediction to Dhū Yazan, Saqardīs tells Sayf Ar'ad that, according to the ancient books, Noah's curse will be implemented by a Yemeni king named Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan, who will go on to gain mastery over the worlds of both human and jinn, and warns that this fate must be averted. It is this advice that prompts Sayf Ar'ad to send Qamariyya to Dhū

51 This story is in the introductory section of the *sīra*. See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 50–52; and Jayyusi, *The Adventures of Sayf*, pp. 18–19.

52 The text here has *ḥajar jalmad*, or 'jalmad stone'. *Jalmad*, as far as I can ascertain, refers to stones of a particular size rather than a particular colour (larger than a pebble, but smaller than a ballista). I have therefore followed Jayyusi's translation in using 'coal'.

53 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 52.

54 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 24. For the text and a translation of the poem, and following analysis, see Phillips, *Bravery and Eloquence*, pp. 146–157.

Yazan with orders to kill him. Unfortunately, the very measures intended to prevent the birth of Dhū Yazan's son (inevitably) end up actually facilitating it.

After Dhū Yazan's death, Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn continue to try and rid themselves of the Yemeni threat. Thwarted in their attempts to prevent the birth of their nemesis, much of the action of the next two subsections is motivated by their determined efforts to prevent the marriage of Sayf and Shāma, which is apparently also essential for the implementation of the curse. These endeavours begin soon after Sayf, abandoned by his mother to die in the wilderness, has been rescued and taken in by King Afrāh, one of Sayf Ar'ad's vassal kings. Saqardiyūn arrives at King Afrāh's court only to discover, to his horror, that King Afrāh has adopted an abandoned infant of highly suspicious provenance with a mole of ominous portent on his right cheek. His fears are exacerbated when, shortly after his arrival, Afrāh's wife gives birth to a baby daughter, Shāma, who has a matching mole on her cheek:

"Know, my King", [said the accursed devil Saqardiyūn to King Afrāh], "That if these two moles on these two cheeks are joined, Noah's curse will be carried out. The blacks will become slaves to the descendants of his son Shem, and the land of Ḥabasha will be overtaken by ruin and destruction, and all traces of it will be wiped out."⁵⁵

Despite Saqardiyūn's urging, King Afrāh refuses to kill either of the children, but instead raises them separately so that they will never meet. However, even as a young boy Sayf's talents as a warrior are evident. He practices jousting daily and unseats all who come against him, even killing those who attack him with hostile intent. The people become afraid and complain to their king, while Saqardiyūn threatens to inform Sayf Ar'ad that King Afrāh is harbouring the child. Rather than cast Sayf out, Afrāh sends him to live with one of the knights in his service, 'Aṭamṭam Kharāq al-Shajjar ('Aṭamṭam, Piercer of Trees', so named for his practice of piercing the trunks of ten enormous trees in his gardens with his lance). 'Aṭamṭam is renowned for his might and prowess on the battlefield, and he takes the young boy under his wing and teaches him all the arts of war. When Sayf reaches the age of fifteen, 'Aṭamṭam sets him one final test, to attempt to pierce the trees himself. Sayf's prowess is such that it puts 'Aṭamṭam to shame and, enraged, he storms at his protégé:

Who knows . . . it may be that you are the one at whose hands Noah's curse will come to pass. Know, boy, that this land is not yours, nor your father's,

55 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 54.

but ours from time immemorial, since the days of our father Ham. Quit our country this instance, basest of scoundrels, and prepare to die if we ever find you here again!⁵⁶

Later, after Sayf and Shāma have, in fact, met by chance and fallen in love, Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn make two further attempts to avert their marriage and the fulfillment of Noah's curse by sending Sayf on two potentially fatal dowry quests (the first for the head of Sa'dūn al-Zanjī and the second for the Book of the Nile). As with their initial plan to avert the curse by sending Qamariyya to murder Dhū Yazan, rather than reducing the threat to the Ḥabashīs, both quests instead benefit Sayf and actually help him on the path to fulfilling it.⁵⁷ Not only does he acquire the Book of the Nile, which will later be essential for the diversion of the river and the foundation of Egypt, but he befriends Sa'dūn (whose head he brings back to Saqardiyūn still attached to his shoulders), and the sorceress 'Āqila and her daughter Ṭāma, not to mention his foster sister 'Āqiṣa, all of whom are important allies for Sayf throughout his following adventures. It is also during these quests that he is introduced to Islam and told of his identity and destiny by an ascetic, al-Jayyād.⁵⁸

The theme of the averting of the curse *per se* takes a back seat when Sayf returns to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' and is recognised by his mother. However, the theme of Sayf as the individual through whom Noah's curse is implemented continues to facilitate the plot, simultaneously enabling and explaining the struggle between the Yemenis and the Ḥabashīs. It is for this reason that its story is repeatedly mentioned and related during *Sayf's* introductory section. The introduction of Sayf as the descendant of Shem through whom destiny is to be implemented against the Ḥabashīs, the descendants of Ham, sets the scene of division and subjugation against which all the later action takes place. Within the first thirty pages, the future course of the *sīra* is laid out, as are the characters of the main protagonists and the nature of the heroic struggle to come. In this context, the way that Noah's curse is referenced in *Sīrat Sayf* not only helps to establish audience expectations, but serves to create tension between the predicted destiny of the infant hero and his enemies' attempts to prevent him from fulfilling it. It is this tension which instigates the action of the *sīra*, in accordance with the universal epic premise that "certain key

56 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 63. The translation here is from Jayyusi, *The Adventures*, p. 22.

57 For the quest for the head of Sa'dūn al-Zanjī see *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 80–99, for that of the Book of the Nile see vol. 1, pp. 99–169.

58 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 102 for this prophecy.

conflicts in the narratives are highlighted by having the forces of divine and human destiny work against each other”.⁵⁹

Furthermore, just as the story of the curse informs audience expectations of plot, it also encapsulates some of the dominant themes of *Sayf*: racial conflict and the use of sexual metaphor in the order-chaos subtext. Partly by using the Noah intertext the narrator of *Sayf* is able to indicate these themes and begin to build on them before the action has even started. The presence of racially motivated conflict (as in conflict between two socio-cultural groups) underpins the plot of much *sīra* literature. It is also a convention that such conflict is fundamentally fratricidal, i.e. that these groups can trace themselves back to a common ancestry.⁶⁰ Generally this ancestral link is gradually uncovered in the course of the *sīra*, in accordance with the premise that “As each obstacle is cleared away on the route of [the hero’s] onward march, so an obstacle is removed in the discovery of the mystery of his birth and his true origin and lineage”.⁶¹ This discovery of mutual ancestry may be read as symbolic of the final integration of victor and vanquished into one social unit. Noah’s curse is of great importance to audience expectations and perceptions of the fratricidal aspect of this conflict. It defines the warfare as racial, reflecting the historical reality in which the *sīra* is grounded, whilst placing the Yemenis in the moral, or religious, right through their descent from Shem. It allows the conflict to be enlarged from a tribal definition to a cultural and global level by presenting all humanity as what is effectively a single tribal unit. This is especially so given that, in *Sayf*’s version of historical reality, all who enter into Islam are equal, brothers in religion. While Noah’s curse has often been used as the basis for arguments for racial superiority, and it might superficially appear to be used as a justification for racial warfare in *Sayf*, this does not hold true from a reading of the text, in which issues of the race or colour of individual

59 John Smith, ‘Scapegoats of the Gods: The Ideology of the Indian Epics’ in Stuart H. Blackburn, Peter J. Claus, Joyce B. Flueckiger and Susan S. Wadley (eds), *Oral Epics in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 176–194, p. 186. This quote is taken slightly out of context as Smith is here discussing the Indian epic, which does not address a monotheistic universe. However, many of the fundamental ideas expressed in this article are universal to the epic form and are relevant to monotheistic ideas of fate.

60 In *The Merchant of Art: An Egyptian Hilali Oral Epic Poet in Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), Susan Slymovics discusses the theme of fratricidal warfare in terms of the ancient familial links between the Hilālī hero Ḍiyāb and his opponents. Norris also touches on the subject in *The Adventures of ‘Antar* and ‘The Rediscovery of the Ancient Sagas of the Banū Hilāl’.

61 Norris, *The Adventures of ‘Antar*, p. 35. He goes on to say “the discovery of the uttermost parts of the earth is at the same time the self-discovery of the hero”.

characters are not in themselves important.⁶² Thus, the emphasis placed on Noah's curse in the introductory section melds the essentially exclusionary concept of racial conflict with the (in *Sayf*) universal, inclusionary concept of *jihād* by providing a subtext on which both can rest. It enables both *Sayf* the hero and *Sayf* the *sīra* to conform to genre conventions whilst manipulating them. The *sīra* genre is one which demands warfare on an epic scale and sharp delineation between the forces of good and evil. The intertext of Noah's curse is a device by means of which *Sayf* is able to transcend both what has been described as the essentially xenophobic reality of the *sīra*, and the distinctions between Ḥabashī and Yemeni, human and jinn, and reconcile them in Islamic unity.

As mentioned above, the use of this particular part of 'Noah' introduces and expresses one further important theme to *Sayf*—the sexually expressed nature of the order-chaos conflict. Noah's cursing of Ham is commonly accepted by Biblical scholars to be based on some kind of sexual crime:

For the Rabbis, and later for the Church Fathers, this passage [in which Ham commits the crime of 'seeing' his fathers genitals] presents several problems. What did Ham do that is implied in the verb "saw"? It is more than just a glance, they reason, because the consequences are so great.⁶³

Although the Islamic sources cite Ham's crime as 'laughing', there is a clear conceptual link between the act of his seeing his father's genitals and his laughter, and the issue of the eye, and sight, as a metaphor expressing sexually based conflict has been explored convincingly.⁶⁴ Furthermore, Ginzberg's

62 Jayyusi has also noted this aspect of Noah's curse in *Sīrat Sayf* (Jayyusi, *The Adventures*, pp. xxiii–xxiv). On the curse as a justification for racial prejudice see, for example, David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003); and Roland Boer and Ibrahim Abraham, 'Noah's Nakedness: Islam, Race and the Fantasy of the Christian West' in Roberta Serman Sabbath (ed.), *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur'an as Literature and Culture*, Biblical Interpretation Series, 98 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 461–473.

63 Gordon D. Newby, 'The Drowned Son: Midrash and Midrash Making in the Qur'an and Tafsīr' in W.M. Brinner and Stephen D. Ricks (eds), *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions: Papers Presented at the Institute for Islamic-Judaic Studies* (2 vols. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1986), vol. 2, pp. 19–32, at p. 23. He discusses the cursing of Ham in some detail.

64 See Alan Dundes, 'Wet and Dry, the Evil Eye: An Essay in Indo-European and Semitic Worldview' in Alan Dundes (ed.), *The Evil Eye: A Folklore Casebook* (London & New York: Garland Publishing, 1981), pp. 257–298.

Legends of the Bible has a more explicit variant than those mentioned in the Islamic sources:

Noah betook himself to the tent of his wife. His son Ham saw him there, and he told his brothers what he had noticed, and said: "The first man had but two sons, and one slew the other; this man Noah has three sons, yet he desires to beget a fourth besides." Nor did Ham rest satisfied with these disrespectful words against his father. He added to this sin of irreverence the still greater outrage of attempting to perform an operation upon his father designed to prevent procreation.⁶⁵

Ham's implied sexual assault on his father can thus be read as having implications of gender confusion: sexual assault on another man, let alone one's father, definitely transgresses the boundaries of sexual propriety as defined by gender. It is interesting that the issue of gender role confusion is present in the sexually expressed conflict of the Ham story given the importance of this trope in the portrayal of the forces of chaos throughout the whole of *Sayf*. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the association of sight with sexual transgression has great significance to the *sīra*'s subtext.⁶⁶

The Sword of Shem

The second major reference to the Noah intertext occurs in the Qamariyya section, after Qamariyya's first attempt to kill Sayf following his return to Madinat al-Ḥamrā'.⁶⁷ Sayf survives but finds himself abandoned in the wilderness and sets out in an attempt to get back home. The first person he encounters on his journey is Akhmīm al-Ṭālib, the latest in a long line of guardians of Ham's treasury inside which is interred the body of Shem. Akhmīm al-Ṭālib, it soon

65 Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible* (Philadelphia & Jerusalem: Jewish Publications Society, [1909] 1992), p. 80.

66 The idea of Ham being cursed with blackness for committing a sin of a sexual nature conforms to medieval Middle Eastern stereotypes about the indiscriminate sexuality of black slaves as expressed, for example, in the *One Thousand and One Nights* cycle. Given that the introductory section in which this story is related in detail is followed by the section dealing with the (sexually expressed) struggle between Qamariyya and her son, the similarities of theme and motif in this episode of the Noah story and the ancient Egyptian myth 'The Contendings of Horus' (for which see chapter 3) are interesting. Both stories are concerned with the attempts of the antagonist to steal the procreative powers of the protagonist. In both cases, the hero is sexually violated by his rival, and in both cases the struggle is linked with the issue of 'sight'.

67 For the episode in which Sayf acquires the sword, see *Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 225–36, and Jayyusi, *The Adventures of Sayf*, pp. 103–111. This episode is also discussed in chapter 3.

emerges, has been waiting for the arrival of Shem's rightful heir, which just happens to be our hero. Ham built the treasury to house not only Shem's body, but two magical items: a talismanic necklace which controls the jinn 'Ayrūd and the Sword of Shem. To claim his inheritance Sayf must perform a miraculous leap between two huge pillars, both set on the top of mountains which span a lake, approach the palace within which the talisman and sword lie and announce himself thus: "I am Sayf, son of the king Dhū Yazan, son of the Yemeni Tuba', son of King Asad al-Bayd, son of King Sām (Shem) the brother of King Ḥām, and my forefather is Noah."⁶⁸ Once inside the palace, he finds the body of Shem wrapped in seven veils and, in accordance with Akhmīm's instructions, recites certain formulae which cause the body to raise its arms, following which he is able to safely remove the talisman, a tablet which hangs around the dead king's neck on a chain. He takes this back to Akhmīm, who sends him back to retrieve Shem's sword:

Set the tablet here before me, and return once more to the palace, for King Shem awaits your return. You will find his right hand sunk back over his breast and the left still raised where it was before. Lift the edge of the mattress beneath his left side: there you will find a sword in its sheath. Then you shall say to him: 'O King, by your leave I shall take this sword, and strive with it in God's cause, and you will have recompense from God.' And if he does not let his arm sink, lift up the sword and gird yourself with it, and return safely to me. Do exactly as I have said, for if you go against my instructions you will perish.

"I hear and obey," said King Sayf. Then he entered the palace once more, and found the dead man's right hand sunk back over his breast and the left still raised as it had been before. So he walked forward as Akhmīm had instructed him and, raising the mattress from under the dead man's side, took the sword and girded himself with it.⁶⁹

But, once having achieved his goal, Sayf is incapable of resisting his curiosity, and goes against Akhmīm's instructions to return immediately:

"What marvel is this", he said to himself. "Does this dead man yet have some breath of life by which he moves? For he raised his hands so you could take the tablet, and then again so you could take this sword. Had he

68 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 230. Jayyusi's translation gives the grammatically correct 'Asad al-Bayda" (Jayyusi, *The Adventures of Sayf*, p. 105 and p. 107).

69 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 232, translation from Jayyusi, *The Adventures of Sayf*, p. 109.

indeed possessed life, he would have been capable of speech; and yet if he had no life, his flesh and bone would have decayed, and I see his body there intact. I must raise the cover from his face, and see if he is alive, in health and safety, but with his tongue constrained from speech; or whether he has been dead these many years, so that only sticks and stones remain of him, and these movements of his spring merely from sorcery and the secret sciences.”

“And suppose, too, that I relate to any I meet, to ‘Aṭamṭam, or Sa’dūn, or Afrāḥ, or other friends, how I entered the palace of Shem, son of Noah, and took a sword and a tablet from him, perhaps one of them will say, ‘Did you steal them, or did he give them to you?’ And if you then say, ‘I stole them,’ you have lied; and if you say, ‘He gave them to me,’ people will say Shem has been dead these many years. I shall not leave until I have looked into his face, to know if he is alive or dead.”

With that he returned and drew near the bed; and he had girded himself with the sword, which was the cause of his safe escape. He lifted the first veil and the second; then, as he lifted the third veil, he was struck with awe. Yet he braced himself and lifted all the covers, every veil, wishing to gaze into the face of God’s prophet Shem. Then the prophet opened his eyes, roaring with rage, and viewing Sayf with eyes like crimson blood, flames and sparks pouring from his mouth.

“Insolent man,” he cried, “basest of Arabs, have you dared, in this place, to unveil the face of the sons of prophets, when they have done you kindness and charity?” . . . Then the jinn servants rose up at him and roared as the lions of the forest roar, so that he could no longer have stood or risen or sat, or uttered a single word, had he not girded himself with that sword; for the servants would have given him the cup of death to drink. The cries grew ever greater, and the servants and guardians of the palace dragged him off and threw him unconscious out of the palace . . .⁷⁰

The principle of heroic inheritance serves partly to create a line of heroic descent designed to enhance prestige. In this case, the intertextual associations created by Sayf’s inheritance of the sword of Shem forges an obvious bond between Sayf and the figures of both Noah and Shem (and, interestingly, Ham whose treasury this is and who has set these heirlooms aside within it for Sayf). At the same time, the role played by the sword in the power struggle between Sayf and his mother also builds on the connotations of Noah’s curse,

70 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 232–233, translation from Jayyusi, *The Adventures of Sayf*, pp. 109–110, with some amendments.

continuing the sexually metaphoric aspect of the conflict between these two characters.⁷¹ Not only does Sayf's inheritance of Shem's sword function in specific terms, placing Sayf in the prophetic line as his chosen heir, it also creates more general, implicit associations between him and 'Alī, thus connecting Sayf directly with the popular tradition of the prophetic heir:

'Alī is also 'coupled' with another ancient *waṣīyy*, namely, Shem, who was the successor of his father Noah. The relation between 'Alī and Shem is demonstrated through a tradition to the effect that some Yemenites, 'survivors from the ancient family of Noah' came to the Prophet and told him about Shem, the *waṣīyy* of their prophet Noah. Upon being asked to mention his own *waṣīyy*, Muḥammad pointed to 'Alī. 'Alī himself performed a miracle by which he raised Shem from his grave, and the latter testified that 'Alī was the *waṣīyy* of Muḥammad.⁷²

Thus, reference to the Noah intertext is established in the beginning stages of *Sayf*. Whilst the sword of Shem disappears from the narrative early on, Noah's curse continues to play an important role throughout the *sīra* even though it is not often directly referred to in the later stages. The majority of the Noah intertext seems to occur during the first section of the narrative, although it is built on by reference to the pick of Japheth during the diversion of the Nile, and Sayf's division of his kingdom between his sons and allies—which has vague resonances of Noah's division of the earth between his sons before his death, given the earlier stress on the curse—immediately before he retires to the life of an ascetic.⁷³

Abraham

The legend of Abraham is one of the longest of all the patriarchal prophets. It consists of several core episodes—different versions of the story may expand on different details and add a variety of material, but there is a high degree of consistency to the narrative in all variants in terms of both tale pattern and

71 As with the curse, the underlying phallic symbolism of the sword has correspondences with that found in the Egyptian intertext. See chapter 3, pp. 172–165.

72 Rubin, 'Prophets and Progenitors', p. 52.

73 Sayf obtains Japheth's pick from the treasury of Hūd, where he also obtains al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad. See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 237.

use of motif.⁷⁴ The story is usually prefaced with a description of the might and power of the infidel king Nimrod. In all variants Nimrod is explicitly connected with the practice of worshipping idols.⁷⁵ The narrative tells of a supernatural warning to King Nimrod of the imminent birth of a child who will be the cause of his downfall and the loss of his throne. Nimrod takes steps to prevent this. However, Abraham's mother manages to bring her pregnancy to term undetected and hides her child in a cave in the wilderness. After a childhood packed with miraculous events, Abraham's father takes him back to the city where he is apprenticed in the idol manufacturing trade, at which he does not excel because of his monotheistic faith. This faith eventually leads him to destroy the town's idols, usually then placing a sword in the hand of the largest of these and laying the blame on it. King Nimrod is enraged and orders a vast bonfire built, onto which the hapless Abraham, whose part in their destruction is quickly determined, is cast to burn alive for his temerity. Divine intervention renders the flames at the centre of the fire cool and Abraham is seen by onlookers sitting in a garden in the middle of the flames, chatting with the angel Gabriel. Nimrod is impressed and acknowledges God, although he refuses to convert. He decides that he must see heaven for himself and has a large box constructed which is pulled by eagles and flies in it up into the sky. Needless to say, the invention is a disaster, and Nimrod plunges back to earth (he does, however, usually survive the experience).

Abraham leaves the land of his birth, meets and marries Sarah in Harran, and then moves on until he comes to another land.⁷⁶ When he crosses through the customs-post at the border he attempts to hide Sarah, for fear that she will be taken from him because of her beauty.⁷⁷ Despite Abraham's efforts, Sarah is discovered and the king (henceforth referred to as 'Pharaoh' following the

74 For the various accounts, see: al-Tha'labī, *Arā'is al-majālis*, pp. 63–88; Brinner, *Arā'is al-majālis*, pp. 124–173; Eisenberg, *Vita Prophetarum*, pp. 128–135; al-Kisā'ī, *Bad' al-khalq*, pp. 204–228; al-Kisā'ī, *Qīṣaṣ wa-mawālid*, pp. 109–133; Thackston, *The Tales of the Prophets*, pp. 136–154; Ibn Kathīr, *Qīṣāṣ al-anbiyā'*, pp. 117–147; Knappert, *Islamic Legends*, vol. 1, pp. 72–82; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārikh*, vol. 1, pp. 142–188; Brinner, *The History, Vol. II*, pp. 48–131; Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārikh madīnat Dimashq*, vol. 6, pp. 164–259.

75 Some accounts of this story play up this motif further. For example, al-Kisā'ī has Nimrod as the first ever instigator of the practice of idolatry, inspired by the suggestion of Iblīs, see Thackston (tr.), *The Tales of the Prophets*, p. 132.

76 al-Tha'labī and al-Ṭabarī have Abraham travelling to Egypt and encountering Pharaoh, as in the Biblical version of the story. According to al-Kisā'ī, Abraham and Sarah encounter a king named Zadok in Jordan. Knappert has Abraham travelling from Mesopotamia to convert the people of Palestine, and the king is unnamed.

77 al-Kisā'ī does not have this motif.

majority of variants) soon comes to hear of her and summons Abraham and Sarah before him to find out who she is. Abraham introduces her as his sister and Pharaoh demands her for his wife. However, when he tries to consummate the marriage, he receives a terrible physical affliction.⁷⁸ All the doctors in the land are sent for, but none of them can cure him. Finally, Abraham tells Pharaoh that he is being punished by God for taking the wife of one of his prophets, and promises to heal Pharaoh if he is given Sarah as payment. This deal is accepted immediately and the affliction removed by God in response to Abraham's prayers. In his gratitude Pharaoh not only returns Sarah, but gives Hagar to Abraham. This episode ends with Abraham and his wives setting out on their travels again.

Sarah remains childless, and eventually insists that Abraham try to conceive with Hagar so that he might have sons. Abraham complies with her wishes, and Ishmael is born. Over time Sarah becomes consumed with jealousy of Hagar and finally demands that Abraham remove her and Ishmael to some other place, which he does, leaving them in the desert near the Ka'ba. The two are soon in danger of dying of thirst and Hagar rushes from Safa to Marwa in panic, trying to find water. God hears her pleas and creates the well of Zamzam. Hagar and Ishmael settle there and are joined by a band of people from a passing caravan.

The narrative then moves on to a time after Hagar's death when Ishmael has married a woman from a local tribe. Abraham pays an unexpected visit while Ishmael is out, receives an unfavourable impression of his daughter-in-law and leaves a cryptic message for his son, advising him to find a new wife. Ishmael does so and the next time Abraham visits he is content with his son's choice. He and Ishmael then rebuild the Ka'ba (which has been lying in ruins since the Flood) on God's orders. (The story of Lot and the destruction of the people of Sodom are interjected here.)

The legend moves on to the story of the now extremely aged Sarah's miraculous conception, and the birth of Isaac. Several years later, Abraham has a dream in which he receives divine instruction to sacrifice his son and he obediently takes Isaac off to the slaughter.⁷⁹ Iblīs unsuccessfully tries to get Sarah, then Isaac, to plead with Abraham and stop the sacrifice. Isaac makes every effort to make the deed easier on his father, asking to be bound tightly to stop his body writhing, and for his face to be turned away so that Abraham does not

78 al-Kisā'ī and Knappert have his hand withering when he reaches out to touch Sarah.

79 There is a long-lived controversy in Islam over the identity of the son Abraham was ordered to sacrifice, Isaac or Ishmael. The majority of the variants used here cite Isaac as the sacrificial victim, hence he is named in this summary.

become overcome with compassion at the sight of it. The sacrifice is averted at the last minute when God sends down a ram as a substitute victim. The final episode of the Abraham legend, concerning the prophet's death, need not be discussed here.

Thus, the legend of Abraham falls into sections as indicated:

- Prophecy / Birth and childhood / recognition of God
- Destruction of idols / trial by fire / ascension of Nimrod
- Sarah's 'marriage' to Pharaoh
- The abandonment of Hagar and Ishmael / foundation of the well of Zamzam
- Abraham tests Ishmael's wives
- Abraham and Ishmael build the Ka'ba
(Story of Lot)
- The sacrifice of Ishmael/Isaac
(Abraham and the angel of death)

The Confession of Faith

Throughout the whole of *Sayf* Abraham's name is used in the place of that of Muhammad in the profession of faith: "I bear witness that there is no God but God, and Abraham is the friend of God", rather than the more conventional "I bear witness that there is no God but God, and Muhammad is his Prophet".⁸⁰ He is the father of Islam in whose name Sayf carries out his crusades and in whose name people convert. The confession is recited by the Muslim forces when going into battle, as the confession of faith upon conversion to Islam, in prayer, in invocations to God for aid when in mortal peril, and in thanks for deliverance from danger.⁸¹ This use of Abraham's name in the place of that of Muhammad may just be a narrative convention. However, the confession

80 Abraham is conventionally described with the epithet 'the friend of God'. There is one incidence of Sayf using Muhammad's name in the confession of faith when he converts Sābik al-Thālath and Damanhūr al-Wuḥsh (*Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 479). This is preceded by a passage in which Sayf decides to pursue a policy of converting his captured enemies. Although a number of characters have converted before this point, these two warriors are the first characters to be converted as part of a policy of *jihād*. The text deals with their conversion at some length. Sayf begins by expounding on the subjects of the unity of God and heaven and hell. He then goes on to predict the coming of the Prophet Muhammad to Damanhūr and Sābik when they question the use of his name.

81 There are occasional variants in the wording of the confession of faith. However, any differences appear to be due to the slightly different oral formulae of different narrators and the essential form remains unchanged, as does the inclusion of Abraham's name.

of faith is noticeably linked to the persona of Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan throughout the *sīra*. This is somewhat inevitable, as he is the primary hero and the character who carries out nearly all conversion to Islam, of which the confession of faith is a fundamental part. However, the patriarchal status of Sayf in this context, in addition to the fact that the profession of faith he teaches the new converts is one in which Abraham is invariably mentioned, cannot but link him with the persona of Abraham in the audience's perceptions. Like Abraham, Sayf is the father of Islamic monotheism in a universe of infidels and idolaters; in his conquest of the worlds of men and jinn, Sayf encounters only a tiny minority of monotheists of any kind, usually lone ascetics. The constant use of Abraham's name whenever God is invoked may be a convention, but this does not weaken the association between Sayf and Abraham. Furthermore, when taken in conjunction with other, subtextual references to 'Abraham' there is a case for reading intertextual reference into its presence.

Dhū Yazan's Rediscovery of the Ka'ba

The first thematic reference to Abraham that can be read into *Sayf* occurs (along with those to Adam and Noah) when Dhū Yazan comes across the Ka'ba during a military expedition to the lands of King Ba'labak. It is, admittedly, slightly tenuous to read it as a direct reference; it is more accidental, but still worth mentioning because of the powerful associations the parallels between the two texts bring to *Sayf*. These rest primarily on the fact that they occur at the point at which Dhū Yazan tries to dismantle the Ka'ba, which Abraham famously rebuilt after it had been ruined during the Flood. After hearing Yathrib's account of the Ka'ba's history, Dhū Yazan is overcome, decides he must have it for himself and orders his engineers to dismantle it the next morning for transport. To his horror, he awakens the next day to find himself hideously swollen and disfigured:

The new day began, and God illuminated it with his light. Dawn broke, and Dhū Yazan awakened from his sleep to find himself swollen to the size of a huge elephant. He screamed to find himself thus, a mighty shriek that resounded all around.⁸²

Yathrib tells him this is divine punishment for his sacrilegious attempt to carry off the Ka'ba and Dhū Yazan repents, revoking his orders. He wakes up the

There is one variant in which the name of Ishmael is included in addition to that of Abraham. This first comes into use in vol. 2, p. 361 and ceases to occur after vol. 2, p. 445.

82 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 12.

following morning to find himself cured and the Ka'ba miraculously repaired, but again becomes consumed by his desire to own it and gives orders that it be dismantled for a second time. The next day, he finds himself even more hideously swollen than before and is forced to repent again. After a third attempt, with identical consequences, Dhū Yazan finally becomes truly repentant and converts to Islam under the guidance of Yathrib. Dhū Yazan then has a dream in which a disembodied voice tells him that he must adorn the Ka'ba with a *kiswa* (the brocaded coverings which were traditionally provided by Egypt to cover the walls of the Ka'ba), which he does. The following night the nocturnal voice returns to inform him that the quality of the material used is not good enough, so he orders it covered in silk. The voice returns for a third night to tell him that he still has not done justice to God's most holy sanctuary. Finally, Dhū Yazan orders that the *kiswa* be embroidered with gold and silver:

The invisible voice visited him for a third time, and said to him, "Clothe the House with something else." When he awoke from his sleep he ordered his vizier to attend him and told him what he had decided. The vizier replied, "Your wish is my command," and Dhū Yazan ordered him to embellish the *kiswa* with silver and gold silk [brocade].⁸³

This time his efforts appear satisfactory and are met with silence, after which Dhū Yazan and his army continue on their way, pausing only to allow Yathrib to found Medina as a safe haven for the Prophet Muhammad in his future time of need.

In addition to being an origin story for the *kiswa* tradition, this episode of *Sayf* can be seen to have connotations of 'Abraham'. First, there is the manner in which Dhū Yazan's designs to tear down the Ka'ba are thwarted—the repeated bloating with which Dhū Yazan is afflicted is one of many examples of physical afflictions inflicted in prophetic legends when God's will is thwarted, but has parallels to that meted out to Pharaoh to prevent him from carrying out his designs on Sarah, Abraham's wife:

When she came into the tyrant's presence, he bent forward to touch her, but was suddenly seized by a powerful paralysis. He said, "Pray to God and I will not harm you." So she prayed for him, and he was set free. Then he reached out for her again, and again, he was seized by the paralysis. And he said, "Pray to God and I will not harm you." So she prayed for him

83 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 14.

and he was released. Then he did the same thing yet again, and again he was seized. And he asked Sarah to pray for him and was released.⁸⁴

In addition to their common transgression–repentance–cure–transgression pattern, there are correspondences in the nature of their transgressions. In both cases, there are two levels of transgression. On a personal level, Dhū Yazan, like Pharaoh, is guilty of giving unchecked rein to his desire for personal gratification (although Pharaoh is, admittedly, unaware of the fact that Sarah is already married, and it could be argued that he is merely misled). On a global level, he unwittingly attempts to execute a sacrilegious act of desecration: greed is not here the sin itself, but rather the catalyst that leads to a greater wrongdoing. In both cases Pharaoh and Dhū Yazan eventually comprehend the truth of God's existence through his protection of that which is his, recognise their wrongdoing and truly repent. There is also a dimension of moral ambiguity surrounding both kings. Although Dhū Yazan and Pharaoh emerge from their trials wiser men, with a healthy respect for the power of the Almighty, they are left hanging in a kind of moral limbo. Pharaoh makes sacrifices to Abraham's God but does not convert, while Dhū Yazan's character, despite his nominal conversion to Islam, remains essentially preoccupied with his worldly, dynastic ambitions. Unlike Sayf, who routinely converts the people he encounters, even before the final section of the *sīra* in which he embarks on an Islamic conquest, Dhū Yazan is not associated with the motif of conversion.

As mentioned above, thematic parallels can be found between this episode of *Sayf* and the rebuilding of the Ka'ba in 'Abraham'. Abraham and Ishmael's rediscovery and rebuilding of the Ka'ba on divine instruction is echoed by Dhū Yazan's rediscovery and adornment of it, also on supernatural instruction. The case for such analogy is strengthened when one examines this event in context. The climactic account of Dhū Yazan's afflictions and his subsequent conversion takes up only one page in the text, but in this particular page Abraham's name is mentioned four times.⁸⁵ He is mentioned nowhere else in the other six pages of this particular story, and nowhere else in the *sīra* is any prophet's name invoked so many times in so short a space. Furthermore, this episode is framed on either side by narrative fragments relating to other patriarchal prophets: Adam, Noah and Muhammad. Again, the concentration of prophetic

84 Brinner, *The History*, Vol. II, p. 63. Not all renditions have Pharaoh's punishment repeated three times, but the inclusion of this version in al-Ṭabarī indicates that it must have been a well-established variation.

85 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 13. He is mentioned twice by Yathrib as the prophet of God, once in terms of 'the ancient book of Abraham', and finally by Dhū Yazan as he converts to Islam.

references in these fragments is unusual in *Sayf* and it is noticeable that one of the primary functions of these fragments seems to be simply to bring mention of these prophets into the narrative. Yathrib's story of the Ka'ba mentions only that it was built by Gabriel and Adam, and that the black cornerstone was taken up to heaven in Noah's time.⁸⁶ Later, Muhammad's name is brought into the narrative immediately after the story of the covering of the Ka'ba, when Yathrib asks Dhū Yazan's permission to found a city called Yathrib in a verdant valley the newly converted army passes through, Yathrib being the pre-Islamic name for Medina:⁸⁷

Yathrib came before King Dhū Yazan and kissed the ground before him, and said, "... I have seen, in the ancient books and histories, and the great epics, that Almighty God will send a Hāshimī Qurayshī prophet at the end of time. His name will be Muhammad, peace be upon him, and he will be the foremost prophet and the seal of the messengers. He will emigrate from Mecca to this good, blessed land, and his house and his tomb will be here. I ask Your Highness the King to grant me permission to build a city here, and to call it by my name."⁸⁸

It is interesting that the names of these particular prophets—Adam, Noah and Muhammad—are presented in the narrative in chronological order. It is even more interesting, in terms of the internal chronology of *Sayf*, that the action (i.e. Dhū Yazan's adventures at the Ka'ba) takes place in between tale fragments relating to Noah and Muhammad, and that events at the Ka'ba insert Abraham into that chronology in the appropriate place and superimpose current events over Abrahamic mythology by creating parallels between the two. Thus, Dhū Yazan rediscovers the monotheism of the Semitic patriarchs with his rediscovery of the Ka'ba. He then follows in the footsteps of Abraham, paving the way for Muhammad, as signalled by the symbolic foundation of Yathrib/Medina. Furthermore, this is done in such a way that Dhū Yazan is associated with Abrahamic mythology in a positive way without actually being directly identified with the prophet himself, allowing *Sayf* to be more closely identified with them later in the text.

86 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 9–10.

87 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 15–16.

88 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 15. Yathrib is the pre-Islamic name for the oasis of Medina, or part of the oasis, which originally consisted of a number of scattered settlements (see R.B. Winder, art. 'al-Madīna' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn).

The placement of this particular adventure only five pages into *Sīrat Sayf* should also be taken into account. Dhū Yazan's encounter with the Ka'ba comprises the first actual action of the entire *sīra*. Given this, it is only to be expected that the narrator will bring in major themes at this point. This would certainly reflect known oral performance practices of the *sīras*, according to which the opening episodes are used by the performer to set up a contract with his audience in terms of both performance style and the interpretational attitude he will bring to the narrative.⁸⁹ This initial episode of *Sayf* brings up the major Islamic theme of the rest of the *sīra*—that of the hero as a patriarchal, prophetic, founding figure—while avoiding over-associating Dhū Yazan with such figures, which could detract from possible later identification between them and Sayf, the primary hero. The significance of this episode in setting up the thematic subtext of *Sayf* should not be underestimated and can only be fully understood in the light of the Abrahamic legend.

The Adventures of Sayf and Shāma Following their Wedding Night Abduction

After Sayf and Shāma are married and abducted on Qamariyya's orders, they undergo a series of adventures consisting of their respective adventures in the Valley of Ghouls⁹⁰ and the Valley of Giants,⁹¹ their encounters with King Abū Tāj,⁹² Sayf's battle with the magicians of Fire Mountain and fortuitous meeting with the magician Barnūkh,⁹³ and Sayf's journey back to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā'.⁹⁴ There are several specific instances of the Abraham intertext in this subsection, which will be addressed first, as well as some general, thematic associations.

The subsection begins on Sayf and Shāma's wedding night, as discussed in chapter 1. Qamariyya persuades Sayf to give her 'Ayrūḍ's *lūh* for safekeeping and orders 'Ayrūḍ to abduct the sleeping couple and leave them for dead: Sayf in the Valley of Ghouls and Shāma in the Valley of Giants. While Sayf sets about annihilating the ghouls, Shāma is saved from execution by a princess and charged with taking care of a ram the Giants worship as a god. She lives in

89 See Connelly, *Arab Folk Epic*, pp. 69–119.

90 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 292–302.

91 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 289–292, and pp. 302–316.

92 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 317–359. (This episode is interrupted by Sayf's adventures at Fire Mountain.)

93 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 337–351.

94 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 361–374. These episodes are framed by repeated abductions of Sayf (and sometimes Shāma) by 'Ayrūḍ on the orders of Qamariyya, or by rescue missions on the part of 'Aqīṣa, i.e. by flights on the shoulders of jinn. English summaries and translations can be found in Jayyusi, *The Adventures of Sayf*, pp. 133–161.

the ram's shrine, caring for it, and gives birth to Sayf's firstborn whom she calls Damar. All goes well until one day Shāma accidentally starts a fire when she throws a candle end out of the window of the shrine:

[The candle end] fell onto a pile of dried sheaves, and they began to burn. [The sheaves were stored] right beside a storeroom filled with oils, and behind this was another storeroom full of wood. The fire jumped from place to place and began to smoke and blaze. A great many elephants were kept nearby and, sensing the fire, they broke their chains and rampaged left and right. The fire spread throughout the dwellings until it reached the city walls and towers, and there was much clamour and screaming. The king (whose name was King 'Āqil, 'The Discerning') rode around, shouting encouragement to his people while they fought to tear down houses and buildings.⁹⁵

The city is devastated, with the exception of the ram's shrine, which remains untouched. Bemused as to why their god is angry, the King goes to the dome in which the ram is kept, tended by Shāma. Unfortunately, he arrives just in time to catch Shāma, who had been tending the ram and mucking it out, beating the unfortunate creature:

Shāma said, "Will God never release me from serving you, and free me from the sight of your face?" and she took a stick and brought it down upon the ram. The ram bleated,⁹⁶ but she took no mercy on it until the King entered and found her beating it.⁹⁷

Her outraged hosts are on the point of killing her when Sayf arrives on the scene, accompanied by Ghaylūna, the sister of the ghouls, who has helped him escape. Sayf is not sure of Shāma's identity as she has been changed by her ordeals but launches into the fray to defend her on the offchance that she is indeed his beloved. After a pitched battle, Sayf and Ghaylūna are captured and imprisoned with Shāma in the ram's shrine to be executed. They blockade themselves in and blackmail the giants into giving them food by threatening to slaughter the sacred ram. Finally, Sayf actually kills it and Sayf and Shāma are rescued from the furious giants in the nick of time by 'Āqīṣa, who appears, seizes them both by the hand, and flies them to safety (the unfortunate

95 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 303.

96 The text has *wa-huwa yaqūlu bā'* ('while it said "Baa"').

97 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 304.

Ghaylūna is not so lucky, and is slain). The giants are distressed at the turn of events and try to persuade themselves that their god has carried their captives off to the heavens. They are reassured by their vizier, who is convinced of the truth of their god by what he has just witnessed and who tells them that they have been sent a divine message:

The King said, “Perhaps [Sayf’s] ascent to the heavens took place because our God is angry with him, and with those who were with him, so He sent them to the heavens so that He could prolong their punishment. Then, if He wills, He will kill them, or, if He so wishes, He will forgive them.”

“My King”, the vizier replied, “This was not an act of anger, but of approval. Perhaps it was our God originally who brought them down from the skies, and after that He wanted to punish them, hence He gave us power over them. And, after this, He took them back [to the heavens] with Him.”

“But they slaughtered God and ate Him!” said the King.

The vizier responded, “O King, do not say that they slaughtered Him. Rather, He is preparing us to witness something, just as we witnessed [what we just saw], and He will observe our devotion. It may be that those tiny people were actually angels who came [down to earth] with Him, and that they acted as they did, and appeared in that form, then He took them and ascended with them to the heavens so that He might be near to His angels and helpers.”⁹⁸

This episode contains several points of reference to ‘Abraham’; the sacrificial ram, destruction of idols and trial by fire.⁹⁹ However, these are all mixed up, most notably in terms of the fact that the fire does not preserve the idol

98 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 316. In a slightly bizarre twist, the vizier then goes on to cite the Islamic profession of faith.

99 This episode has recently been traced back to Chinese sources: “Il est un épisode de *Sayf Ibn dī Yazan* fort significatif... Il peut former un récit indépendant; et, de fait, ce n'est que l'adaptation d'une histoire figurant dans un traité de discipline bouddhiste, attesté en Chine au v^e s. de l'ère chrétienne et provenant d'un original indien encore plus ancien. Dans *Sayf*, c'est l'épisode des *Adorateurs du bélier*. Quant au récit bouddhique, il est extrait du *Tripitaka chinois*, traduit par Ed. Chavannes au début de ce siècle, et dont on trouve une variante, sous le titre *La servante et le bélier*, dans *Les Avadânas indiens*” (Chraïbi, ‘Le roman de *Sayf*, p. 129). Andrea Crudu has also read it as reflecting an African influence in its depiction of the ram as something that must be hidden to maintain its sacred value, a value which is destroyed when Sayf brings the ram out of the shrine and exposes it to the people (see Crudu, ‘Identità e Conflitto’, pp. 80–90). But, I find these readings

but is started by Shāma, and in the fact that the trial element does not correspond with that in the Abraham legend, as the ram is not explicitly and consciously sacrificed as a substitute for the sacrifice of either Sayf or Shāma.¹⁰⁰ This may be because this episode actually owes more to the Ancient Egyptian *Chaosbeschreibung*, which has been described as “not a genre in its own right, but a mode of presentation, or . . . a ‘discourse’”, one feature of which is “the destruction of sacred animals and the conversion of sanctuaries into kitchens for roasting them, or, alternatively, as stables”, following which they are eaten (the significance of the *Chaosbeschreibung* to *Sayf* will be discussed below in the final chapter).¹⁰¹ However, it is worth exploring a reading of this episode through the Abraham intertext. Perhaps the most powerful of the parallels with ‘Abraham’ that can be seen is the motif of the sacred, sacrificial ram which can be seen as a reference to the sacrificial crisis in general and the averted sacrifice of Isaac/Ishmael in particular. In *The Arabian Nights*, Ferial Ghazoul asserts that in Middle Eastern oral literature the ram is a symbol of sacrificial virility “no doubt due to his association with the Qur’ānic narrative of Abraham”.¹⁰² The use of this motif in *Sayf* is reminiscent of the Abraham legend: the sacred ram of the giants is not sacrificed in lieu of the intended victims, Sayf, Shāma and Damar, but it does die in their stead. So, at one level it is substituted for the intended human sacrificial victim as it is in ‘Abraham’. The associations of infanticide that accompany the Abrahamic motif of the sacrificial ram also subtly continue the background theme of Qamariyya’s infanticide which is, after all, the reason that Sayf and his family are in such a predicament in the first place.

less convincing than the correspondences this episode has with the indigenous Egyptian *Chaosbeschreibung*.

100 V544§, ‘God furnishes substitute (ram) for human sacrifice’.

101 John Dillery, ‘Cambyses and the Egyptian Chaosbeschreibung Tradition’, *The Classical Quarterly* 55: 2 (2005), pp. 387–406, at p. 390 and 396 respectively. For more on this, see the discussion of the Diversion of the Nile subsection in the Conclusion below. A similar episode occurs in vol. 3, pp. 105–110, when Damar comes across Madīnat al-Dajāj (‘The City of Chickens’). The inhabitants of this city worship chickens, which they carry around in cages on their heads, while their main temple contains a statue of a giant chicken and twelve chicks which move backwards and forwards across the temple floor according to the time of night or day. Damar knocks down an idol and is attacked by enraged worshippers. In the struggle that ensues, he inadvertently kills a citizen (and their chicken!) as punishment for which he is cast out of the city to die in the desert. Shuhayb, one of Miṣr’s jinn servants, rescues him, and the two return to the city, convert its inhabitants and round all the chickens up to be slaughtered and eaten.

102 Ghazoul, *The Arabian Nights*, p. 98.

The trope of the destruction of the idols is introduced when Shāma takes to beating the sacred ram and is repeated when Sayf and Shāma are besieged in the shrine, at which point Sayf further mocks and defiles the sacred animal, killing and (to add insult to injury) eating it even as he fights off the enraged giants who now invade the shrine.¹⁰³ As in the Abraham legend, this destruction of the idol is linked with trial by fire, via Shāma's burning of the shrine. When Sayf prays to God for help escaping the shrine, 'Āqiṣa appears to fly them to safety. There are thus a series of common elements to be found in this narrative fragment of *Sayf* and Abraham's persecution by Nimrod,¹⁰⁴ "probably the most illustrated scene in the tale of Abraham".¹⁰⁵ The sacrificial trial by fire motif is repeated in a later adventure in this segment, when the magicians of Fire Mountain decide they must sacrifice Sayf in the fire.¹⁰⁶

It seems more than coincidental that the episode following directly on from the encounter with the sacred ram takes as its plot the attempted seduction of Shāma by King Abū Tāj. This narrative fragment has echoes of another episode from the Abraham legend that has been mentioned already in the context of Dhū Yazan's attempt to remove the Ka'ba: the miraculous protection of Sarah from Pharaoh's advances. In *Sīrat Sayf*, Shāma, like Sarah, is introduced to Abū Tāj as Sayf's sister rather than wife, prays when accosted by Abū Tāj and is similarly saved from her would-be seducer three times thanks to God's timely intervention.¹⁰⁷

[King Abū Tāj said to her] "If I wanted to do you ill, who is there who is able to save you from me?"

[Shāma] replied, "O King, do not seek to conquer what is beyond you; do not do something depraved and wicked. Do not abandon good and fall into iniquity. If you intend to do me wrong my Lord will save me from you. There is no God but Him, God, the Almighty King, the Most High, who created man from clay and who determines our destinies and our appointed time."

103 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 312.

104 Knappert's version of this episode in the Abraham legend has Sarah joining Abraham in the fire, and conversing with him. When she emerges she is thrown into the dungeon by Nimrod (here her father). She is rescued from the dungeon by an angel who carries her off to safety in the nearby mountains (see Knappert, *Islamic Legends*, vol. 1, p. 76).

105 Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image*, p. 97.

106 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 337–344.

107 K649.4.3§, 'Wife mentioned as sister: defence against lecherous king'.

“If your faith is so strong,” he said, “And your God so great, then ask Him to save you from me, for I must make you mine.”¹⁰⁸ He pounced on her, intending to ravish her, but she raised her face to the heavens and said, “You who know our innermost secrets, You who are all-powerful, deliver me from this treacherous sinner and from the wiles of idolatrous unbelievers.” No sooner had she finished speaking than God accepted her pleas and Abū Tāj was emasculated.¹⁰⁹ He was jostled about like a baby goat, and fell to the ground, overcome with fear and confusion.¹¹⁰

Although the method of intervention in *Sayf* is somewhat drastic, the basic motif remains the same, as does the underlying theme of the story. It is also worth noting that the motif of the sister-wife is prominent in both ‘Abraham’—where it has historically been a problematic issue for theological commentators—and in this episode of *Sayf*.¹¹¹

Thus, the subsection that deals with Sayf and Shāma’s marital adventures contains a group of structural and thematic allusions to the Abraham intertext. However, ‘Abraham’ also informs this subsection in a more general way which, unlike the other intertexts addressed so far, seem to be spread throughout several smaller episodes. It is possible to read two narrative structures at work here, the first of which can be summarised as follows:

- | | |
|---|-----------------|
| - Adventures in the Valleys of Ghouls and Giants | outward journey |
| - First encounter with King Abū Tāj | |
| - Sayf’s battle with the magicians at Fire Mountain | climax |
| - Second encounter with Abū Tāj | |
| - Sayf’s journey back to al-Ḥamrā’ | return journey |

The subsection can thus be read as having a tripartite construction centred around Sayf’s meeting with Barnūkh and the attempted sacrifice of Sayf by the magicians of Fire Mountain. However, when the narrative fragments which make up the other two episodes are analysed another structure becomes

108 The Arabic has *dajī’atī*, ‘my bedfellow’.

109 Lit. ‘God sent down castration upon him’.

110 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 353.

111 For example, see E.A. Speiser, ‘The Wife-sister Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives’ in Alexander Altmann (ed.), *Biblical and Other Studies* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 15–28. In the case of *Sayf*, this corresponds readily to Shāma’s actual status as Sayf’s foster sister and wife, but the motif is still unusual enough to warrant attention.

apparent. This is a tripartite structure in which roughly half of the stories address order and chaos through the issues of sexual morality and taboo, whilst the other half are chiefly concerned with the balance of order and chaos with reference to religious morality, specifically the issue of sacrifice:¹¹²

<i>Departure (abduction by 'Ayrūd)</i>	
Sayf's adventures in the Valley of the Ghouls	Sexual morality
Sayf, Shāma and the Valley of the Giants	Sacrifice
<i>rescue ('Āqīṣa)</i>	
Abū Tāj demands the loan of Shāma (<i>1st encounter</i>)	Sexual morality & sacrifice
<i>abduction ('Ayrūd)</i>	
Sayf's battle with the magicians at Fire Mountain	Sacrifice
Abū Tāj's attempted seduction of Shāma (<i>2nd encounter</i>)	Sexual morality
<i>rescue ('Āqīṣa)</i>	
<i>Return</i>	

This structure takes Abū Tāj's demand that Sayf lend him his wife for a month as its central episode. Although the primary theme of this second structure is the breaking of sexual taboo, the issue is still the averting of the sacrificial crisis—Sayf must either sacrifice his wife or risk his own neck:

[The vizier] said [to King Abū Tāj], "When the *dīwān* is full and all are present, send for him and ask him [for the loan of his wife] while he is there in front of you. Say to him, 'I want you to lend me your wife for a month, so that I can have my way with her, and then I will return her to

112 All of the stories dealing with sexuality are set in locations where order is threatened by chaos embodied in animal form. For example, the cannibalistic ghouls of the Valley of the Ghouls are the result of a woman having sexual relations with a wolf, a man, and smoke. The use of such animal symbolism seems to be a feature of this segment; the ghouls can only be killed by the feathers of a magical cockerel, and Shāma is forced to look after a ram by the giants. There appears to be a progression, in terms of the issue of sacrifice of a number of animals which are often used to denote certain ideas of masculinity (i.e. the wolf and the lion denote power, aggression and vitality (often, in the case of the wolf in a negative, destructive light), the cockerel symbolises pompous masculinity, and the ram sacrificial virility), culminating in the attempted sacrifice of Sayf by the Fire Mountain magicians. This is a gradual reversal of the substitution of animal for human which underlies the practice of animal sacrifice. Sayf only escapes being the victim of the sacrificial crisis when this crisis has been brought out into the open. For a brief discussion of animal symbolism in Middle Eastern folklore, see Ghazoul, *The Arabian Nights*, pp. 91–108.

you.' If he hears these words he will be shamed into complying, and if he is not this will be the cause of his ruin and destruction."¹¹³

The concern of the second structure with the issues of sacrifice and sexual morality reflects the larger framework of oedipal conflict between Sayf and Qamariyya. In contrast, in the first structure the sexual element is played down, by shifting the central climax of the action to the attempted sacrifice of Sayf at Fire Mountain, an incident entirely peopled by masculine characters, and the only episode of the segment where the sacrificial crisis is not instigated by sexual misconduct. Given the predilection of Semitic religious lore for expressing the sacrificial crisis in a masculine context (Cain and Abel, Abraham and Isaac, to give just two examples), this emphasis conforms to the conventions of Islamic religious folklore. However, the primary preoccupation of this subsection of *Sayf* in both structural alternatives remains the sacrificial crisis—a theme with which Abraham is closely identified. Not only are both narratives concerned with the general theme of sacrifice, an issue introduced through the motif of the sacrificial ram, but they specifically concentrate on the averted sacrifice of the son by the parent and of the wife by the husband. 'Abraham' is defined by its preoccupation with the portrayal of the sacrificial crisis in terms of the family unit: Nimrod, the avenging father, tries to sacrifice Abraham, Abraham (arguably) sacrifices his wife to Pharaoh, he then sacrifices Hagar and Ishmael to pacify Sarah, and his son to pacify God.¹¹⁴ Likewise, in this subsection of *Sayf*, Qamariyya tries several times to have her son and daughter-in-law killed, sacrificed for the sake of her power. Thus, reference to the Abraham intertext at this point serves to keep the underlying issue of the oedipal conflict between Qamariyya and Sayf in play, highlighting both the desperation of Sayf's situation and the implacable nature of Qamariyya's infanticidal drives.

The Exile of Takrūr and Būlāq

There is one later allusion to 'Abraham' that warrants mention, towards the end of the Wedding Quest section. The exile of Sayf's wife Takrūr and their young son Būlāq after they are kidnapped and cast out by al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā' echoes Hagar and Ishmael's abandonment in the desert. Takrūr, like Hagar, is abandoned in the desert with her infant son thanks to a female rival (here al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā') and is rescued from dying of thirst when God sends a miraculous thunderstorm in answer to her prayers and lamentation:

¹¹³ *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 326.

¹¹⁴ It may be relevant that this is the only example of such a 'family' adventure in *Sayf*.

The accursed al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā' ordered her jinn servant to take Būlāq and his mother, and cast them into an arid, rocky valley . . . Takrūr and Būlāq walked throughout the night, until day broke on the two of them, Takrūr carrying her son in her arms. The sun shone and the barren wilderness became blinding, while the rocks and pebbles were as hot as burning fire. Takrūr grew weary and dejected and began to cry. She raised her eyes to the sky, holding her thirsty son, and began to recite . . .

. . . No sooner had she finished her entreaty to God than the skies began to fill with rainclouds. Lightning flashed, thunder pealed, the heavens opened, and torrential, cool rain immediately began to pour. The land and the stones were quenched, and water began to flow between the mountains. It pooled in the low ground and began to fill it, all around, until the water began to form waves like the waves of the sea. A little while later, the clouds lifted, the sun shone on the hills, and all became calm after the storm.¹¹⁵

Mother and son settle by the lake, which attracts animals and sustains them. As in the story of Hagar and Ishmael, they are joined by a tribal group who settle in the area (in this case they adopt Takrūr as their leader until her son comes of age). Both stories then go on to tell of the reunion between father and son. In *Sīrat Sayf*, Sayf and the Muslims have embarked upon their exodus to Egypt and husband, wife and son are reunited in a chance meeting as the Muslims forge their way across the desert. The intertextual reference to 'Abraham' is pressed home by the magical foundation of two wells by 'Āqila and Akhmīm al-Ṭālib to provide water for the Muslims immediately following this story, repeating the stress on the miraculous creation of the well of Zamzam. Sayf is so pleased with the wells that he decides to found his new city, Miṣr, on the spot then and there. Having given out the relevant instructions, he then retires to reacquaint himself with his various wives while it is built.

In this case the Abraham intertext is performing multiple functions. It helps to underline the conventional reunion of Sayf and his family that marks the end of one adventure and the beginning of another (in this case the change of narrative tack from the Solomon's Treasury quest to the quest to build the city of Miṣr and divert the Nile). It also, through reference to the founding of Zamzam, introduces the theme of the provision of water, paving the way for the new diversion of the Nile subsection. Association between Sayf and Abraham at this point implies divine sanction of Sayf's prophesied diversion of the Nile (heightened by the description of Sayf's pleasure in the wells

115 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, pp. 141–142.

being equal to his pleasure in capturing lands for Islam) and promotes the concept of Sayf as a patriarchal religious hero embarked on the fulfilment of a divinely ordained destiny. The further intertextual resonances of Abraham and Ishmael's rebuilding of the Ka'ba should also not be forgotten, given that it is at this point that Sayf begins to build what will one day be the capital city of Egypt. Through use of the Abraham intertext, implicit parallels are created between Miṣr and the Ka'ba, thereby implicitly Mecca, contributing to the *sīra's* rewriting of Egyptian history.

Thus, the Abraham intertext occurs at sporadic occasions in *Sīrat Sayf*. It is established in the very early stages of the *sīra*, is then periodically referred to and built upon in the later stages of the Qamariyya section, and is finally brought back into the narrative during the climactic section dealing with the diversion of the Nile. This material plays a small but significant role in the *Sayf* narrative. Reference to the Abraham intertext takes the form of structural and thematic material and is expressed in a different way to that of Noah—stories about Abraham are not related at any stage of the *sīra*, and none of the various religiously charged relics or heirlooms are attributed to him. It is interesting to note that intertextual references to 'Abraham' in which Sayf figures are nearly all drawn from the first section of the legend cycle, and occur in chronological order (in terms of the order in which the various elements of 'Abraham' are usually collated), while those referred to in the context of Dhū Yazan are introduced in a slightly less coherent manner. This chronological replication of the intertext in the case of Sayf indicates that use of the Abraham intertext, while not necessarily conscious on the part of the narrator, is in fact present.

Moses

The Moses legend is long and complex. The variant texts demonstrate a high level of structural and motif consistency in their accounts of the legend.¹¹⁶ The narrative begins when Pharaoh has a series of prophetic dreams which

116 For the various accounts, see: Khoury, *Les légendes prophétiques*, pp. 1–51; al-Tha'labī, *Arā'is al-majālīs*, pp. 147–221; Brinner, *Arā'is al-majālīs*, pp. 278–414; Eisenberg, *Vita Prophetarum*, pp. 192–240; al-Kisā'ī, *Bad' al-khalq*, pp. pp. 274–315; al-Kisā'ī, *Qīṣaṣ wa-mawālīd*, pp. 242–251; Thackston, *The Tales of the Prophets*, pp. 208–259; Ibn Kathīr, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, pp. 266–386; Knappert, *Islamic Legends*, vol. 1, pp. 104–120; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 1, pp. 220–256; Brinner, *The History*, Vol. III, pp. 1–96; Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, vol. 21, pp. 15–186. The al-Kisā'ī texts include many additional anecdotes concerning Moses' wisdom and miraculous abilities.

worry him deeply. They are interpreted by his advisors as signalling the advent of a child who will bring disaster to the Egyptians. To prevent this, Pharaoh orders that all newborn males of the Banū Isrāʾīl be killed, and that all their men and women henceforth be separated. Despite his precautions Moses is conceived through God's intercession. Following another portentous dream, Pharaoh again orders the murder of all newborn males. In an attempt to prevent the death of her son, Moses' mother abandons the infant in a floating basket on the river. Pharaoh's daughter finds the baby and adopts him as her own son, while his real mother acts as his wet nurse.

One day Moses comes across an Egyptian and a man of the Banū Isrāʾīl arguing. The Jew calls upon him for help, and Moses accidentally kills the Egyptian. He is forced to flee for his life into the wastelands, where he is taken in by a family who recognise his virtuosity. He becomes the shepherd of their flocks, inherits the father's staff, and marries his two daughters. His rural idyll is interrupted when he comes across a miraculous burning bush and is called to prophethood by God. Moses returns to Egypt and tries to convert Pharaoh by doing battle with his magicians and proving his God to be stronger than their magic. However, although Pharaoh acknowledges the power of God, he does not convert, and God sends down seven plagues. The Banū Isrāʾīl then depart Egypt under the leadership of Moses, heading for the Holy Land. When they arrive at the Red Sea the waters part miraculously to allow them passage. Pharaoh and his army, who are in hot pursuit, are lured into the sea by the angel Gabriel, whereupon the waters close over them and they are drowned.

The Banū Isrāʾīl continue on their exodus until they arrive at Mount Sinai, where Moses ascends the mountain and converses with God. When he returns to his people he is disgusted to find them worshipping a golden calf, a sin for which they are condemned to wander the arid wastelands for forty years. Moses leaves the tribes for this period, and travels with only his family. At this stage, stories of al-Khiḍr are usually inserted into the narrative. Then Moses leads the Banū Isrāʾīl to Palestine, where they do battle with the king of Balika, a city on the border. The king attacks the Israelites with snakes (on the advice of a magician), which Moses counters by loosing hungry storks to eat them. Then the king sends out nubile women to seduce the Israelites and sap their morale. Moses is advised by Gabriel to kill the first men who succumb, to discourage the rest. Moses follows his instructions, and the Banū Isrāʾīl are eventually victorious and settle in their new homeland.

After some time has passed Moses' brother Aaron dies whilst they are out walking and Moses is accused of murdering him. The angels carry Aaron's body aloft and bear witness that he died naturally. Moses now feels that the time for his own death has come, gives his final sermon, and appoints Joshua as his

successor. However, when it comes to it, Moses is reluctant to die and returns home, ashamed. He bids farewell to his family and prepares himself for death for a second time, but when Azrael, the angel of Death, arrives he is again ambivalent about the situation. In order to persuade him of the benefits of death, God sends down an apple from Paradise. As soon as Moses smells this, his soul flies up to heaven before Azrael can take it.

The Moses Intertext

Sīrat Sayf contains a number of motifs and thematic material found in the Moses legend, all of which warrant mention, but a concrete Moses intertext is elusive. This is because the entire intertext rests on general parallels between *Sayf* and 'Moses', around which are clustered a number of elements which occur in several of the variant Moses texts, but which are not often fundamental, essential elements of the Moses story. Furthermore, many of these narrative elements are also characteristic of ancient Egyptian stories. The complexities of the intertextual presence of Moses are hard to pin down, and are addressed in the final chapter of this study. In terms of an Islamic prophetic intertext, 'Moses' is approached in this chapter via Aboubakr Chraïbi's discussion of the Moses intertext in his article 'Le roman de *Sayf ibn dī Yazan*: sources, structure et argumentation'.¹¹⁷ Rather than duplicating his work, his article is here used as a point of departure from which to discuss the ambiguities of this particular intertextual presence. Chraïbi's article is about an earlier *Sayf* manuscript, which he refers to as the Ambrosiana MS. Both 'Ambrosiana' and the 1877 edition of *Sayf* appear to follow a similar general structure and narrative direction and almost all of the specific points of reference that he finds are also present in the 1877 edition studied here. One big difference is that in 'Ambrosiana' the diversion of the Nile is caused by Sayf Ar'ad's destruction of the cataracts in an attempt to flood the Muslims out of Egypt, rather than Sayf's deliberate attempt to divert the Nile himself. In 'Ambrosiana' the end result is the same, however, as *Sayf*, with the help of some jinn, digs a trench to catch and harness the waters to his benefit, thus setting the Nile's current course.¹¹⁸ (It is worth noting that both variants are consistent in the use of important, characterising motifs, such as the role of the jinn in building the new river bed and the use of the Book of the Nile). It also appears that there is a relatively high level of consistency between the earlier stages of 'Ambrosiana' and the printed text which

117 *Studia Islamica* 84 (1996), pp. 113–134.

118 See Chraïbi, 'Le roman de *Sayf*', p. 124.

decreases as the *sīra* goes on, as is the case with the BM 4274 Or manuscript. This is most notable in the final sections, which are widely divergent.¹¹⁹

Chraïbi's article finds many parallels between the *sīra* and 'Moses' through comparison of motif, theme and general structure:

L'hypothèse proposée est que la composante étiologique du roman, l'histoire de la fondation de l'Égypte, a pour source principale la légende de Moïse, qui avait, on le sait bien, emmené son peuple vers la terre promise pour fonder un nouveau royaume. À cette fin, on s'intéressa, d'une part, aux changements subis par le personnage historique Sayf Ibn dī Yazan lors de son adaptation au roman, changements qui contribuent précisément à donner à notre fiction une orientation similaire à la légende mosaïque; d'autre part, on citera certains motifs caractéristiques de « la vie de Moïse », présents également dans le roman de *Sayf*, et qui indiquent que ce n'est pas seulement le thème central qui est le même mais que l'épisode biblique a été parfois repris jusque dans ses moindres détails.¹²⁰

His conclusions can be summarised as follows:

1. There is a general reversal of symbolism in the two stories: Sayf leads his people to Egypt whilst Moses leads his away. The water and flood symbolism is likewise reversed; the flood of the Nile in *Sayf* is a life-enhancing occurrence, in contrast to the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea.
2. The initial background situation of both the Moses and *Sayf* narratives is the same in that their peoples are living in a foreign land under the rule of a tyrant.
3. In both narratives there is a prediction by two chief magicians to the evil tyrant that an infant child will implement a curse against the king.
4. The abandonment of the infant Moses and Sayf is identical.
5. Rescue of the infant hero by the enemy king.
6. The marriage of Shāma and Sayf before the move to Egypt reflects the reunion of Aaron and Moses before the exodus: in both cases the reunion of the moles carried by each character signals the imminent

119 For a brief introduction to the status of Moses in Islam, see Duncan B. MacDonald, art. 'Mūsā', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn; and A.H. Johns, 'Moses in the Qur'an: Finite and Infinite Dimensions of Prophecy' in Robert B. Crotty (ed.), *The Charles Strong Lectures, 1972-1984* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), pp. 123-38.

120 Chraïbi, 'Le roman de *Sayf*', p. 115.

implementation of a curse which will result in the downfall of the evil tyrant. This explains the narrative importance given to the entire subject of Sayf and Shāma's marriage, and the stress on his vow to marry no other before her.

7. Like Moses, Sayf is put at the head of Sayf Ar'ad's army in the hope that this will secure his death.
8. After an almost identical beginning, the two narratives then diverge until the exodus, upon which parallels with the Moses story resume, in the diversion of the Nile and the final battle with Sayf Ar'ad.
9. To divert the course of the Nile, Sayf rides his horse where he wishes the water to flow, and it follows him. Exactly the same motif occurs in the Moses story, where Pharaoh demonstrates his might by guiding the Nile waters on horseback.
10. The Book of the Nile can be equated to the tablets of Moses, on which he received the ten commandments.
11. There are parallels between the combat between Sayf and the magicians of Fire Mountain led by Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn at Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' and Moses' conflict with Pharaoh's magicians. In both cases the hero destroys all the magicians except for their two, foreign, leaders, with whom he then fights again.

Based on the above, Chraïbi reads 'Ambrosiana' as a retelling of the Moses story, in which the exodus from Egypt is reversed. He concludes:

Le recours aux données bibliques, et plus précisément à celles concernant Moïse, a fourni les moyens, si l'on peut dire, de faire d'une pierre trois coups: reprendre une trame narrative ayant déjà prouvé son efficacité au niveau de l'imaginaire; neutraliser la mauvaise opinion que l'on a des habitants de l'Égypte et que véhiculent les textes religieux, qu'ils soient chrétiens, juifs ou musulmans, à travers l'image de Pharaon, le roi impie par excellence; justifier et favoriser la conversion des non-Musulmans et, surtout, conforter les nouveaux convertis dans leur choix.¹²¹

Chraïbi's article is in many ways perspicacious, and it makes some good and valid points: it is undoubtedly true that the Moses intertext lends Sayf heroic authority—both figures are sacred leaders who fight for the cause of God, lead their people to a promised land and found communities based on religion. It appears that the Ambrosiana MS differs significantly to the printed text, but

121 Chraïbi, 'Le roman de *Sayf*', pp. 133–134.

I find the general principle of the ‘reverse exodus’ he identifies (point 1) convincing, as well as some of the parallels in the accounts of both figure’s childhoods: the predictions made to the evil tyrant by magicians (3), the rescue of the infant hero by the king (5) and the fact that Sayf, like Moses, is put in charge of the tyrant’s army in the hope of causing his death (7). However, there are significant differences in the abandonment of the two infants (4), and I find the argument that the marriage of Shāma and Sayf reflects the union of Moses and Aaron (6) unconvincing, because it rests on a very metaphysical reading of the significance of the matching moles, which is not an unusual motif in itself. Likewise, on the basis of the information given by Chraïbi, the comparison between the Book of the Nile and the Tablets of Moses (10) seems untenable. Although the Book of the Nile plays a slightly different part in the ‘Ambrosiana’ variant, in which Sayf uses it to “répartir et évaluer les impôts à prélever”,¹²² giving the Book a ‘lawgiving’ aspect, the nature of the law involved, land allocation and taxation, is still linked to authority over the bounty of the waters of the Nile and is fundamentally different to the social law laid out in the Ten Commandments. It may actually fit in more with the *sīra*’s use of taxation and land ownership as a trope in that it is taxation/tribute issues that spark off the conflicts between Dhū Yazan and Sayf Ar‘ad, and Sayf Ar‘ad and Qamariyya that drives the plot. In *Sīrat Sayf* the concept of land ownership and taxation do seem to be linked with the beginnings of social unrest, so it is, perhaps, only fitting that in re-establishing order Sayf sets out rules for fair and legitimate taxation.¹²³

Furthermore, although the Moses intertext does obviously play a role in both ‘Ambrosiana’ and the variant addressed in this study, there are some problems with interpreting it as a *retelling* of the Moses legend. In order to be a retelling, the text must contain certain identifying elements in the form of motifs, sequentially presented so as to promote an essentially recognisable tale pattern, and should also deal with the same basic themes and issues as the Moses narrative. In the case of the 1877 text the choice of Mosaic motif that is introduced, important changes to their narrative sequence, and major differences in the underlying issues explored in the two narratives all combine to undermine such a high level of identification between the *Sayf* and the Moses narratives. To give just one example, Chraïbi finds a parallel between the Moses and *Sayf* narratives in the background against which they are both set:

122 Chraïbi, ‘Le roman de *Sayf*’, p. 124. See also pp. 121–122.

123 See pp. 225–228. Jean-Claude Garcin has also noted the use of taxation issues in the *siyar*, see, Garcin, ‘Sīra/s et Histoire’, pp. 41–43. He is talking here about the unjust taxation of merchants as a trope, as it occurs as a prelude to conflict in *Sīrat Sayf*.

L'introduction de la *sīra* aboutit à une société composée d'Abyssins et de Yéménites, les premiers dominant les seconds, comme les Egyptiens dominaient les Juifs.¹²⁴

This comparison is very broad and, I would argue, is not really thematically applicable to the 1877 text, in which concepts of social and cultural identity in terms of 'insiders' are significant. The Israelites in 'Moses' live as slaves incorporated into Egyptian society. In contrast, the Yemenis in *Sayf* live in their own society, outside the boundaries of Ḥabashī rule. Even when Qamariyya takes the throne, she cannot really be described as a vassal of Sayf Ar'ad as her first priority, which is reiterated time and time again, is to maintain her independence and her throne against him—and any other threat to her power. It is this independence that leads Sayf Ar'ad to send a campaign against her, in which Sayf participates and which brings about their reunion. Later in the *sīra*, while Sayf is imprisoned by al-Thurayyā' al-Zarqā', the Yemeni city of Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' is sacked by Sayf Ar'ad's forces, and the Yemenis are exiled. They are consistently depicted as outsiders to Ḥabashī society. I also do not find Chraïbi's assertion that the two narratives are linked by the theme of escape from an evil tyrant (p. 125) entirely convincing; I would argue that it is more of a trope than a theme in *Sayf*.

One of the most important indicators that the 1877 text, whilst being informed by the 'Moses' intertext, is not a retelling is the incompatibility of the basic premises of the two stories. Although both share the concept of exodus to the Promised Land, the Moses legend is primarily an assertion of patriarchal order, while *Sīrat Sayf* is a much more nuanced and wide-ranging exploration of the optimal balance of the forces of order and chaos. The Moses legend single-mindedly addresses the necessity to defer to the patriarchal power of the father, through the relationship of Moses and his people with the all-powerful, essentially avenging, father figure of God. Thus, the 1877 text cannot be said to be a retelling of the Moses story, on the single premise that it does not deal with the same central issues. The intertextual boundaries become even more blurred when one takes into account the fact that not only does *Sayf* draw solely on the episode of the legend dealing with Moses' exploits in Egypt for motifal content, but, with the exception of the motif of Shāma and Sayf's matching moles, all of the references that Chraïbi describes as Mosaic can be traced back to ancient Egyptian mythological origins, as will be discussed in chapters three and five. For example, apparent narratorial confusion surrounding the motif of the abandonment of the infant Sayf can

124 Chraïbi, 'Le roman de *Sayf*', p. 118.

be explained as resulting from the presence of elements which occur not only in the Moses pretext, but also in the Osiris myth which, to me, gives a more convincing intertextual relationship in terms of the thematic parallels and subtextual resonances.¹²⁵ This is extremely interesting, when one takes into account ideas put forward by scholars such as Jan Assmann about the reliance of the Egyptian episode of the Moses legend on the Osiris myth.¹²⁶ It would appear that, as will be discussed in the following chapter, whilst the Osiris intertext dominates the first section of *Sayf*, the Moses intertext is also drawn in to inform the *sīra* on general, global terms. The apparent narrative confusion surrounding Sayf's abandonment may thus be a slightly awkward means by which the narrator works (whether consciously or unconsciously) two essentially different, but equally important, intertexts into the text. The Moses motifs identified by Chraïbi in the Qamariyya section can be interpreted as being, in fact, related to an older Egyptian mythology which has just as much intertextual compatibility with the *Sayf* narrative in terms of narrative sequence and theme. Furthermore, the collection of Moses motifs Chraïbi finds later in the narrative when Sayf diverts the Nile can, as will be discussed in the concluding chapter below, be identified with a number of separate ancient Egyptian stories.

Although Chraïbi's reading is one that makes many relevant connections and brings out an undeniable relationship between *Sīrat Sayf* and the 'Ambrosiana' text, there is one further problem with Chraïbi's theory that *Sayf* as a whole is a *retelling* of the Moses narrative. He argues that Sayf Ar'ad is the anti-hero of 'Ambrosiana' whose defeat is the climactic moment of the *sīra*, and entirely dismisses the last section of the *sīra*, the hunt for Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn following the death of Sayf Ar'ad, as irrelevant amplification which he traces back to the romance of *'Ajīb wa-Gharīb*. This is problematic. There is a significant difference between 'irrelevant' and 'duplicative' material. The insertion of irrelevant material goes against the theory of self-correction, which is primarily applicable to orally transmitted material but also plays a part in written material which is performed or transmitted as a fluid text, which *Sīrat Sayf* is. If material is in the text, it should, by definition, be meaningful to the story. Clearly, this will not always be the case and, admittedly, the final section of the 1877 printed text consists of a series of repetitious battles in ever more distant lands, but a large segment of the Wedding Quest section is similarly given over to repeated stories of failed romances and doomed marriages: the exploration

125 See chapter 3 for a discussion of the Osirian intertext.

126 Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

of a subject through repeated stories on a theme is a fundamental element of the *sīra* genre. The expanded Hunt section may be a later addition to the story corpus, but this does not mean that it should be dismissed. (In similar vein, in his discussion of the diversion of the Nile, Chraïbi also regards as ‘artificiellement amplifié’ the fact that the fact that Sayf needs seven magical talismans to divert the Nile, whereas the vizier al-Rif in ‘Ambrosiana’ simply orders the jinn to dig out the river course. As the discussion of this section in the final chapter below will make clear, the story may have developed and expanded, but the way it has done so is far from meaningless or irrelevant).¹²⁷ In the 1877 variant, and also in the BM 4274 Or manuscript, the true enemies are the pagan magicians Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn rather than the Ḥabashī king, who is revealed to be a brother through common descent, and this may well be why this aspect of the story has been expanded. The fact that the magicians are the ultimate enemies, rather than the King, Sayf Ar‘ad, does, in itself, correspond with a reading of the Moses intertext.¹²⁸

In conclusion, intertextual reference to ‘Moses’ can undoubtedly be read as present in this version of *Sayf*, in the form of a variety of motifs which have strong associations with this particular prophet. The use of such motifs in the context of its Egyptian setting cannot really do anything but summon up such associations, but the incompatibility of the major themes of the two narratives makes it difficult to state with confidence that this version of *Sayf* is a *retelling* of the Moses story. It may be that Moses did play a more prominent role in earlier *Sayf* narratives and that this disappeared gradually from the evolving *sīra*, but equally it may be that ‘Moses’ provides a general intertext because of the fusion of Islamic and Egyptian connotations in his legend. It seems more likely that in the 1877 text the principle of opposition identified in ‘Ambrosiana’ is a device by which the Moses intertext is brought into the *Sayf* narrative whilst being simultaneously distanced from it. It is interesting that this technique is used with no other religious figure in the entire *sīra*, but it does occur, as will be seen in the concluding chapter, with reference to some ancient Egyptian

127 See Chraïbi, ‘Le roman de *Sayf*’, p 124, n. 25.

128 This may explain the narrative purpose behind the fact that neither Qamariyya, nor Sayf Ar‘ad, are killed by Sayf, not to mention his perplexing opposition to the deaths of both characters and fury when they are killed by his companions. The stress on his lack of involvement in their killing is in stark contrast with the memorable and satisfyingly gory machine that Sayf orders made for the execution of Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn. Having his earlier arch-enemies killed by others is a good way of fulfilling the narrative conventions and sustaining narrative tension; once the hero has defeated and killed his enemy, the story has ended.

figures. Its application here might reflect the use of the Moses intertext to rewrite history and to disassociate Egypt with the unflattering portrait of the Pharaoh drawn in Islamic lore. If this is the case, then the fundamental purpose of reference to 'Moses' in the printed text is consistent with that attributed to it by Chraïbi: if you don't mention Moses directly, then you don't have to mention Pharaoh. This makes history easier to rewrite, blotting out the persona of Pharaoh but retaining the Moses intertext in such a way as to give Egypt a more honourable ancestry from the point of view of the Islamic intertext. In these terms, as Chraïbi finds, the 'Moses' intertext in *Sayf* functions as a device through which the Pharaonic legacy is wiped out, whilst the *sīra* retains the presence of the underlying Egyptian past.

Solomon

Solomon has unique status in Islamic popular culture. He is regarded as the ultimate prophet king, the wisest and most powerful of the four Islamic world rulers, and much of his mythological corpus is devoted to tales of his wisdom and greatness. The Solomon intertext is entirely absent from the first section of *Sīrat Sayf*, but is used to wide ranging effect throughout the Wedding Quest section of *Sīrat Sayf*. All the various forms of intertextual reference previously defined (heroic heirlooms, related tales, and structural, thematic and motif material) work together to create a complex network of referential links between the two narratives. Because of the wealth of material, the points of reference dealt with here are only the most significant.

A vast collection of tales has been built up around the figure of Solomon over time. This has resulted in a fluid narrative corpus.¹²⁹ However, there is thematic coherence to the Solomon tales, the vast majority of which either deal with gender relations or demonstrate Solomon's great wisdom, often through his ability to discern the difference between outward appearance (*ẓāhir*) and inner reality (*bāṭin*).¹³⁰ In addition, there are core episodes that appear in an accepted order in all of the variant texts, comprising the basic legend upon which all the other anecdotes are hung.¹³¹

129 For example, Knappert recounts seventeen stories about Solomon, each of which is an independent anecdote and none of which are biographical.

130 "Special emphasis was placed on his wonderful powers of magic and divination. The most puzzling riddles and the most abstruse subjects were within his ken" (J. Walker, art. 'Sulaimān' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*).

131 For the various accounts, see: Khoury, *Les légendes prophétiques*, pp. 102–180; al-Tha'labī, *Arā'is al-majālis*, pp. 257–293; Brinner, *Arā'is al-majālis*, pp. 482–548; Eisenberg,

The Solomon discourse consists of anecdotes describing the wealth, wisdom and judgement of Solomon, his magnificent throne, his God-given power over animals, the jinn, and the winds (which he uses to transport his vast army through the air), and his military prowess. There is also a corpus of animal tales which elaborate on Solomon's wisdom and humility.¹³² Examples of these often preface the three more developed stories of the Solomon cycle. The first of these is the story of Solomon and Bilqīs, the Queen of Sheba. One day, when Solomon is out on an expedition he sends a hoopoe to look for water. The hoopoe comes across the palace of Bilqīs, a wise, powerful and just queen who rules over Yemen and is half human and half jinn.¹³³ The hoopoe is delayed by this encounter and only escapes Solomon's wrath by telling him of the existence of Bilqīs. Solomon sends the hoopoe back to her palace with a letter demanding her immediate submission and threatening her with destruction if this is withheld. In reply, Bilqīs sends an envoy to Solomon with gifts and several tests, so that she might establish whether he is, in fact, more powerful and wiser than she.¹³⁴ Solomon passes these initial tests, so Bilqīs herself visits him to discover the extent of his might and wisdom. Solomon has her throne, which she has had securely locked away, magically transported to his court.

Vita Prophetarum, pp. 267–299; al-Kisā'ī, *Bad' al-khalq*, pp. 336–360; al-Kisā'ī, *Qiṣaṣ wa-mawālīd*, pp. 279–304; Thackston, *The Tales of the Prophets*, pp. 288–320; Ibn Kathīr, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, pp. 440–467; Knappert, *Islamic Legends*, vol. 1, pp. 124–167; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 1, pp. 287–296; Brinner, *The History, Vol. III*, pp. 152–175; Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dīnashq*, vol. 22, pp. 230–299.

- 132 That is to say, tales in which Solomon interacts with animals. The story of Solomon's encounter with the king of the ants (Knappert, *Islamic Legends*, vol. 1, pp. 156–158, for example), and his slaughter of his horses (al-Tha'labī, *Arā'is al-majālis*, pp. 268–269) are two of the most well known examples of such stories.
- 133 al-Kisā'ī and Knappert give accounts of how Bilqīs, the daughter of a vizier and a jinn princess came to the throne by marrying and murdering the unjust and corrupt king of Sana'a, after which she was made queen to popular acclaim. According to al-Tha'labī, she was the daughter of the king of Yemen and a jinn princess. Despite the lack of agreement on her genealogy, there is a common consensus that she ruled over the land of Yemen. This may well reflect the Yemeni oral traditions surrounding a number of powerful and influential Yemeni queens. See Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).
- 134 The tests vary, but are all concerned with the ability to discern inner differences in things that are outwardly identical, and are usually sexually or gender charged. One of the most commonly used variants is that in which Bilqīs sends a group of young men and women, dressed in such a way that their gender is made obscure, and asks Solomon to identify male from female (without resorting to removing their apparel). Another commonly cited test is that in which Solomon is asked to thread a pearl without removing it from its locked container.

When she arrives he shows it to her and asks if it is indeed hers, to which Bilqīs replies, wisely, that it appears to be.¹³⁵ She presents the king with a series of riddles, all of which he solves. Solomon then orders the jinn to build a castle for him to receive Bilqīs in. The jinn are afraid that Solomon will marry Bilqīs, who they have heard is half jinn, and that he might then have a son who will be part jinn, as a result of which they would always be enslaved to his descendants. Having heard that Bilqīs has cloven feet and exceptionally hairy legs as a result of her jinn heredity, they build a palace with a polished floor that shines like water in the hope that she will raise her skirts when she crosses the floor, thus revealing her legs and dampening Solomon's ardour. Bilqīs is, in fact, tricked by the floor and raises her skirts to reveal hairy but human ankles. When she realises that she has been tricked, she surrenders to Solomon, who orders her legs depilated. Bilqīs and Solomon then marry, and she returns to Yemen, where he visits her for a certain amount of time each year.¹³⁶

The story of Solomon and Bilqīs is usually followed by the story of Solomon and Jarada. Solomon embarks on a military campaign against a foreign king. The king is killed, and Solomon falls in love with his beautiful daughter, Jarada, and marries her after she has reluctantly converted to Islam. Jarada remains sad over the loss of her father and asks Solomon for a statue of him to be built for her quarters. When the statue is built, the queen clothes it, and she and her slave girls bow down to it, as they used to bow to their king. Shocked by

135 "The question is carefully constructed. She will fail the test and lose the game whether she answers affirmatively or negatively. Should she respond that it is not, she would proclaim herself a proper ruler with an authentic symbol of authority safely locked in her palace. However, Solomon could then expose her folly were she challenged to produce her throne. Were Bilqīs to accept that the disguised throne is indeed hers, she will have acknowledged that the prophet possesses the very object that gives her license to rule. If nothing else, this queen is extremely perceptive. She seems to grasp the essence of his ploy, and so . . . she responds evasively: maybe it is and maybe it is not. The game is still on" (Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 82).

136 The issue of Bilqīs' marriage is a little problematic, in terms of a composite summary of the story, as the various texts diverge significantly on this point. The story of Solomon and Bilqīs is one of the most popular and well known in Islamic culture, but accounts differ on the issue of Bilqīs' marriage at the resolution of the tale. Some have Solomon marry Bilqīs, whilst, according to al-Ṭabarī and al-Tha'labī, she is turned down by Solomon, who deems her unworthy, and is, somewhat unwillingly, married to a lesser king, Dhū Tubba', who returns to Yemen with her. The summary above takes the ending given by Kisā'ī and Knappert primarily because the story of Bilqīs and Solomon as told in *Sayf* has them as husband and wife.

this idolatry, the vizier Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā, criticises the prophet publicly in a sermon. Solomon is initially outraged but when Āṣaf explains the situation he sees the error of his ways. The statue is torn down, Jarada is punished, and Solomon dresses in garments of purification and goes out into the desert to do penance. Because of his sin, God causes Solomon to lose his ring of power to a jinn, Ṣakhr, who takes on his appearance. Solomon is cast out, unrecognised and reviled, to wander his lands for forty days, a duration equal to the period of time Jarada practised idolatry in his palace. In the meantime Ṣakhr rules in his stead, causing consternation with his unusual and un-Islamic behaviour. After the forty days, the demon flies off and drops the ring into the sea, where it is swallowed by a fish. The fish is caught by a fisherman and given to Solomon to eat, whereupon he finds the ring, returns to court, and is recognised. Solomon's first act on regaining his throne is to have Ṣakhr imprisoned in stone for the rest of time.

The legend then ends with an account of Solomon's death: during his reign, Solomon set the jinn to building the mosque of Jerusalem. Every day Solomon goes to the temple to supervise the building. Unfortunately, before the mosque is completed, Solomon dies. However, his soul leaves his body so gently that he remains standing, propped up by his wooden staff, for an entire year. During this time everyone thinks he is still alive, and the jinn continue to work day and night, terrified of incurring his wrath. When the mosque is finished, the prophet finally falls to the floor, his staff having been eaten away by a single worm.

The basic Solomon legend is thus defined by four specific elements; the initial demonstration of the king's wisdom and might, his battle of wits with the Queen of Sheba, the loss of his throne to the jinn Ṣakhr, and his death whilst building the mosque of Jerusalem.

The Sword of Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā

There are abundant references to Solomonic mythology throughout the Wedding Quest section of *Sayf*, which dominate the intertextual background through sheer volume, if nothing else. Further to this liberal scattering of motifs, there are three specific occasions of special intertextual import which are informed by a multi-faceted web of reference to 'Solomon'. One of these occurs in the form of an heroic heirloom, the sword of Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā, which is obtained by Sayf early on in the Wedding Quest section, shortly after he sets out on his journey to the Treasury of Solomon.¹³⁷ Although the actual

137 See *Sirat Sayf*, vol. 2, pp. 252–280 for this adventure. The sword has been mentioned earlier in this chapter.

quest for this sword is short and appears to be somewhat incidental to the action, this heirloom plays a significant role throughout the rest of the *sīra*, and is mentioned frequently. As with the sword of Shem, the weapon has been carefully hidden away and a guardian left over it to ensure it falls into the rightful owner's hands. On this occasion, the donor figure has even taken the trouble to have the sword inscribed with a dedication to its future owner:

"You will find a large chest in the middle of the room, made of *'ar'ar* wood¹³⁸ inlaid with red gold, with four chains of silver", Takrūr told him, and Sayf brought it to her after he had struck off the four chains. He wanted to open the chest, but he couldn't find out how it opened because it was different on each side. He was amazed by this, and said to Takrūr, "O Daughter of Shaybān, how do I open it?"

"Recite your lineage, and you will see something astonishing," she responded. So he recited his lineage over the chest, and suddenly the chest turned to the right and opened in front of him. King Sayf looked in and saw a mighty sword in a wooden sheath¹³⁹ of unequalled beauty. He took it and drew the sword from its sheath. He grasped it and took a swing, and found it to be sharp and keen, and its blade caught the light. When he swung it to his right, seven flashes of lightning flew out from it. [Sayf] was overjoyed, He turned it over in his hands and he saw that written upon it were the words, "This is a gift from Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā to King Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan".¹⁴⁰

From this point onwards, the sword of Āṣaf replaces that of Shem. This second weapon is extremely powerful, being specifically designed for killing jinn (which are destroyed by the beams of lightning that shoot out from the blade), but is also invaluable for testing the *islām* (submission to God) of converts, not to mention the destruction of magic charms and talismans.¹⁴¹ Although the tangible benefits of the sword of Āṣaf are obviously so great as to justify

138 According to *Lisān al-'Arab*, the *'ar'ar* tree is otherwise known as *al-sāsam* or *al-shayza* and it is used to make pitch. According to other accounts, it is a tall, evergreen mountain tree otherwise known by the name of *al-fursh al-sarw*. Its fruit starts off green, then goes white, then black, and they are good to eat.

139 Although I have used 'sheath', the text has *jafīr*, which usually describes a wooden quiver, without any leather; or of leather, without any wood (see *Lisān al-'Arab*, Kazimirski's *Dictionnaire* and Lane's *Lexicon*).

140 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 268.

141 For example, immediately after obtaining the sword, Sayf uses it against an enemy, Abū Hāyisha. Not only does the sword destroy a magical fire-breathing, elephant-like creature

Sayf's jettison of his previous sword in its favour, there is a further significance to this replacement that relies on the symbolic association of the weapons with their two respective prophets. Just as Shem's sword functions partly as a metaphor encapsulating the oedipal struggle between Qamariyya and Sayf, there is a symbolic aspect to the sword of Āṣaf that is acquired by Sayf in the *sīra's* second section. The progressive, implicit identification of Sayf with both Shem/Noah and Āṣaf/Solomon through the device of the sword signals his changing persona. Whereas in the Qamariyya section Sayf's heroic identity is very strongly tied up with his role as the outcast son of Dhū Yazan, desperately fighting his unnatural mother for his life, his throne (and heroic status) and destiny, his persona in the Wedding Quest section is very different. By this stage Sayf's heroic identity is (at least temporarily) realised and secure. The struggle he faces is no longer oedipally expressed, but is now characterised by a different kind of gender conflict, a theme which dominates both the Wedding Quest section of *Sayf* and the legend of Solomon:

The game of wits between God's Vice Regent and the ruler of all the Yemen will be emblematic of the joust between man and woman. At a more cosmic level, the major test that Bilqīs has prepared signifies an attempt to disrupt if not reverse God's design by deliberately confusing gender, the most identifiable marker of natural order.¹⁴²

The reference becomes more finely honed through the specific association of his inherited sword with the figure of Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā. Āṣaf is strongly identified with the episode of the legend in which Solomon temporarily loses his throne to the jinn Ṣakhr, as a direct result of permitting his wife, Jarada, to worship an idol.¹⁴³ As in the case of the Bilqīs episode of the Solomon legend, this episode is a metaphorical discussion of the control of the forces of order and chaos through the theme of gender conflict; in this case it is inappropriately handled by Solomon and the forces of chaos are unleashed, in the form of Ṣakhr, until the prophet acquires the necessary wisdom to regain his throne. Such neat intertextual analogies of both theme and means of expression between the Solomon legend and the Wedding Quest section of *Sayf* make the sword of Āṣaf an effective metaphor of the main issues of this section of

produced by his enemy, but, simply by drawing it from its sheath, Sayf is able to defeat all the other charms of Abū Hāshiya with the light of its blade. See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 286.

142 Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, p. 79.

143 On this, see M.O. Klar, 'And We cast upon his throne a mere body: A Historiographical Reading of Q. 38: 34', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 6: 1 (2004), pp. 103–126.

the *sīra*, performing a narrative function identical to that of the sword of Shem in the previous section whilst, through internal intertextual reference to the earlier sword, providing a sense of continuity and progression to the *sīra*.

The Quest to Solomon's Treasury

There is also a complex web of references, in the form of related tales, heroic heirlooms, and motif and thematic material, surrounding 'Ayrūd's wedding quest to Solomon's Treasury and the following trials he is set by his reluctant intended. The quest is instigated when 'Āqiṣa, determined to extricate herself from an unwanted marriage to 'Ayrūd, requests Bilqīs' bridal clothes from the Treasury of Solomon as her dowry:

Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan said, "Āqiṣa, tell me what you request," and she replied, "I ask of 'Ayrūd the crown, the diadem, the belt and the bejewelled wedding dress which the Lady Bilqīs wore when she married the prophet Solomon, son of David. If he is capable of bringing me these things, I will be forever in his service, and I will be his bedfellow and hear and obey."¹⁴⁴

The entire court is shocked and dismayed by this request, as it is well known that the Treasury is closely guarded by a fearsome contingent of the jinn, appointed by the great king himself, who are under orders to eliminate any would-be intruders. Despite all their efforts to dissuade her, 'Āqiṣa remains adamant that she will not marry without these gifts and, amid much lamentation, 'Ayrūd departs on his quest, only to be captured and tortured by the jinn as soon as he arrives at the Treasury. When Sayf eventually realises that 'Ayrūd is in trouble he sets out to rescue both him and the dowry. After many diverting adventures on the way, he eventually reaches the mountain on which the Treasury is situated, and spends the night by a pool containing mechanised brass fish, which, he is told by a jinn, were made by Solomon to adorn a palace he built for Bilqīs.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, pp. 185–186.

¹⁴⁵ For the story of the creation of these fish, see *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, pp. 405–408. The motif of Solomon building palaces for Bilqīs is a common one in Middle Eastern popular literature; "Solomon is further said to have built three great palaces for Bilqīs, namely Salhin, Ghumdan and Baynun, all in the Yemen, and to have built that of Baalbek as her dowry. The building was carried out by demons" (W. Montgomery Watt, 'The Queen of Sheba in Islamic Tradition' in James Pritchard (ed.), *Solomon and Sheba* (London: Phaidon, 1974), pp. 85–103, p. 101).

When Sayf finally makes it to the Treasury the next morning, he discovers that his arrival has been prophesied by Bilqīs, who, cognisant of Sayf's future need of her clothing, has left instructions that he be informed how to open the Treasury. Once the dress and crown have been retrieved and 'Ayrūd rescued, the two companions set out on their return journey, pausing only to allow 'Ayrūd to wash his wounds in the pool of brass fish, which has miraculous healing powers. 'Āqīṣa, however, is far from impressed when Sayf and her suitor return with her dowry, and flounces off to the Qāf mountains saying that she refuses to marry a slave, and an incompetent who has to be rescued.

It is immediately apparent that all the direct intertextual reference to 'Solomon' during the Treasury Quest subsection is exclusively made to the story of Solomon and Bilqīs, on one level the Islamic stereotype of the perfect royal couple. Their story, like that in which Solomon loses his throne, explores the optimum balance of the forces of order and chaos through gender conflict.¹⁴⁶ As in the case of the 'Āṣaf's sword' motif, the Solomon-Bilqīs intertext is used throughout the Treasury Quest subsection to heighten general narrative tension and reflect general themes. At the same time, direct reference to the Solomon-Bilqīs intertext is restricted to episodes which deal directly with the relationship between 'Ayrūd and 'Āqīṣa and Sayf's attempts to bring about their marriage, creating links between the two relationships.

The Bilqīs intertext is first introduced via the dowry quest for her crown and wedding robes. These objects are essential symbols in which the basic elements of the gender/power struggle of the legendary romance are embodied. Bilqīs' crown, like her throne, which is so frequently alluded to in the Solomon

146 "By the Middle Ages, the main focus of the queen's visit had shifted from international to sexual politics and from diplomatic relations to the more complicated relations between men and women. That is, in its post biblical and Islamic versions, the queen's joust with Solomon was portrayed as a dangerous attempt to subvert time-honoured rules of gender... Any such attempt to alter nature's equilibrium was perceived as an obvious threat to all of mankind" (Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, p. 1). His discussion and comparison of various medieval (and modern) accounts of the legend, in an attempt to discern the universal and culturally specific aspects of the legend, support this interpretation of the legend-core and cast some interesting light on particular variant texts, including that of al-Tha'labī. James Pritchard (ed.), *Solomon and Sheba* (London: Phaidon, 1974) includes an article on the Bilqīs legend in Ethiopian religious mythology which is extremely interesting in terms of the issue of gender conflict in *Sayf* and the question of the Ethiopian intertextual presence in the narrative; see Edward Ullendorf, 'The Queen of Sheba in Ethiopian Tradition' in James Pritchard (ed.), *Solomon and Sheba* (London: Phaidon, 1974), pp. 104–114.

legend, is an obvious symbol of power and sovereignty.¹⁴⁷ The motif of Bilqīs' wedding gown can only be read as symbolising the maintenance of the natural order through the institution of marriage, given its connection with the figure of Bilqīs who, as Lassner points out, has "two unnatural failings: she spurns the natural state of marriage and obeisance to man".¹⁴⁸ In addition to the connotations of the heirlooms themselves, their introduction into the text as objects of a dowry quest brings to the text of *Sayf* immediate echoes of the riddles set to Solomon by the Queen of Sheba, another kind of marital test. Coincidentally, 'Āqīṣa's demand for these objects marks the point of the *sīra* at which her persona undergoes a sudden and drastic change. Henceforth she ceases to be the protective and loyal supernatural helper of the Qamariyya section and, like the Queen of Sheba, takes on chaotic and dangerous characteristics which must be neutralised through marriage in order to prevent the destruction of the natural order.¹⁴⁹ The use of the motifs of the crown and wedding dress is two-dimensional. On the one hand the presence of two such symbols of male power and female subjugation to the patriarchy draws on the theme of the beneficial union of order and chaos. However, the fact that these symbols are connected primarily with the figures of Bilqīs and 'Āqīṣa (for whom the crown and gown are a precondition of marriage) who are both powerful, potentially chaotic, female figures in their own right, speaks to the related theme of the potential threat of unchecked female power, the actualisation of which is a threat to the fabric of the patriarchal universe of the *sīra*. The juxtaposition of these two themes informs the audience that this marriage will only be achieved with great difficulty.

The introduction of these motifs at the beginning of the Wedding Quest section through the device of 'Āqīṣa's dowry demand thus acts as a plot facili-

147 "Of all the implements that became symbols of Solomon's authority, none, including perhaps the signet ring, received such prominence in so wide a variety of cultures as did his legendary throne. That she [Bilqīs] too possesses a magnificent throne foreshadows the impending conflict between them and his need to obtain her most prized possession" (Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, p. 77).

148 Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, p. 77.

149 "The epic world is essentially a male world: performance is normally both by and for men, and epic attitudes towards sexuality consequently reflect men's attitudes. The pattern which emerges from the narratives reveals a powerful sexual fear; women as mothers are strong and courageous, as are many sisters and wives; celibate women and widows are dangerous and often destructive" (John Smith, 'Scapegoats of the Gods: The Ideology of the Indian Epics' in Stuart H. Blackburn, Peter J. Claus, Joyce B. Flueckiger and Susan S. Wadley (eds), *Oral Epics in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 176–194, at p. 188).

tator in much the same way that Noah's cursing of Ham does in the first section. It launches Sayf on a quest to save 'Ayrūd by providing a rationale for the action itself, but it also helps to establish a new set of audience expectations of both 'Āqīṣa's behaviour and the subtextual theme of this second section of the *sīra*: Sayf's struggle to achieve a metaphorical marriage of order and chaos. Furthermore, it also suggests the action to come, indicating that 'Āqīṣa, like Bilqīs, must be incorporated into the natural order, and that this will be done through her marriage to 'Ayrūd. However it must be stressed that the use of the Bilqīs intertext to inform the relationship between 'Ayrūd and 'Āqīṣa is not an end in itself, but rather the means by which Sayf's struggle to achieve a metaphorical marriage of order and chaos is highlighted. Throughout this section, 'Ayrūd appears as little less than Sayf's creature or alter ego, little more than a pawn in the conflict between Sayf and 'Āqīṣa. This creates an ambience in which Sayf, in the guise of helper or companion, is perceived as the dominant participant. To this end, the spurned lover's quest to the Treasury is first and foremost a plot device which facilitates Sayf's own journey and, as such, is given the bare minimum of narrative attention.¹⁵⁰ When Sayf finally arrives at the locale of Solomon's Treasury, he discovers that *his* need of the dress and crown, rather than 'Ayrūd's, has been anticipated and that the queen has actually left instructions with the Treasury's guardians to help him retrieve them:

Kayhūb told him, "If you speak the truth, then your desires will be fulfilled without obstacle, for the Lady Bilqīs, when she placed these garments in the Treasury, entrusted us with their care and told us, "Protect these garments until a stranger comes to you, travelling far from his lands and people. You will find him short and pale skinned, and he will have a green mole on his right cheek and be girded with various swords. He will tell you that his name is Sayf ibn Tubba' ibn Hassān, and his lineage goes back to the Ḥimyar. Give him the gown, for I bequeath it to him as it is the finest thing in the Treasury that I own."¹⁵¹

The device by which Sayf gains entry to the Treasury, the recitation of his lineage, further serves to identify him, rather than 'Ayrūd, with the quest (as does Bilqīs' explicit reference to Sayf's swords, which brings the Sword of Shem back into intertextual play here). This association of Sayf rather than 'Ayrūd with the Solomonic subtext is strengthened as the section continues. Soon after the objects have been retrieved from the Treasury, they are stolen from

150 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, pp. 191–194.

151 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 411.

‘Ayrūd by another jinn, only to be found again by Sayf during his encounter with al-Thurayyā al-Ḥamrā’. Furthermore, almost simultaneously with ‘Ayrūd’s loss of the garments, Sayf loses Āṣaf’s sword when ‘Āqīṣa, furious with Sayf for his support of her unwanted suitor, steals it from him in a fit of pique while he sleeps and flings it into the sea, just as Solomon’s ring of power was cast into the waters.¹⁵² This, admittedly small, episode is reminiscent of the conflict between Sayf and Qamariyya in the previous section, in which the theft of ‘Ayrūd’s talisman and the metaphor of the sword were important motifs, and helps to create associations between the order-chaos struggle being enacted in the second section of the *sīra*, and that between Sayf and Qamariyya in the first section. These are then tied in to the Solomon intertext when the sword later turns up in the hands of a jinn who is patiently waiting, perched on a large stone column planted in the middle of the sea, provided by Āṣaf in anticipation of Sayf’s future hour of need:

On the eighth day [of drifting, lost in the sea, Sayf] saw a tall pillar of stone in front of him, rising from the shore, and on top of it was a tall tower which emanated a dazzling light. Sayf’s boat was drawn towards it, by God’s will, and when he drew near to it there was someone sitting at the top of the pillar, calling out, “Welcome, King Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan.” With that, King Sayf turned towards him and shouted to him, “From where do you know me?”

“O King, I have never met you before, but I have a rendezvous with you, and you with me, settled a long time since,” came the reply.

“How can that be?” Sayf asked. The stranger replied, “The reason is a strange and happy one. Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā, the vizier of Lord Solomon, had made a sword of Yemeni steel and enchanted it against the jinn, and inscribed it with talismanic charms and proofs. He knew that it was destined, after a long time, to be possessed by a man called Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan of *tubba’ī* descent, and this person is you, O King of the Age. When he discovered this, he created the sword in your name, and God’s prophet Solomon said to him, “I know that it is inevitable that the sword will fall in the sea because of enmity and strife.” And after he learned this, he ordered the jinn to bring this pillar from Jabal Marmar¹⁵³. . . [and when it was built Solomon instructed me to wait on this pillar, and commanded my brother to bring me the sword when it was cast into the sea] then instructed me, “When you see a man approaching this place, travelling in

152 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, pp. 430–431.

153 A mountain in Yemen, near Sana’a, *marmar* generally refers to white marble or alabaster.

a wooden boat filled with fruit, know that this is the king of prediction, so greet him kindly and tell him that he is surely the [rightful] owner of the sword . . .”¹⁵⁴

Despite the fulfilment of ‘Āqīṣa’s dowry demand, ‘Ayrūd and ‘Āqīṣa’s marriage is not achieved until the very end of the Wedding Quest section. ‘Āqīṣa remains stubbornly opposed, in the face of all efforts to persuade her, until ‘Ayrūd defeats the mighty *mārid* al-Samīdha’, one of two fearsome jinn that, according to *Sīrat Sayf*, were imprisoned by Solomon within pillars of stone in Bilqīs’ palaces. Hearing that he has proved himself in single combat:

‘Āqīṣa arrived, laughing and full of joy, saying, “I will have no one but ‘Ayrūd.” She went before King Sayf and all of his advisors who were all gathered, including Hudhād and ‘Āqīla. When she approached, King Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan asked, “What do you want to say, ‘Āqīṣa”, and she replied, “O King, I will marry ‘Ayrūd.”

“You say that you wish to marry ‘Ayrūd,” said King Sayf, “If it is indeed your desire to marry him, then say ‘I will marry no one but ‘Ayrūd’ to me three times so that I can carry out my oath [to marry you two].” Then ‘Āqīṣa stood before the assembled company of witnesses and said “Bear witness, all who are present, that I will marry no one but ‘Ayrūd,” and she said that three times.¹⁵⁵

Al-Samīdha’ embodies the destructive aspect of chaos and his defeat by ‘Ayrūd mirrors his previous subjugation by Solomon, who had literally imprisoned him in the fabric of which his society was built. In *Sayf* the defeat of al-Samīdha’ facilitates the marriage of ‘Āqīṣa, likewise symbolic of the incorporation and subjugation of the forces of innovative chaos. This marriage also marks the end of the Solomon intertext in the *sīra* and the beginning of the final section of the narrative, the hunt for Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn, in the course of which the entire world is incorporated into Sayf’s Islamic empire.

The Diversion of the Nile

The diversion of the Nile takes place towards the end of the Wedding Quest section, but before ‘Ayrūd and ‘Āqīṣa’s marriage.¹⁵⁶ After founding the city of Miṣr, Sayf realises that more water is needed, and ‘Āqīla reminds him of the

154 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 436.

155 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 392.

156 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, pp. 220–259.

prediction that he will change the course of the Nile. In order to do this, she tells him, he will need seven things, including al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad, a ferocious jinn who, as punishment for having the audacity to fall in love with Bilqīs, was imprisoned by Solomon in a column in one of the palaces he had built for the queen after their marriage.¹⁵⁷ This brings another set of Solomonic associations into the narrative. The fourth fundamental element of ‘Solomon’ identified above is that of the building of the temple of Jerusalem, in which, as in the diversion of the Nile and the building of Miṣr in *Sayf*, the king relies on the labour of his jinn servants. However, the Bilqīs intertext plays a more complex role than providing connotations of divinely sanctioned building. To do this it relies on the intertext of the story of al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad related to *Sayf* by ‘Āqila which, in turn, relies on the intertext of ‘Solomon’: Without knowledge of the Solomon intertext, much of the import of this story would be lost. The story of al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad can be summarised as follows:¹⁵⁸

After their marriage, Bilqīs asked Solomon to build her a castle on pillars, which he dutifully did. The end result is truly amazing; built of bricks of gold, silver and precious metals, it has a central fountain forty feet high and forty feet deep. Bilqīs, however, is not quite satisfied, and asks for some fish for the fountain. Solomon orders his jinn to fetch some fish from nearby, but Bilqīs rejects these as being too commonplace, and asks for some ‘special’ fish that are not found anywhere else, and which are made of gold and silver. Solomon has the jinn make four fish, two gold and two silver, and these are placed in the fountain. But when Bilqīs inspects the fountain she is disappointed that the new fish don’t move and asks Solomon to make them behave like real fish, upon which he orders some jinn to enter them and animate them. Bilqīs is still unsatisfied and says that she wants fish which actually seem to be alive and are capable of breeding, rather than being possessed by jinn. Solomon, after agonising over the possibility that this essentially fatuous demand will call down divine wrath on his head, prays to God to perform this miracle for him. In reply, God sends down the angel Gabriel with the message that his request will be granted on one condition; that everyone present truthfully state their most secret jealousy:

No sooner had he ceased praying than the angel Gabriel descended, and said to him, “Prophet of God, your Lord bids you peace and says, ‘Know

157 The other things *Sayf* needs are the Book of the Nile, the sword of Āsaf, the emerald horse Barq al-Barūq, the pick of Yafith ibn Nūḥ, the talisman of Kūsh ibn Kin’ān, the talisman of al-Khilijān and al-Khilikān, and al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad. See *Sirat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 222.

158 For the story of al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad and Bilqīs, see *Sirat Sayf*, vol. 3, pp. 224–229.

that there are four fish and that four of you are present. Each of you must reveal your secret envy and speak of your inner resentment, so that you will become aware of [the secrets] harboured amongst you. For each of you who is truthful—and God knows if you speak truly—I will bring one fish to life.’¹⁵⁹

Āṣaf, Āṣaf’s father, Solomon and Bilqīs all confess in turn, and, as they do, each fish is miraculously brought to life. Āṣaf’s father is jealous of his son’s knowledge of the sciences and the magical power of books, while Āṣaf confesses that he is jealous of his master, Solomon, because while he himself has had to struggle for 121 years to attain his wisdom and knowledge, Solomon has been given knowledge and the Ring of Power by God. Āṣaf admits to envying Solomon’s God-given dominion over man and jinn. Solomon’s secret envy is of the power Bilqīs has over him:

Lord Solomon said, “As for me, I envy my wife Bilqīs, and the reason for this is that God has given me power over the multitudes of His creation, and rendered [even] those with wisdom and knowledge subject to my rule, but this Bilqīs rules over me. Men follow my command, but I follow hers.”¹⁶⁰

whilst Bilqīs’ is of the virile power of young men:

The Lady Bilqīs said, “Of all men, I secretly envy those whose cheeks are soft like mine, and whose cocks are as thick and strong as my forearm, who burrow and slam, and who are not hampered by any illness or affliction. There is nothing better. I won’t accept [anything else] and don’t desire it.”¹⁶¹

Despite the miraculous fish, the queen’s demands, however, are not over: she now requests that her husband arrange that the water level in the fountain never fall. After consulting with Āṣaf, Solomon orders the jinn to make a pump so as to ensure a constant water supply. Unfortunately, the castle is high up on a mountain, and the water source far away, so every day some of the jinn working the pump die of exhaustion. When they complain to Solomon, he again consults Āṣaf. The vizier tells him of al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad, a mighty *mārid* who

159 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 225.

160 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 226.

161 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 226.

would be able to work the pump alone, so Solomon captures him and puts him to work. Al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad, finding himself trapped inside the column which houses the pumping mechanism, resigns himself to his fate. One day Bilqīs stops by, out of curiosity, and al-Rahaṭ instantly falls in love with her. The next day, as coincidence would have it, Āṣaf and Solomon also visit him and the *mārid* asks if he can be married to the beautiful woman who visited him yesterday. Solomon initially agrees, but when he finds out that the woman in question is Bilqīs, he is overcome with rage, and is only prevented from killing al-Rahaṭ when Āṣaf intervenes and tells him that the *mārid* will be needed by King Sayf in future times:

The prophet became enraged when he realised that [the object of al-Rahaṭ's desire] was his wife, and he wanted to stamp his seal [ring] on [al-Rahaṭ's] forehead so that he might perish from the inscription on the ring, but the vizier [Āṣaf] said to him, "Have patience, O Prophet, soon a *tubba* king will be born who will populate the land after destruction and death, and this al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad will carry the pick of Japeth the son of the prophet Noah, and with it cleave through the cataracts, destroying them, and the waters will flow through them and carry the river Nile through the farthest reaches of the land. This king will be called Sayf. Carving through the rapids and the cataracts will be difficult for him, and he will not be able to achieve it without al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad."¹⁶²

Upon hearing this, Solomon relents and sends al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad to another palace, where he is imprisoned in a pillar of iron to await the coming of the Yemeni king.

As in the case of the Bilqīs intertext of the Treasury Quest, the reference here is again clearly to the gender conflict aspect of 'Solomon', and it is again Sayf, rather than 'Ayrūd, who is identified with the prophet. There are a number of points of reference between the events of Solomon's time, as outlined by Āqila, and this part of *Sayf*. Not only is the premise for al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad's enslavement the same, the diversion of water, but the *mārid* again falls in love with the Bilqīs character, Āqiṣa. Furthermore, just as in the above story Solomon accedes to a series of increasingly impudent demands made by Bilqīs, Sayf accedes to a list of marital demands made by his jinn foster sister. In both cases the king is forced to walk a tightrope between appeasing and incorporating the forces of chaos, and unleashing them in their most destructive aspect. Both the significance of this, and the general narrative tension in *Sayf* is

¹⁶² *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, pp. 228–229.

heightened by the constant reference, through the persona of al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad, and after him al-Samīdha¹⁶³, to a story in which Solomon must risk incurring the wrath of God in order to please his wife. The inclusion of the story of the mechanical fish at this point also refers back to the story of the brass fish told to Sayf during his quest to Solomon's treasury.¹⁶³ In addition to reiterating the themes of appearance versus reality and the quest for wisdom, this brings a sense of continuity and internal intertextual association into *Sayf*.¹⁶⁴ At this point, the narrative is returning to focus on Sayf himself, having been interrupted by the adventures of Miṣr and Damar, both of which have a different thematic agenda. The mechanical fish story functions as a device through which the audience is reminded of all the themes which the Bilqīs intertext has previously been used to highlight, allowing the narrator to quickly re-establish his base.

Thus, the Solomon-Bilqīs intertext reflects and informs both the characterisation of Sayf and the main themes of *Sīrat Sayf*'s middle section. When the structure of the entire Wedding Quest section is studied, it becomes clear that the influence of the Solomon-Bilqīs intertext is not restricted to the actual events mentioned above, or to the relationship of 'Ayrūḍ and 'Āqīṣa. In fact, the Bilqīs intertext underpins the structural coherence of the entire second section of *Sayf*. Although the diversion of the Nile is one of the major plot points of the *sīra*, it is also the conclusion of a plot device, signalling the final achievement of a unified social unit by the hero. It is not until this is achieved that the metaphorically loaded marriage of 'Ayrūḍ and 'Āqīṣa can take place.

The structure of the Wedding Quest section can be summarised as below.¹⁶⁵ If one leaves aside the adventures of Sayf's sons, a construction can be read into the Wedding Quest section based on Sayf's marital problems with antagonistic females, according to which the section begins with his encounter with the two sisters, Munyat al-Nufūs and Nūr al-Hudā during his quest to the City of Women, followed by his struggle to avoid marriage to the truly revolting al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā', continues with the climactic diversion of the Nile, and culminates with the resolution of 'Ayrūḍ and 'Āqīṣa's marital crisis:

163 See above, p. 122.

164 See Doniger, *Other Peoples' Myths*, for a discussion of the symbolism of fish in mythology. She posits the idea that fish, because of their 'otherness' (as opposed to more 'understandable' animals such as horses or dogs) often symbolise spiritual knowledge or the quest for spiritual knowledge: to be able to understand the fish is to be able to understand the other.

165 The indented segments are those which occur in temporal parallel with the adventures of Sayf himself.

Sayf's quest to the City of Women

Quest to Solomon's Treasury

Invasion / Evacuation of Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' in Sayf's absence

Miṣr's adventures

Damar's adventures

Sayf's encounters with the al-Thurayyā cousins

Naṣr's adventures

Diversion of the Nile

Wedding contests between 'Ayrūḍ and the jinn

This whole structure is greatly informed by the Bilqīs intertext. Three of these four sections relate to gender relationships, and the fourth, the Nile diversion, is informed by the story of the mechanical fish. Of the women involved in Sayf's quests, Munyat al-Nufūs and Nūr al-Hudā are diametrically opposite in personality, or inner nature, but identical in appearance. However, when Sayf encounters the al-Thurayyā cousins, their inner nature is perfectly matched by their outward appearance—al-Thurayyā al-Ḥamrā's inner character is reflected in her outer beauty, whilst al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā' is described in less flattering terms. In fact, al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā' is so unattractive that Sayf at one point claims that he would rather drown than look at her face.¹⁶⁶ A reading of this juxtaposition of motif as somehow indicative of Sayf's spiritual growth and newly found Solomonic wisdom (from a man who was so lacking in judgement that he had, earlier in this section, married a number of totally inappropriate women, including, at one stage, a giantess) is supported both by the physical centrality of the al-Thurayyā adventure to the Wedding Quest section as a whole and by the fact that it is immediately after this episode that the scattered Muslim forces regroup and embark upon the diversion of the Nile.

Further to the above, the section falls naturally into two parts, divided by the central encounter between Sayf and the al-Thurayyā cousins, and framed by the other marital adventures. The first of these, the quest to Solomon's Treasury, is informed mainly by the intertext of the order-chaos struggle as informed by the marriage of Bilqīs and Solomon, predominantly through the symbols of the crown and wedding dress. In the second part, the diversion of the Nile and the wedding contests are informed by a slightly different Solomon subtext, that of the harnessing of the destructive powers of chaos embodied, in both cases, in the king's defeat of chaos in the form of a mighty jinn. The section as a whole is given coherence partly through the reliance on the very

166 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 460.

specific motif of the marriage of Solomon and Bilqīs and the continued theme of Bilqīs' testing of the king even after their marriage—she may be subjugated in marriage but she must still be appeased. Although the entire mythological corpus surrounding the prophet-king is brought into play simply through reference to him, by concentrating only on the marriage the direct intertextual stress is laid very firmly on the order-chaos theme of the story of Solomon and Bilqīs.

It should also be noted that *Sayf* contains a number of other motifs common to popular medieval stories generally accepted as owing a considerable intertextual debt to 'Solomon.' One of the best known of these is 'The City of Brass,' which takes as its central theme the issue of external appearance and internal reality or knowledge.¹⁶⁷ To give just two examples, at the very beginning of the Wedding Quest section, when Sayf sets out on his quest to find his errant wife, Munyat al-Nufūs, he comes across a series of islands upon which can be found trees that bear fruit in the form of beautiful women.¹⁶⁸ Likewise, in 'The City of Brass' the protagonists are given fish with a human appearance to eat. The enthroned, life-like, automaton queen of the brass city can also be found in *Sayf*, guarding the seven-sided pearl of Kūsh ibn Kin'ān. Although it would be precipitous to draw any far-reaching conclusion from the presence of such motifs in both stories, there does appear to be a set of themes and motifs in such medieval tales which interact both with 'Solomon' and each other on an intertextual level.¹⁶⁹

Finally, Sayf and Solomon have basic characteristics in common. Although the *sīra* is littered with talismanic devices through which the jinn are controlled, this section of *Sīrat Sayf* is especially concerned with the control of the jinn, for the building of palaces and cities and, in the case of one particularly terrifying and powerful *mārid*, facilitating both the diversion of the Nile and the marriage of 'Āqiṣa and 'Ayrūd. Whereas many of the individual instances in which the Solomon intertext occurs correlate specifically to the Wedding Quest section, these parallels in the characterisation of Sayf and Solomon also

167 For a detailed approach to the 'City of Brass' story, see David Pinault, *Storytelling Techniques in the Arabian Nights* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), pp. 149–239; Mia Gerhardt, *The Art of Storytelling: A Literary Study of the Thousand and One Nights* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1963), pp. 195–235; and Andras Hamori, 'An Allegory from the Arabian Nights: The City of Brass,' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 24 (1971), pp. 9–19.

168 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, pp. 17–20.

169 It is also worth noting that the 'City of Brass' intertext links the Moses, Solomon and Alexander intertexts. See Pinault, *Storytelling Techniques*, pp. 180–186. Gerhardt also finds an Egyptian dimension to 'The City of Brass,' see *The Art of Storytelling*, p. 202.

inform audience expectations and narrative continuity at a global level. The implicit identification of the two characters, as well as enhancing Sayf's heroic status, builds on the oft-repeated predictions of Sayf's destiny as world ruler, paving the way for the climactic third section of the *sīra* in which the Muslims embark on an inexorable march throughout any still unconquered earthly lands, and into the realms of the jinn.

Thus, the apparently disparate elements of *Sayf*'s second section are held together largely by the Solomon intertext. Furthermore, in general terms of the *sīra*, it continues the gender dominated imagery used previously in the male-female power struggle between Sayf and Qamariyya. The eventual marriage of 'Ayrūd and 'Āqīṣa, and the birth of their son, 'Ufāsha, marks the conclusion of this conflict, both thematically and symbolically. From this point onwards in *Sayf* the conflict is externalised against the (masculine) outer group and takes on the essentially different characteristic of *jihād*. The Solomon intertext is one of the narrative devices by which the continuity necessary for a smooth shift between these themes is achieved. In the light of this progression, it is probably not coincidental that the Solomon story has two main aspects: the popular legend is concerned with the maintenance of the natural order, depicted through gender struggle, while the Qur'anic legend takes as its central theme the struggle against idolatry:

The story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba comes full cycle from the biblical account of a little-known diplomatic mission, to postbiblical tales that articulate widespread concerns about gender boundaries and an orderly universe, to the Qur'anic admonition against idolatry, and finally to a Muslim exegetical tradition that links all these themes while at the same time creating a discrete and self-serving Muslim vision of man, woman, prophecy and God's universe.¹⁷⁰

170 Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, p. 119. He argues that, although the struggle between polytheism and Islam was perceived by Islamic scholars as fundamentally tied up with the protection of the natural order, according to Islamic theology "Everything, including unexplained disorder, if not chaos, is part of God's ineffable stance" (p. 65). As a result of God's omnipotence, Islamic jurisprudence has problems with the interpretation of any legend, not just that of Solomon and Bilqīs, as being about man's control over unpredictable forces. This, in his opinion, has led to the evolution of a different legend in Islamic scholarship: "Muslim religious scholars had a cultural agenda of their own; explanation was linked to religious doctrine and practice. As a result, many universal themes were filtered out of religious scholarship or given much less importance in the formal analysis of texts" (p. 64). He uses al-Tha'labī's reading of 'Solomon' to, convincingly, argue his case (see pp. 64–87). Lassner also finds that current tellings of the legend among a

The General Prophetic Intertext

Having examined the intertextual impact of a number of individual prophets on *Sirat Sayf*, some general conclusions about the role of the Islamic prophetic intertext can be made. It appears that reference to religious figures often serves a dual purpose in *Sirat Sayf*: it provides heroic status through the principle of heroic inheritance, whilst textual reference to prophetic tales or assumed audience familiarity with the legendary corpus surrounding a figure simultaneously enriches the plot of the *sīra* through intertextual parallelism. Perhaps the most wide-ranging set of references is the use of the legend of Solomon and Bilqīs to create the setting and thematic framework for the entire 'Wedding Quest' section. Once established via Sayf's quest to Solomon's Treasury, the influence of Solomonic mythology extends throughout the rest of the section. For example, when Sayf wishes to divert the Nile, he must first obtain control of al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad, whom Solomon imprisoned in a column in Bilqīs' palace after discovering that he had fallen in love with the queen.¹⁷¹ The Solomon-Bilqīs intertext is thus brought to the forefront at a climactic moment by the use of a heroic heirloom, al-Rahaṭ, left to Sayf by Solomon for this precise purpose.

Another way in which *Sayf* is Islamised is through the presentation of the hero in a way which conforms to Islamic ideas of the prophet-hero. The prophet-hero is a recognised Semitic heroic type, within which several sub-types have been classified. Renard finds that the boundaries between the prophet-hero and other Semitic heroic types are extremely fluid:

Islamicate heroic narratives and the artists who have illustrated them have transformed and adapted for specifically religious purposes the literary imagery and iconography of heroes not explicitly religious in origin. One finds among religious heroes strong echoes of the major types, such as warrior/liberator, tragic prince and progenitor. The same dynamic appears also to work the other way around. Action, motivations, and settings (temporal and geographical circumstances, persons to whom they

variety of people in the Middle East do still address the gender struggle as their main theme, rather than limiting themselves to the theological interpretation. The unmistakable dominance of the order-chaos theme in the 'Solomon' intertext of *Sayf* is an indication of its popular roots, but, given the general importance given to the struggle against polytheism in Islam, both in the popular imagination and theological studies, the presence of the second theme in *Sayf* also has great importance.

171 See *Sirat Sayf*, vol. 3, pp. 224–229.

relate) of originally non-religious heroes begin to take on an identifiably Islamic cast.¹⁷²

These differences between the various prophet-heroes make it impossible to establish a detailed set of criteria that either defines or allows classification of individual heroes into given types. However, the prophets referred to in *Sayf* (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Solomon) all have a number of common characteristics which they share with Sayf that inform the prophetic-heroic aspect of Sayf's identity. (This is not quite so true of Solomon who brings different connotations into play). In addition to this, their legends also share a number of general themes and motifs which find echoes in *Sīrat Sayf*. Although these general intertextual parallels are not by any stretch of the imagination definitive, the consistency of these common factors in the pretexts of the various prophetic stories which play a role in *Sīrat Sayf* can only have a 'propheticising' effect on Sayf's persona.

The first and most obvious characteristic shared by Adam, Noah, Abraham and Moses is that they are patriarchal, founding fathers. Adam is the father of all mankind, Noah is the 'second' father of all mankind after the creation is re-enacted in the flood, Abraham is the father of the Jews, Arabs and monotheism, and Moses rescues the Israelites from enslavement in Egypt and leads them to the promised land. The significance of reference to these figures rather than, for example, Job or Saul, on the persona of Sayf is to identify him with this kind of character. At the most fundamental level, they are patriarchal, founding figures and their presence as such enhances Sayf's own image as a patriarchal, founding, religious king. However, they do not simply serve as religious legitimisation for Sayf throughout the *sīra* but have further function in the subplot and meaning of the text, adding narrative depth and direction. These are prophets whose stories have a consistent religious significance and take as their main concern conversion to monotheism and opposition to idolatry (this time with the exception of Adam). Although this is one of the defining factors of the Semitic religious heroic type, the prophets mentioned here are those most famously associated with the issue. The tales of these prophets also all address a common issue—order, chaos and the sacrificial crisis.¹⁷³

172 Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image*, p. 93.

173 "The books of the Old Testament are rooted in sacrificial crises, each distinct from the other and separated by long intervals of time, but analogous in at least some respects. The earlier crises are reinterpreted in the light of the later ones . . . Like tragedy, the prophetic act constitutes a return to violent reciprocity . . . Tragic and prophetic inspiration

The various legends also have some common themes. They often have an important element of gender related or otherwise sexually charged conflict: for example the stories of Noah and Ham and Solomon and Bilqīs. Furthermore, with the exception of Solomon, all of the prophets whose intertext is called upon in the *sīra* are inextricably associated with travel (although ‘Solomon’ could be said to be connected with the theme of travel through the story of Bilqīs’ visit to Solomon). Their stories also include an important element of water symbolism. One of the climactic episodes of *Sīrat Sayf* is the diversion of the Nile to provide water for the land of Egypt, now inhabited by the migrants who have followed Sayf there after the destruction of Madīnat al-Ḥamrā’. It is therefore interesting that water is a major theme in all of the prophetic intertexts: for example, the flood story in ‘Noah’, the parting of the Red Sea in ‘Moses’, the divine provision of water in ‘Abraham’, and the symbolic role of water in the story of Solomon and Bilqīs.

It is also worth noting that there is a chronological progression, in terms of the prophetic intertext, which takes place during the course of *Sayf*. The Qamariyya section is filled with references to the early patriarchal prophets—Adam, Noah and Abraham—who are all presented into the narrative in chronological order, whilst during the Wedding Quest section Solomonic mythology takes center stage. Thus, in addition to providing a general blanket of associations, the combined use of the prophetic intertexts is put to work in the introductory episode of *Sīrat Sayf* to establish the reality in which it takes place, putting Sayf himself in the line of the prophets. This is important for the creation of a new, Islamic history which is taking place in the *sīra*, and is consistent with the more subtextual use of the Moses intertext to rewrite the Pharaonic past. What is also interesting is the way that this creates indirect intertextual links between *Sayf* and the canonical *Sīra nabawiyya* in the texts I have looked at—all of the Semitic prophets called upon in *Sayf* have intertextual import on Muhammad in much the same way as they do on Sayf, which creates a further set of intertextual associations between the two narratives.

In conclusion, it is undeniable that an ignorance of Islamic legends and characters would not preclude either enjoyment, or understanding, of *Sīrat Sayf* as at one level it functions as an epic without its Islamic aspect being taken into account: the narrative importance of the quest to Solomon’s Treasury is that the quest is to a dangerous and awe inspiring place which hides a great prize.

do not draw strength from historical or philological sources but from a direct intuitive grasp of the role played by violence in the cultural order and in disorder as well” (Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image*, p. 66).

It is not only a quest to the treasury of Solomon the prophet, but to the treasury of Solomon the king. Having said this, examination of the underlying associations brought into play by the use of prophetic and religious material brings a wealth of new meaning and connotation into the text, while simultaneously reinforcing the coherence and unity of the central theme of the text, the foundation of an Islamic empire centred upon Egypt.

The Gods: *Sīrat Sayf* and Ancient Egyptian Myth

Give that *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* is a work of Egyptian popular literature, a certain amount of ‘Egyptianness’ is inevitable. The *sīra* abounds with Egyptian names for both people and places, pharaonic style tombs and treasuries containing dead ancestors protected by talismans. For example, the name of Sayf’s third son Miṣr means ‘Egypt’ and is commonly used to refer to Cairo, while his youngest son Būlāq carries the name of an area of Cairo. Other characters named after Egyptian towns include Akhmīm (al-Ṭālib) and Damanhūr, and the princess Rawḍa (daughter of the magician Saysabān) is named after one of the Nile islands in Cairo. Mention of geographical phenomena is essential to anchoring the narrative in some kind of reality of historical place and time (especially important given its wilder flights of fancy). Likewise, calling on the ruins that litter Egypt invests the narrative with a sense of mystery. What is more interesting, and less obvious, is the use of distinctive ancient Egyptian narrative material in *Sīrat Sayf* in the form of motif, fragments of tale pattern and characterisation. There is a vast amount of relevant material in the *sīra*, too much to treat with justice in a single chapter. Therefore, this chapter will discuss some examples of the Egyptian intertext, rather than attempting an exhaustive survey. It will then explore the potential of a relationship between *Sīrat Sayf* and the Osiris myth, ‘one of the oldest and most important of the Ancient Egyptian myths’.¹

Any story is itself a reflection of the people who tell and listen to it. Stories also travel, carried by people from one place to another, and interact with each other. This makes it almost impossible to define a story as belonging to one particular place and time. The way that a story is put together can, however, be distinctive of a particular worldview. With this in mind, the sources from which the Egyptian pretexts used in this chapter are drawn concentrate on the earliest examples of Egyptian narrative rather than focussing on later Coptic, Graeco-Roman or medieval Arabic material. By starting from a basis of ancient Egyptian storytelling it is hoped that examples of the older narrative and mythological legacy of Egypt can be identified. There is clearly no intention to ‘prove’ direct intertextual links, not least because some of the isolated motifs or tropes that will be discussed in this chapter may be merely random pebbles

1 J. Gwyn Griffiths, *The Conflict of Horus and Seth from Egyptian and Classical Sources* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1960), p. 1.

thrown up on the narrative shore. In addition, there are issues surrounding the study of ancient Egyptian myth and narrative that muddy the waters even further. When it comes to the older texts and myths (those that predate 1350 BC), the majority of the material we have exists only in fragmentary episodes scattered throughout a range of religious texts, used for various different ritual and religious purposes. There is debate among Egyptologists over the degree to which religious myths existed at all as extended narratives in the very early period. There is also debate about the extent to which the connected narratives we have from later periods reflect a stable story pattern or are put together on a one off, ad hoc basis (as it were) from various elements (termed ‘constellations’ by Jan Assman) so as to provide a narrative tailored to a specific ritual or other context.² There is, equally, the possibility that the texts we have are individual written compositions which draw in their allusions and detail from

2 “Some ancient writings seem to offer direct accounts of ancient worldviews: ‘myths’ understood as narratives that are set in the world of the divine. Tales of creation and conflict between deities are the stock of ‘mythology’ in European study of religion. Yet for ancient Egypt, such ‘myths’ turn out to be a problem, because so few longer narratives of deities are written down or depicted. As a result, Egyptologists debate whether people in earlier periods produced any such ‘myth’/extended tale of the divine. Even after 1350 BC, when tales of the gods do survive as connected series of episodes, the contexts for each of these writings reveal culturally specific grounds for each narration” (Stephen Quirke, *Exploring Religion in Ancient Egypt* (Malden, Oxford & Chichester: Wiley–Blackwell, 2014), p. 110). See his discussion of the issues at hand, and the debate within Egyptology on pp. 110–116. My thanks to Professor Quirke for sharing a pre-publication version of this chapter with me. For a wider review of recent scholarship on ancient Egyptian myth, see J.K.B. Jørgensen, ‘Egyptian Mythological Manuals: Mythological Structures and Interpretative Techniques in the Tebtunis Mythological Manual, the Manual of the Delta and Related Texts’ (unpublished PhD thesis: Københavns Universitet, Det Humanistiske Fakultet, 2014), pp. 9–18. He describes Assman’s ‘constellations’ as follows: “These constellations consist of grouping of gods with reference to their relations and actions. Assmann emphasizes that constellations do not in themselves amount to a narrative though they can be utilized for episodes in a mythic narrative. A typical constellation is the Father-Son constellation, which is structured according to the ideal situation in the funerary cult, where the duties of the oldest son include taking care of the father’s funeral. This constellation is commonly expressed in mythical statements referring to Osiris and Horus. What sets these mythical constellations and statements apart from real narratives is the momentary character of the roles and the fact that they take place in the present” (p. 16). Jørgensen discusses his theory and the counterarguments presented by scholars such as Baines and Goebbs at pp. 16–18. See also Jan Assman, ‘Die Verborgenheit des Mythos in Ägypten’, *Göttinger Miszellen* 25 (1977), pp. 7–43; John Baines, ‘Egyptian Myth and Discourse: Myths, Gods, and the Early Written and Iconographic Record’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 50 (1991), pp. 81–105; Jürgen Zeidler, ‘Zur Frage der Spätentstehung des Mythos in Ägypten’, *Göttinger Miszellen* 132 (1993), pp. 85–109; and Katja Goebbs, ‘A Functional

an underlying compositional pool, the genotext, an approach which allows for a more complete mythology and connected narrative. We also have no idea of popular religious practice—the only records we have are from the official, high culture, religion. Despite this, and the danger of falling victim to the human predilection for finding patterns in chaos, it does seem, from comparison of *Sīrat Sayf* with both early sources and later texts, that there is a clear presence of a characteristically ‘Egyptian’ intertext. This does not mean that *Sīrat Sayf* is in any sense an organic development from these pretexts, simply that there are certain motifs, themes and patterns that seem to have remained meaningful. The intriguing thing about these Egyptian intertexts is that they help make sense of the *Sayf* text. There are a number of occasions on which puzzling stories or apparently bizarre motifs in the text suddenly become meaningful when read in the light of these ancient pretexts, and the themes and subtext of the Egyptian pretexts resonate with those of *Sīrat Sayf*.

Few stories dating from the Pharaonic age have been recovered and translated. Those we do have can be found in a number of collections in English: Lichtheim’s three-volume *Ancient Egyptian Literature*,³ Simpson’s *The Literature of Ancient Egypt; An Anthology of Stories, Instructions and Poetry*,⁴ Maspero’s *Popular Stories of Ancient Egypt*,⁵ Parkinson’s *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Egyptian Poems 1940–1640 BC*,⁶ and Budge’s *Egyptian Tales and Romances: Pagan, Christian and Muslim*.⁷ Budge’s *Egyptian Tales and Romances* includes a number of later Coptic and Muslim stories, many of which display the signs of a specifically Egyptian heredity, and is built on by another work,

Approach to Egyptian Myth and Mythemes’, *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 2 (2002), pp. 27–59.

- 3 Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume 1: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1973); *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume 2: The New Kingdom* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1976); and *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume 3: The Late Period* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1980).
- 4 W.K. Simpson (tr.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions and Poetry*, ed. R.O. Faulkner, E.F. Wente Jr and W.K. Simpson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973).
- 5 G. Maspero, *Popular Stories of Ancient Egypt*, ed. and intr. Hasan El-Shamy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 6 Parkinson, R.B., *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940–1640 BC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 7 E.A. Wallis Budge (tr.), *Egyptian Tales and Romances: Pagan, Christian and Muslim* (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd., 1931).

Coptic Apocrypha in the Dialect of Upper Egypt.⁸ The introduction to the latter includes a section entitled 'Egyptian Mythology in Coptic Writings' detailing all the connections he finds between Coptic and ancient Egyptian religious mythology.⁹ In his opinion the Coptic church held on to many of the basic concepts that can be found in ancient Egyptian theology and "In the long course of Egyptian history the beliefs about Amente, the Emente and Amente of the Copts, changed very little, and the general characteristics of this place and its torments were as real to the Egyptians who worshipped God as to those who many centuries before had worshipped Horus the Elder, or Ra or Osiris".¹⁰

In addition to these narratives, there are a number of translations of the Osiris myth. 'The Osiris myth' refers to the number of myths which surround the figures of Osiris and Horus, rather than a single myth in fixed form. The two most important are the story of Osiris' murder and resurrection in the form of Horus and the story of Horus' conflict with Seth. In this study the myths of Osiris and 'The Contendings of Horus and Seth' are presented as a linear, connected narrative. This is the form in which they are presented in Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*, which is the latest version of the Osiris myth on record, but it should be noted that it is thought that Plutarch, a Greek philosopher, historian and priest writing in the first century AD, created this linear structure himself from elements (or constellations) that had previously existed as independent entities.¹¹ The synopsis of the first part of the myth below is mainly from Rundle Clark's discussion of the motifs he finds in most or all of the myths about Osiris and generally treats the Middle Kingdom (c. 2050–1750 BC) form of the myth.¹² Later motifs mentioned by Plutarch are pointed out, partly because

8 E.A. Wallis Budge (tr.), *Coptic Apocrypha in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* (London: Longmans & Co., 1918).

9 See Budge, *Coptic Apocrypha*, pp. lxi–lxxii. There are significant amounts of Osirian mythology in the other stories translated in *Coptic Apocrypha*.

10 Budge, *Coptic Apocrypha*, p. lxi.

11 See Jan Assman, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, tr. David Lorton (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 111–147 on Egyptian myth, and pp. 123–147 on the Osiris myth. See Jørgensen, 'Egyptian Mythological Manuals', pp. 9–11; and, for Plutarch's version of the Osiris myth, J. Gwyn Griffiths, *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1970).

12 See R.T. Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames and Hudson 1993 [1959]), chapter 3. It is not clear which texts he uses to compile his composite myth, although he refers to 'The Pyramid Texts', 'The Coffin Texts' and 'The Book of the Dead'. The version which is generally quoted is the much later one handed down to us by Plutarch in *De Iside et Osiride* and he does mention this as one of his sources. See also Assman, *Search for God*, pp. 123–147; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume 2*,

they date from much later in Egyptian history, after the Roman conquest, but also because on some occasions Plutarch mentions motifs which are found nowhere in the ancient texts.¹³ ‘The Contendings of Horus and Seth’ is taken from *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt, Ancient Egyptian Literature: Volume 2* and *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*.¹⁴ Although ‘The Contendings’ is thought to have originated during the Middle Kingdom, we only have textual evidence dating from the New Kingdom (c. 1580–1320 BC) and, because of its apparently comic tone, there is debate over whether it was a satirical tale intended purely for entertainment, or a piece of formal religious writing composed with intentionally carnivalesque elements and intended for ritualised reading on feast days.¹⁵

It appears that there are no Coptic versions of the Osiris myth *per se* in written form. However, in addition to the adaptation of Osirian myth in Coptic apocrypha, several non-religious ancient Egyptian tales reappear in Coptic form and some non-religious Coptic tales such as the story of Cambyses’ invasion of Egypt show strong parallels with Osiris myths.¹⁶

pp. 81–85; S.H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology from the Assyrians to the Hebrews* (London: Penguin, 1963), pp. 65–70; A. Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, tr. H.M. Tirard, intr. J. Manchip White (London: Dover Publications, 1971), pp. 269–271 for a short synopsis of the myth, taken from Plutarch. Also, H. Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion; A Study of His Role in Egyptian Mythology and Religion* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967), chapters 2 and 3 for a longer discussion of the myth in its various versions.

- 13 Furthermore, “Although Plutarch narrates the Osirian legend and the conflict which it included in much greater detail than Diodorus, some of his additional episodes are not easy to parallel in the Egyptian sources” (Gwyn Griffiths, *The Conflict of Horus and Seth*, p. 103). This may be a reflection of the fact that, according to Frankfort, “even the oldest Greek source exemplifies the peculiarly Greek tendency to transmute every borrowed trait into an expression of Hellenic thought” (Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 292.
- 14 See, Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol*, pp. 195–208; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume 2*, pp. 214–223; and Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 108–127.
- 15 See Quirke, *Exploring Religion*, pp. 145–147, and John Baines, ‘Myth and Literature’ in Antonio Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Forms* (Leiden, New York, Köln: E.J. Brill, 1996), pp. 361–377, at p. 373.
- 16 See Heike Behlmer, ‘Ancient Egyptian Survivals in Coptic Literature: An Overview’ in Antonio Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Forms* (Leiden, New York, Köln: E.J. Brill, 1996), pp. 567–590, for an overview of the material in question, and the extent to which Coptic texts were influenced by ancient Egyptian theology and religious ideas. For a translation of Cambyses’ invasion, see H. Ludin Jansen, *The Coptic Story of Cambyses’ Invasion of Egypt: A Critical Analysis of its Literary Form and its Historical*

Likewise, it has been noted that elements of ancient ritual have continued through time.¹⁷ Also, some continuance of the Osiris myths appears to have taken place in popular culture up until the present day, as, for example, in *Folktales of Egypt* Hasan El-Shamy is able to trace remnants of Osirian mythology in modern Egyptian and Sudanese folklore.¹⁸ In his introduction El-Shamy asserts that “None of the ancient Egyptian tales included in literary translations of hieroglyphic texts appear in oral circulation. Nevertheless, a number of traditional tales bear a remarkable resemblance to the ancient stories”.¹⁹

Ancient Egyptian Narrative and *Sīrat Sayf*

The Book of the History of the Nile

The Book of the Nile is introduced in the early stages of *Sīrat Sayf* when Sayf is sent on two dowry quests for the hand of Shāma, the second of which is for the Book of the Nile.²⁰ It is then relegated to the background until the third volume when ‘Āqila reminds Sayf that it is one of the magical talismans needed

Purpose (Oslo: I Kommissjon Hos Jacob Dybwad, 1950), pp. 59–70. ‘Cambyses’ will be discussed further in the final chapter.

- 17 See Lane, *Manners and Customs*, pp. 482–493 for a description of the nineteenth-century festivities surrounding ‘Leylat an-Nuktah’ (‘The Night of the Drop’) and ‘Wefa al-Neel’ (‘the Abundance of the Nile’) which have their origins firmly in fertility rituals of the ancient Egyptian past. Max Rodenbeck also cites numerous examples of the continuation of ancient Egyptian beliefs and rituals in his *Cairo: The City Victorious* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 1998).
- 18 Hasan El-Shamy, *Folktales of Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). The tales in this book were chosen from over 800 tale texts collected between 1968 and 1972 from a variety of areas and religious and ethnic groups in Egypt and Sudan by a number of researchers. The stories were selected “on the basis of their readability and representation of a specific genre, social institution, or aspect of culture. Had they been selected for their frequency alone, such tales as no. 47 would have been eliminated. ‘Distorted tales’ and fragments, which may be as important for understanding the culture as fully narrated tales, would have predominated” (p. lii). Background information about the narrator and occasion of the tale-telling prefaces each story.
- 19 El-Shamy, *Folktales of Egypt*, p. 1. He lists the stories in the collection which have ‘ancient Egyptian’ themes as tales no. 2, 3, 6, 12, 14, 47, 48 and 51. ‘Ancient Egyptian’ beliefs are expressed in tales no. 19, 26, 29, 30, 34, 36, 41, 44 and 45: thus approximately a third of the 62 stories refer back to ancient Egyptian mythology. Tales no. 2, 3, 6 and 14, (also 26 and 34), contain echoes of various elements of the Osiris myth. (See the notes accompanying the various stories, pp. 239–302).
- 20 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 99–187 for the entire quest.

to change the course of the Nile. Although it is one of many mysterious, magical books in Islamic folklore, the Book of the Nile has specific reverberations. Magical books were especially important in ancient Egyptian culture as the Egyptians believed that the gods could be manipulated and controlled by the proper use of magical formulae.²¹ Perhaps the most famous example of this is the Book of the Dead, which would ensure the safe passage of the soul into the afterlife, but there was also a mythological book of magical knowledge, the Book of Thoth, which was believed to contain spells of the ultimate power of understanding and control over the heavens and the earth.²² By the Roman period, sacred books were generally understood as being the writings of Thoth, who had become “the primary pseudonymous authority for diverse priestly texts, imbuing them with a kind of ultimate antiquity and secrecy”.²³

One of the most complete stories that has come down to us from ancient Egypt, written in Demotic script on the back of two official Greek papyri dating from about 46 AD, is ‘Setne Khamwas and Naneferkaptah’.²⁴ In this tale Setne Khamwas is a priest who sets off on a quest to find the Book of Thoth. He eventually finds it in a tomb, where he meets a dead woman, Ahwere. She warns him that the book will bring him destruction and tells him the story of how her husband, Naneferkaptah, retrieved it from the Nile, in which it had been hidden by Thoth, and where it lay guarded by a huge serpent and hundreds of scorpions. When Thoth discovered the theft he took his revenge by causing Ahwere, Naneferkaptah and their only son to fall into the Nile and drown as they travelled back downstream by boat. Despite attempts to prevent him, Setne Khamwas takes the book from the tomb and himself undergoes disaster until he is eventually persuaded by Pharaoh to return it.

21 “... the priest versed in sacred language becomes a master of interpretation that imposes himself on the world of the gods. In the metaphorical language of the Book of Thoth the scribe does not merely reach an understanding of the sacred texts but gains power over them” (Jørgensen, ‘Egyptian Mythological Manuals’, p. 197).

22 For a brief discussion of the ritual use of the Book of the Dead, and other books, see Quirke, *Exploring Religion*, pp. 230–237. The Book of Thoth is discussed in Robert Armour, *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1997 [1986]), pp. 156–159; and Jørgensen, ‘Egyptian Mythological Manuals’, pp. 194–198. For more detailed information, see Thomas George Allen, *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day: Ideas of the Ancient Egyptians Concerning the Hereafter as Expressed in Their Own Terms*, SAOC, 37 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

23 D. Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000 [1988]), p. 240.

24 See Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume 3*, pp. 127–137; Maspero, *Popular Stories of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 97–118; and Budge, *Egyptian Tales*, pp. 170–189 for the full story.

Elements of this tale appear to have survived into the Coptic era, for example in the story of Bishop Pisentius, who retires to contemplate in a tomb where he talks to and converts mummies, and El-Shamy finds evidence of its continued existence in the present day in two of the stories in his collection.²⁵ A number of similarities suggest that the Book of the Nile may be calling on the inter-text of this older book of magical knowledge, the Book of Thoth, or at least that it carries specifically Egyptian motif characteristics. Naneferkaptah finds the Book of Thoth encased in a number of boxes, described as follows:

Naneferkaptah went to the place where the box was. [He found it was a box of] iron. He opened it and found a box of copper. He opened it and found a box of juniper wood. He opened it and found a box of ivory and ebony. [He opened it and found a box of] silver. He opened it and found a box of gold. He opened it and found the book in it. He brought the book up out of the box of gold.²⁶

Although the Book of the Nile in *Sīrat Sayf* is secreted in different circumstances—it is guarded by three hundred and sixty magicians led by the sorceress ‘Āqila and is kept in a stronghold in the city of Qaymar—it is also kept within nested boxes:

This book was a god to the people of Qamroun’s city, and they recognised no other, believing that it was this [book] that brought them the Nile²⁷ and made the waters flow, so that when they planted their crops in the ground the waters irrigated them. It was because of this that they believed that the book was their god. Whenever the new moon rose they would come before it, and kneel in worship to it rather than the Lord of Lords, the All-Forgiving Sovereign, who makes the rain fall from the clouds and mist, and who created Adam from clay. This book was kept in a chest made of black ebony, inlaid with red gold, and this chest was placed within a coffer of teak, inlaid with silver. Over this was a high wooden altar, made of wood draped with a curtain of coloured silk, and

25 The story of Bishop Pisentius can be found in Budge, *Egyptian Tales*, pp. 213–217. For the modern tales see ‘The Maghrabī’s Apprentice’ and ‘It Serves Me Right’ in El-Shamy, *Folktales of Egypt*.

26 Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume 3*, p. 130.

27 Jayyusi’s translation has “brought them fire”.

over all had been built a cupola of white marble, with a door of Chinese iron and locks of steel.²⁸

Furthermore, like the Book of Thoth, the Book of the Nile is inextricably associated with the river Nile—it was created by an ancient magician, Jābalqā, to give power over the flow of the waters during his struggle with another sorcerer, Jābiršā, for control of the river. In a story told to Sayf by ʿĀqila soon after the Muslims arrive at the site which will become Miṣr, just at the beginning of the central Nile Diversion section, we learn that Jābiršā diverted the Nile to flow through his city with the help of an enchanted bottle. The news of the sweet and abundant waters of the river travelled from city to city, and when it reached Jābalqā's city, he decided to steal it, again using an enchanted bottle:

And this sorcerer began stealing [the Nile], and the other stealing it back, until each had stolen it seven times. After this, the sorcerer Jābalqā wrote the Book of the History of the Nile, and he put it into a well and worked talismanic enchantments upon it. Then he told the people of his city, "Be assured, no sorcerer will be able to steal [the river] from us, for the waters will only flow following behind this book."²⁹

Just as in 'Setne Khamwas' the magical book is hidden in the Nile by Thoth, in *Sīrat Sayf* it is returned to the Nile when it is placed in the Nilometer by Saysabān following the diversion of the river. Once the river has been diverted by Sayf and his companions, crocodiles the size of elephants start to appear and menace the population who are understandably alarmed. Saysabān, Sayf's newest advisor and ally, tells him that there is only one thing to be done: an enchantment against the creatures must be set up using the Book of the Nile. Thus, once again, when the book is in the Nile, it is connected with the motif of dangerous creatures—Saysabān states that the Nilometer will now act as a protective measure against crocodiles:

Saysabān turned to [King Sayf] and said, "Know, O King, that these are wild animals, they can only be prevented if a tall column is brought [from Shem] which is intended for this purpose, for this a dangerous matter.

28 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 122, translation taken from Jayyusi, *The Adventures*, p. 49, with some minor amendments.

29 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 221. For the whole story, see pp. 220–221.

It must be placed here, and the Book placed inside it. A seal must be put on it, and it must remain there forever, never to be moved.”³⁰

When al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad, who is sent to Shem (Syria) to collect the column for the Nilometer, returns with it, Saysabān puts the book inside an enchanted crocodile made of brass which is conjured into life and imprisoned within the column of the Nilometer, which he then puts in the Nile.³¹ Although this is admittedly a slightly different type of connection with the concept of dangerous Nile creatures—in ‘Setne Khamwas’ the creatures have been put in the Nile to protect the book, rather than the book to protect against them—the basic concept of ‘book–protection–dangerous Nile creatures’ is still present. There may therefore be grounds to attribute to the Book of the Nile specific associations with the magical book of knowledge and power of Thoth, or at least with an Egyptian take on the motif.³²

Akhmīm al-Ṭālib

Akhmīm is introduced into the narrative as the guardian of Ham’s treasury and is the first of a number of learned sorcerers who become Sayf’s allies and advisors.³³ The Ham’s treasury episode is very Egyptian in flavour; Shem’s sword and the talismanic *lūḥ* which controls ‘Ayrūḍ have to be recovered (as discussed in the previous chapter) from a palace on the other side of a lake where the dead but still animate body of the prophet, wrapped in seven veils and surrounded by treasures, lies in eternal rest. The situation of the palace, on the opposite side of the lake, also reflects the ancient practice of building holy places, and in some cases (as in the ancient town of Dīma near Faiyum) burying the dead on islands, or at least ‘across the water’. (The water represents the

30 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 252. See p. 257 for the establishment of the Nilometer.

31 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 257.

32 See also Phillips, *Bravery and Eloquence*, vol. 1, p. 173, on the preservation of a poem composed by Yathrib predicting Sayf’s “glorious future”, which was preserved in a box placed above the lintel of the gates of the city of Yathrib. He comments on the shamanistic nature of the combination of poetry and prophecy in the poem, and remarks on the parallels between the preservation of this poem and the Book of the Nile, saying “The fact of preservation also points to the link between the prophetic poems and the *sīrah*’s embodiment of the ‘foundation myth’ of Egypt. There are clear parallels between the preservation of poem 43, for example, and the way in which the Book of the Nile, which is at the heart of the ‘foundation myth’ is preserved.” See also W. John Tait, ‘Demotic Literature: Forms and Genres’, in Antonio Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Forms* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), pp. 157–187, at pp. 183–184.

33 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 225–236 for this episode. Also chapter 2, pp. 87–89.

primeval ocean, and the island the primeval mound made by Ra at the creation of the universe). The description of the setting also draws on characteristic Egyptian symbolism:

On the sixty-first day that [Sayf] travelled through the wilderness, confused and bewildered, he saw two mountains in front of him, to his right a white mountain and to his left a red mountain. He rode on until he drew near to them, then looked between them and saw a banner flying on the side of the red mountain, which was to his left. He looked at the mountain to his right and saw a lofty palace which was one of the most wondrous sights on this earth; clouds and mist clung to its heights. Between the two mountains was a turbulent sea dividing them. It was dark, with towering waves that astonished the eye. He climbed the red mountain, on his left, as he was unable to get to the other one because of this sea that separated them.³⁴

It may be mere coincidence, as the use of the colours red, white and black are a generic combination often found in North African narrative, but it is perhaps noteworthy that the depiction of the mountains as red and white corresponds with ancient Egyptian symbolic representation of the lands of upper and lower Egypt, the crowns for which were white and red respectively. Early rituals discovered at Saqqara included the *heb-sed* ritual, during which Pharaoh demonstrated his fitness to rule by running between two markers, symbolic of the two lands; in *Sīrat Sayf* the hero must make a miraculous leap from one pillar, on the red mountain, to another on the white mountain on the other shore of the lake.

However, the main significance of Akhmīm's persona lies in his name, Akhmīm al-Ṭālib ('Akhmīm the Scholar'), and again draws on associations with Thoth. Although a great many of the names in *Sīrat Sayf* are connected with Egyptian place names (Miṣr, Damariyāt, al-Rawḍa and Damanhūr, to name just a few), Akhmīm's can be read as having further significance. Akhmim is a town in Upper Egypt, approximately half way between Cairo and Aswan, with which the ancient Egyptian god Thoth, the scribe of the gods, is traditionally associated. Thoth was the god of wisdom, science, medicine and writing. He invented writing, astronomy and arithmetic and was the deputy, or scribe, of Ra, the chief of the Egyptian gods, who was expected to protect him from all threats.³⁵ Akhmim continued to be associated with the concept of

34 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 225–226.

35 See, Armour, *Gods and Myths*, pp. 154–160 for a brief synopsis of Thoth's attributes.

written knowledge and scribes throughout the Coptic era: Akhmim, Thebes and Aswan were sites of great Coptic monasteries where scriptures and other works were translated into Coptic texts in the first few centuries AD.³⁶ Following the Arabic conquests, the temple at Akhmim was a major site of interest for medieval Muslim geographers, travellers and encyclopadists.³⁷ It is significant that Sayf's first advisor, a magician learned in the magical arts of the pen, is linked to the ancient advisor of the gods in this way at such a key moment in the Qamariyya section—the sword and *lūh* that Sayf retrieves from the treasury are instrumental to his struggle with Qamariyya. Although the significance of this will not become clear until the role of the ancient Egyptian intertext in the relationship between Sayf and his mother is explored later in this chapter, Akhmīm can be read as being connected, through the associations of his name, with the myth 'The Contendings', in which Thoth took on an increasingly important role as time went by. According to Rundle-Clark, in later versions of the myth the role of Isis, the mother goddess, declined whilst that of Thoth, the arbitrator, became more prominent.³⁸

The Magician Nūt

Soon after the Muslims finally arrive at their predestined homeland, Egypt, and build the city of Miṣr, 'Āqila performs the *raml* and discovers the existence of a fire-worshipping magician called Nūt, who claims to be immortal:

"... all of this area is uninhabited except for this place," said 'Āqila. "This is the home of an evil soothsayer, the foremost sorcerer of his people. He is a tyrant over his people and considers himself greater than God, the Almighty. This devil claims to be divine. He resides in this land, which has a strange appearance and is called Nūt.³⁹ This magician has created a vast garden, full of fruit of many different kinds, and he has

36 See Budge, *Egyptian Tales*, p. 12.

37 Ulrich Haarman, 'Medieval Muslim Perceptions of Pharaonic Egypt' in Antonio Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Forms* (Leiden, New York, Köln: E.J. Brill, 1996), pp. 605–627, at pp. 612–613.

38 "Isis is now unnecessary in her role as Divine Mother. Perhaps this version of the Osiris fate is an importation from the Semitic peoples of Asia, some of whom held more firmly than the Egyptians to a transcendent and obstinately masculine idea of deity... In Coffin Text 338 he is addressed as 'Thoth, who made Osiris triumph over his enemies'. As god of writing and the power of reason his triumph is a legal one" (Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol*, pp. 172–173).

39 The text here says that the land is called Nūt, but later on the magician is also called by this name.

created flowing rivers in his city through the magical sciences of the pen and set over it a crystal pavilion with the appearance of the sky, within which stars revolve, and has made it rotate around the city. He has also made a brazier of brass within which burns a permanent fire, the tongues of its flames of different colours, and for one day every month this devil bows to worship the fire rather than the Eternal Sovereign.⁴⁰

Sayf is outraged and immediately gathers an army together to defeat the heathen, infidel dog. When he arrives at Nūt's city the sorcerer welcomes him and offers him shelter. In reply, Sayf demands his surrender and conversion to Islam. The two sides meet in fierce battle, during the course of which nearly all the Muslim champions are captured. Nūt and ʿĀqila engage in contests of magic and after a bitter struggle Nūt is defeated and his sister, Fustuqa, flees to plot her revenge.⁴¹

The inclusion in the *sīra* of a character who is not only named after the ancient Egyptian sky goddess, Nut, but rules over a city with a magical revolving sky covered in artificial stars is a striking narrative element as Nut is almost invariably depicted stretched across the roof of ancient tombs against a dark blue sky emblazoned with golden stars.⁴² It is also interesting to note that here this once highly revered mother goddess, 'she with the braided hair who gave birth to the gods', has undergone a gender transformation. Although she was a popular mythological figure, it is unlikely that the name Nut survived in popular memory (the goddess of the sky herself lived on into gnostic literature, but under another name),⁴³ and it seems most probable that the name at least was worked into the *sīra* after the rediscovery of how to read hieroglyphics *circa* 1800.⁴⁴ If this is the case, then it points clearly to the deliberate use of

40 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 210. For the whole episode, see pp. 209–219.

41 Much later on in the *sīra*, towards the very end, Fustuqa, returns to try to avenge his death (see *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 4, pp. 398–400).

42 For a more information about Nut, see Armour, *Gods and Myths*, pp. 38–41.

43 See Behlmer, 'Ancient Egyptian Survivals', p. 575.

44 "The conventional modern form 'Nut' is based on the hieroglyphic writing of the goddess's name, and includes a final 't' that is written, but was not pronounced. The 't' had become a kind of purely graphic marker for feminine nouns. Thus if the name survived from antiquity, it would show no 't'. One possibility therefore is that the form Nūt has indeed entered the text after the decipherment [of hieroglyphics]. Nut was prominent in Egyptian mythology and in funerary material, but not in cult, and the general view seems to be that she did not enter classical traditions—indeed that the name 'Nut' did not pass into Greek, and is also not reflected in Coptic. Egyptologists who have interested themselves in her seem to have limited themselves to the pharaonic period."

references to ancient Egypt in the text, as the insertion of this episode into the *sīra* at this particular point has meaningful resonance. Nūt's appearance in the text comes just after Sayf and his allies have settled in Egypt, immediately before Sayf embarks on his quest to divert the Nile, creating Egypt, and is mirrored by another encounter with a pagan magician, Saysabān, who has to be dealt with before the Nile diversion can be completed. The episode can be read as one in which the ancient Egyptian pharaonic legacy is demonised and rewritten in a more Islamic light; in the defeat of Nūt and his people the pagan past is symbolically wiped out and replaced by a Yemeni, Islamic history of the origins of Egypt.⁴⁵

Ufāsha's Third Hand

The character of 'Ayrūḍ and 'Āqiṣa's son, 'Ufāsha, born with a detachable third hand in the centre of his chest that (amongst other things) doubles as a weapon is a striking one which appears to be unique in the *sīra* genre:

[‘Ayrūḍ] said, “My Lord, I have come to you with the gladdest of tidings,” to which King Sayf replied, “What are these glad tidings?”

“My Lord,” he said “When I married 'Āqiṣa, she became pregnant, and when the time came for her to give birth she delivered a boy who was a miracle of his time, created by the Almighty Judge.”

“What was amazing about him?” asked King Sayf.

“O King, every other created being has two hands, apart from this boy, for he has three hands: two hand like those of other beings, but he has a third hand on his chest, made of blue steel. It has a normal palm and five fingers, with perfect fingernails, but it is made of blue steel rather than flesh and bone. On it are written divine names and talismans that no one has ever seen before. Three days after his birth [the boy] said to his hand, ‘I want to possess strength and skill, and for all the jinn to be under my command,’ and then, all of a sudden, all of the jinn came to him and bowed before him. When he says to his hand, ‘Disappear, and don't be visible,’ it disappears and is invisible. If he wants to take it from his chest and transform it into whatever he wishes, he says to it, ‘Be such and such,’ and it becomes whatever he wants it to be.”⁴⁶

(John Tait, personal correspondence). Nūt does not appear in the British Museum MS I have looked at.

45 For more on this, see the discussion of the Nile Diversion subsection in chapter 5.

46 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, pp. 411–412.

It is possible that the association of 'Ufāsha with a third hand may be a consistent one. In another manuscript variant in which it is not explicitly mentioned in the text, the motif remains present:

'Ufāsha . . . is known in the body of the manuscript as Abū Yad. This latter name presumably alludes to the fact that 'Ayrūd's son, as he is pointed out in the printed text, is the possessor of a third, talismanic hand. Surprisingly, however, this characteristic is not mentioned in the manuscript. One can only hypothesise that the redactor was either so familiar with the nature of 'Ufāsha's fabulous appendage that he overlooked the need to narrate the story to his audience, or that he was totally unaware of its existence and hence, also, of the reason behind the nickname.⁴⁷

This concept of a third hand that can be changed into a sword is one that finds a parallel in the character of Seth. In the ancient Egyptian myth of 'Seth and Apopis', Seth, the ancient Egyptian god of chaos and disorder, in his aspect as the harnessed powers of chaos—as opposed to his unbridled chaotic aspect—destroys Apopis, the primeval serpent, using his detachable foreleg as a weapon.⁴⁸ Apopis was a giant serpent who lived in the celestial Nun, or Nile, and represented the primeval forces of the universe before order had been imposed on it by Ra, the supreme deity. Ra orders Seth to do battle with Apopis because of Apopis' daily attempts to obstruct Ra's sun boat on its course across the skies. Seth's fore-leg had been removed (prior to this) because it was not allowed to approach Horus, his arch rival amongst the gods. Over the course of time, the ancient Egyptian word for fore-leg came to mean; the Great Bear constellation, 'strong arm', 'strength', and 'scimitar' and myths often refer to the arm of Seth instead of the leg.⁴⁹

Although he is a staunch defendant of Sayf and the Islamic cause, 'Ufāsha has elements of the trickster in his character which reveal a dark, potentially disruptive aspect. He spends a great deal of time impersonating others and coming out on top by the use of his wits, both classic aspects of the trickster. Like Seth, 'Ufāsha is essentially a chaotic character. For example, on one occasion when Sayf has disappeared and 'Ufāsha's help is enlisted to find him,

47 Klar, 'A Study of Ms BM 4274 Or', p. 32.

48 See Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol*, pp. 208–212, for the myth of Seth and Apopis. A brief introduction to Seth can be found in Armour, *Gods and Myths*, pp. 50–54. See also Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, pp. 166–167.

49 See Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, p. 86; Gwyn Griffiths, *The Conflict of Horus and Seth*, p. 34.

the jinn insists on first being robed like a king and given power before setting out, and then demands a party at which he gets drunk. He is only actually persuaded to depart on his quest when Damar loses his temper:

‘Ufāsha said, “Damar, have patience and don’t be hasty.” Then he ordered that food be served for lunch, and ‘Ufāsha and his jinn servants ate. After that he ordered wine, and sat drinking wine while Damar watched, his heart burning with suspense. Enraged, Damar demanded, “Why these distractions and delays? The day is nearly over!”

“Don’t be angry,” ‘Ufāsha replied, “What difference is there between day and night? And there is little difference between today and tomorrow. Let us eat and drink. Your father will be rescued soon, God willing, so leave me to my pleasures today so that I can enjoy the benefits of my rank.⁵⁰ Tomorrow I will head out to rescue your father.”

“My father may be killed by enemies,” retorted Damar, to which ‘Ufāsha replied, “If he is dead then it is his appointed time, and if he lives then Almighty God will provide for him.”

When Damar heard these words, his rage grew even stronger, and he shouted at ‘Ufāsha “Do not say such things!” Then, in the intensity of his fury, he rushed at ‘Ufāsha with a sword. When ‘Ufāsha saw Damar do this he left, and flew up high into the sky.⁵¹

This behaviour is fundamentally bacchanalic, although the threat of chaos is averted by Damar’s intervention, and is interesting because ‘Ufāsha is given such a major role in the final section of *Sayf*, figuring prominently in the narrative and driving most of the action.⁵² As he says himself, if it were not for his repeated ‘rescue’ of Saqardis and Saqardiyūn the Muslims would have ended their conquests far from the Qāf mountains:

‘Ufāsha descended upon them, and when King Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan saw him, he said to him, “Why, whenever we capture our enemies, do you release them from our grasp?”

“Oh King of Islam,” ‘Ufāsha replied, “There are many benefits to this, because you have opened up the seven [earthly] realms and they have

50 The text has *al-sultana* literally ‘sultanship, rule, dominion’, which I have translated here as ‘the benefits of my rank’.

51 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 425.

52 See Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, pp. 119–143 for a treatment of chaos and order in the Dionysus myth.

been led to the Islamic faith when they used to be wicked unbelievers. I will stick to this contrary behaviour until you have opened up the land to Islam right up to the seventh of the Qāf mountains.⁵³

Thematic reading of ‘Ufāsha’s persona thus indicates that he and Seth have more than their detachable limbs in common—both symbolise the incorporated powers of chaos turned outwards. It is significant that the character of ‘Ufāsha does not come on to the scene until the Muslim’s expansionist campaign in the Hunt section, in which he is the instrumental force behind the Muslims continuation of their conquests beyond Ḥabash to the ends of the world.

The King of Death

The story of the King of Death comes from the beginning of the second section of *Sīrat Sayf*.⁵⁴ It is one of a series of episodes in which Sayf marries a succession of unsuitable women, as a result of which he repeatedly ends up in dangerous situations. These stories all deal with the balance of order and chaos on a personal level, that of the husband and wife. Stories later on in the section deal with the same issue on a larger scale, where whole tribes or peoples are threatened with destruction. The stories are set against the background of Sayf’s quest to the Treasury of Solomon to rescue ‘Ayrūḍ. Unfortunately Sayf keeps being sidetracked from his original purpose. At this point he has befriended a Jewish people, led by King Tiliqān, and rescued them from a giant serpent which has driven them out of their city. After killing the serpent, he cuts off its head which he takes back to the city and throws down in front of the king. Tiliqān is overjoyed and persuades Sayf to take the throne and stay with them. One day, while he is holding court, a young woman approaches carrying a cup and a full jug. She offers the cup to Tiliqān, who tells her to offer it to Sayf first. Sayf drinks from the cup. By doing so he inadvertently betrothes himself to the young lady, who is Tiliqān’s daughter. Although he initially tries to back out of the marriage, pleading that he was unaware of the meaning of the custom, he eventually gives in and asks what bridal payment he should make, to which Tiliqān replies, “Her dowry is true companionship, which will never be severed. If one of you embarks on a journey, the other must follow. I will marry

53 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 4, p. 396. The text has *qīlal Qāf*, ‘Qāf regions’, which I have taken here to refer to the Qāf mountains, the seven realms of the jinn.

54 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, pp. 215–227.

you on this condition: if my daughter Jamīla travels, you must go with her, and if you go on a journey, she will travel with you.”⁵⁵

Sayf also marries several of Jamīla’s companions, and completely forgets his mission to rescue ‘Ayrūd. One day, whilst he is out hunting, ‘Āqīṣa visits him and admonishes him for forgetting his quest. She also warns him that the marriage agreement he has made extends to the next life, saying “Know, my brother, that the obligation that has been contracted between you two is not a precondition for travel in this world, but one that applies to travel in the after-life. If she dies, you die, and if you die, she dies with you.”⁵⁶ Sayf dismiss her warnings. However, when he returns to the court he finds that Jamīla has died and that he is expected to enter the next life alongside her, with the help of an individual known as the King of Death. Sayf tries arguing that he cannot abandon his three other wives, and that as the ruler of the city he should decide what is right, but Tiliqān and his officials insist that he abide by his marriage contract. He is drugged and placed in Jamīla’s tomb, along with the dead bodies of his other wives.

When Sayf awakes, he wanders the tomb for several days, weeping and lamenting his fate, until he encounters a mysterious woman who claims to have been buried alongside her husband and makes him an offer of marriage. Sayf, by now thoroughly put off the concept of marriage, refuses her, after which the mysterious stranger reveals herself to be ‘Āqīṣa and mocks him for being so easily led into disaster by lust: “I came to you so that you could marry me, because you lust for women and you have brought trouble and disaster upon yourself. Sometimes you say ‘I am on a quest to rescue my servant,’ but at other times you get married.”⁵⁷

Eventually Sayf persuades ‘Āqīṣa to take him out of the tomb and put him back on the road to Solomon’s Treasury. Before resuming his quest he decides to end the barbaric practices of Tiliqān’s people and sends ‘Āqīṣa to fetch him the King of Death, whom he admonishes and kills:

[Sayf] said, “Sir, it is God who commands the King of Death, and he is ‘Azrā’īl. He takes the souls of created beings, while you bury people alive so that men are tortured. Sir, this is what we do where I come from.” And no sooner had he finished speaking than [Sayf] struck him [with his sword] and his head flew from his body.⁵⁸

55 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 219.

56 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 221.

57 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 225.

58 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 226.

Finally, the King of Death's body is delivered to Tiliqān with a message warning him to cease the practice of live burial.

Sayf's live burial has echoes of another story believed to have its roots in Egyptian folklore, the story of Sindibad's adventures, which has been traced back to the ancient Egyptian story of the shipwrecked sailor.⁵⁹ In Husain Haddawy's translation of the Arabian nights, which uses a late medieval Egyptian printed text as the source of the Sindibad story, Sindibad, like Sayf, marries a woman he encounters on his travels. When she dies, he is buried alive with her in a large pit, where he survives by killing the other unfortunates who are lowered into the pit with their dead spouses and stealing the provisions they have brought with them. Eventually he escapes when he follows a wild animal who has been eating the corpses and discovers a secret tunnel.⁶⁰

On one level this episode seems to be about the superiority of Islamic customs over alleged practices associated with ancient Egyptian culture, in this case associations with stories of Pharaoh's marrying their sisters and the live burial of wives and concubines alongside the dead Pharaoh (the latter of which, the practice of live burial, was not based in historical truth). The story brings in the theme of marriage between brother and sister when 'Āqiṣa, Sayf's foster sister, offers to marry him.⁶¹ However, underlying these themes is a more complex issue. As a reward for dispatching the snake, Sayf is given Tiliqān's throne, which he accepts. He later marries Tiliqān's daughter. In terms of the *sīra* genre as a whole, which is greatly concerned with maintaining the

59 See Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume 1*, pp. 211–215; Maspero, *Popular Stories*, pp. 81–88; R.B. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940–1640 BC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 89–101; and Budge, *Egyptian Tales and Romances*, pp. 88–95.

60 See Husain Haddawy (tr.), *The Arabian Nights 11: Sindbad and Other Popular Stories* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd, 1995), pp. 27–32. He relies on a variant he calls 'the Bulaq edition'. It dates from 1835 and is "based on a late Egyptian manuscripts whose editor, by adding and interpolating numerous takes, swelled the old text and subdivided the material until he had one thousand and one nights" (p. xi). Sindibad is not one of the 'core' stories of the *Thousand and One Nights* cycle but a later addition. N.J. Dawood (tr.) *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* (Norwich: Book Club Associates, [1954] 1975) contains an almost identical version of the same story (139–144). He relies on a printed edition from Calcutta, dating from the mid nineteenth century, which he believes follows a late Egyptian edition of the story collection.

61 For a discussion of the Egyptian narrative conventions surrounding brother–sister relationships, see Hasan El-Shamy, *Beyond Oedipus: The Brother-Sister Syndrome as Depicted by Tale-Type 872*, A Cognitive, Behaviouristic, Demographically Oriented, Text Analysis of an Arab Oikotype* (Bloomington: Trickster Press, 2013).

integrity of the social unit, this is disastrous. Sayf has effectively allowed himself to be assimilated into a foreign group and deserted his own people, leaving them without a king or spiritual leader. Furthermore, he has allowed himself to be distracted from his quest. Sayf's dismissal of 'Āqīṣa's warnings of impending disaster highlight both his stupidity and the disastrous consequences that may arise from this situation, and it is significant that he escapes death only through her intervention. His adoption of an inappropriate social role has unleashed the forces of chaos upon him which, at this stage of his spiritual journey, he is ill-equipped to control, and has landed him in a deadly situation.

The associations between this story and ancient Egyptian and Coptic folklore reinforce this interpretation (as do the other stories in this subsection of *Sīrat Sayf*—the theme only really becomes clear when this episode is put in context). There are several narrative elements in the story of the King of Death which can be related to Egyptian mythology. First, the episode in which Sayf kills the serpent at the beginning of this episode has some similarities with the modern Egyptian folktale, 'Mari Girgis and the Beast'.⁶² In 'Mari Girgis', the only daughter of the king has been tied to a stake near the Nile as the annual sacrifice to the Nile serpent. Mari Girgis (a Coptic saint) arrives, sent by God to rescue the girl, kills the serpent and makes her drag it through the town to the palace, where he throws it in front of the king. The many North African variants of this story are generally accepted as finding their roots in the myth of Seth and Apopis (by which I do not mean that there is a direct linear relationship, or that the myth of Seth of Apopis is an ur-text, but rather that it is one expression of an ancient myth that has endured in various forms through time).⁶³ The killing of monsters and serpents by a hero is a very common motif in folklore generally, but there is some reason to attach significance to it here. Although this motif does occur elsewhere in *Sīrat Sayf*, this section is particularly full of huge serpents which Sayf has to slay. Moreover, these snakes are inevitably red, black or white: in ancient Egyptian mythology red symbolised

62 For one variant of this folktale, see El-Shamy, *Folktales of Egypt*, pp. 158–160.

63 Norris has identified a number of variants of a story found in North African and Tuareg literature which entails the hero undertaking a quest to kill a serpent that lives in a well and being rewarded with marriage to a princess (whom he often rescues). In his opinion these accounts find their origin in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. See H.T. Norris, 'The Influence of the Hilaliyya on the Peoples of the Southern Magheb and Western Sudan' in Ayūb 'Abd al-Raḥmān (ed.), *Sīrat Beni Hilal: Actes de la vèze table ronde internationale sur la Geste des Béni Hilal* (Tunis: Maison Tunisienne de l'Édition, Institut National d'Archéologie et d'Arts, 1989), pp. 41–57, at pp. 44–54.

lower Egypt, white upper Egypt, and black the desert that surrounded it, effectively the rest of the world.

Sayf's encounter with 'Āqiṣa in the tomb has echoes of Setne Khamwas' encounter with Ahwere in 'Setne Khamwas' (and this is not the only episode in which Sayf is rescued by a mysterious woman who turns out to be 'Āqiṣa after being cast in a pit to die. She also rescues him earlier in the *sīra*, when he is caught stealing the Book of the Nile by King Qamrūn and cast into the Pit of Despair. This is the first occasion on which he meets 'Āqiṣa, and also when she tells him that she is his sister).⁶⁴ Furthermore, the murder of the King of Death in *Sīrat Sayf* may have some parallels with the Coptic apocryphal stories of the resurrection of Jesus, which are in turn a reworking of the ancient Egyptian story of the conflict of Horus and Seth.⁶⁵ In Coptic apocrypha, Horus was often reinvented as Jesus and Seth as Abbaton, the King of Death who ruled over Amente, a kind of purgatory where the souls of the newly dead waited for judgement. The 'Book of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ' begins with the execution of Jesus and his interment in a tomb.⁶⁶ Abbaton comes to collect his soul, but cannot find it there. He returns to Amente, confused, to see if it is there, but still cannot find it. There is a great cosmic disturbance and the foundations of heaven and earth shake. Abbaton realises that this is somehow connected with the soul he cannot find and returns to Jesus' tomb where he confronts the body and demands to know its name. Jesus sits up suddenly in his bier and laughs in Abbaton's face. Abbaton runs away and falls to the ground outside the tomb, terrified. This is repeated three times, until the King of Death realises that Jesus is in fact the son of God. Jesus leaves the tomb and goes down into Amente where he breaks open the doors and frees the souls of the dead which are languishing there. Finally, he ascends to heaven and takes his rightful place at God's side—and God is here depicted in a way traditionally associated with Osiris.

What is perhaps more interesting than the presence of these various intertextual references in this episode of *Sīrat Sayf* is the fact that these stories address the subtext in a thematically relevant way. That is to say, the subtext of

64 For this story, see *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 128–136, and Jayyusi, *The Adventures*, pp. 65–72.

65 There is not absolute consensus on the degree to which Egyptian Christianity can be seen as reworking ancient Egyptian material, see Behlmer, 'Ancient Egyptian Survivals in Coptic Literature', p. 567–569; and R.G. Bonnel and V.A. Tobin, 'Christ and Osiris: A Comparative Study' in Roland G. Bonnel, Leo Depuydt, Sarah Israelit-Groll and Aincant Arieh Tobin (eds), *Pharaonic Egypt, the Bible and Christianity* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1985) pp. 1–29.

66 See Budge, *Coptic Apocrypha*, pp. 179–216.

the older stories referred to in the *sīra* correspond to the subtext of the *sīra* episode. ‘Mari Girgis’ addresses the victory of the forces of order over those of primeval chaos, echoing the order that Sayf brings to Tiliqān’s people through his defeat of the serpent. However, as in ‘Seth and Apopis’, the victory is temporary and the victor himself brings the threat of chaos. Likewise, Setne Khamwas’ quest for power and knowledge which results in personal disaster is echoed in Sayf’s encounter with ‘Āqiṣa in the pit. Unlike Setne Khamwas, Sayf has the sense to listen to the warning he is given. Finally, ‘The Book of the Resurrection’ has a similar theme to that of the murder of the King of Death in Sayf: the salvation of mankind, or a society, by the action of the Sayf/Jesus figure from the King of Death. Both this story of the Resurrection and the Horus myth upon which it draws deal with the subject of order and chaos. This time they address the restoration of order to a universe which has been taken over by the forces of chaos and destruction. On a subtextual level the various intertextual references in this small episode of *Sīrat Sayf* help to give a more profound dimension to what is ostensibly an entertaining diversion in the narrative and neatly encapsulate both Sayf’s personal spiritual journey and the essential order-chaos struggle at the core of the *sīra*.

The various examples of the Egyptian intertext examined so far show a number of ways in which the Egyptian intertext can be read as informing the *Sayf* narrative at the level of individual motif, narrative fragment and characterisation. There is also a larger intertextual presence in this variant of *Sīrat Sayf*, in the form of one of ancient Egypt’s most important myth cycles, Osirian mythology.

The Osiris Intertext

The Osiris myth has been described by Jan Assman as being a fundamental part of ancient Egyptian culture: “No other myth (or cycle of myths) was even remotely as intensely woven into the cultural life of ancient Egypt, or in so many ways . . . the influence of the Osiris cycle was in no way confined to the official sphere. On the contrary, no other myth was more popular or played as great a role in healing spells, popular tales, and other private literary genres.”⁶⁷ It is extremely complex and consists of several episodes which, as mentioned above, do not seem to have existed as a linked narrative outside or (or until) the version compiled by Plutarch in the first century AD. Although the episodes have often been read and understood in the form presented by Plutarch

67 Assman, *The Search for God*, p. 123.

since then, there are several aspects to the Osiris/Horus myth, each of which is open to interpretation and stand alone as separate episodes.⁶⁸ The Osiris myth, in its many aspects, has been interpreted in various ways, but is most convincingly read as a political myth about kingship and power, “the mythic articulation of the Egyptian concept of the state”.⁶⁹ In this context, it can be seen as an expression of conflict between chaos and order; it shows the forces of order almost destroyed by those of chaos, and the chaotic element later subdued by the ‘human’ embodiment of order.⁷⁰ In addition to being read as a political myth allegorising the succession to the throne, and a foundation myth allegorising the political unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, universalised to become an expression of the battle between the forces of order and chaos within the Egyptian state that must be reconciled under the leadership of the king, it can also be read as an expression of the assertion of male supremacy, or as a fertility myth in which the cycle of death and rebirth is expressed through the mutual obligation between the dead father and the living son. Although the structures and treatment of this subject are different in terms of length and narrative complexity, there are some striking parallels between the Osiris myth and the Qamariyya section of *Sirat Sayf*, in which Sayf’s power struggle with his mother is depicted. This first section of the *sīra* follows a distinct and self-contained pattern and gives the impression of being a complete story within the framework of the *sīra* as a whole, much as some of the narrative fragments within it either could, or do, exist separately. None of the characters in *Sirat Sayf* can be directly related to those in the Osiris myths, and *Sirat Sayf* is by no means a retelling of the Osiris story, but a legacy can be traced in themes, and personality traits and motifs associated with various characters, which does point to existence of an Osirian intertext which informs the *sīra* at a deep, conceptual level, most notably in the preoccupation of both myth and

68 For a brief introduction to Egyptian ideas of Kingship and how they relate to the Osiris myth, see David Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1961), pp. 162–168.

69 “... the influence of the Osiris myth was in no way confined to the official sphere. On the contrary no other myth was more popular or played as great a role in healing spells, popular tales, and other private literary genres. Osiris was not a ‘state god’ like Re and later Amun-Re. From the Middle Kingdom on, at the latest, he was generally recognized as the god of the dead, and his jurisdiction and worship extended to everything mortal... Nevertheless, it remained true that the myth of Osiris retained a distinctively political dimension of meaning, so that it can be designated, with complete justification, as the mythic articulation of the Egyptian concept of the state” (Assman, *The Search for God*, p. 124).

70 See Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol*, pp. 263–264.

sīra with the same fundamental issues of kingship, power, and the integrity of the social unit.

The Osiris Myth

Although there is no specific proof of the cult of Osiris until the inscription of the Pyramid texts some time between 2400 and 2200 BC, according to Rundle Clarke “in these texts he is already fully developed, not only already provided with a complete mythology but a carefully thought-out theology as well”.⁷¹ Rundle Clarke also mentions a ‘symbol of Osiris’ dated to 3000 BC and dates the development of Osirian mythology and theology from its ‘fertility god’ roots back to about 2700 BC.⁷² Worship of Osiris grew more evermore popular with the passing of time, and evolved into the cult of the Serapis bull, which Roman writers such as Plutarch and Diodorus of Sicily have recorded.⁷³ Although the cult of Osiris itself died out sometime after the Roman conquests, there is still evidence that at least some of the ideology associated with Osiris lived on through the Coptic era and beyond.

The three episodes generally accepted as making up the Osiris cycle are Osiris’ murder, the childhood and upbringing of Horus, and ‘The Contendings of Horus and Seth’, in which Horus avenges his father’s murder by Seth. It has been argued, for example by Jan Assmann and Gwyn Griffiths, that these myths were originally completely unrelated and became meshed together over the passage of time as ancient Egyptian religion progressed.⁷⁴ Others, for example Rundle Clark, maintain that Osiris and Horus are fundamentally integral to each other—although he agrees that it would be absurd to state that his nature did not change during the three thousand years he was

71 Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol*, p. 98.

72 The North and South of Egypt were first united in the period between c. 3000 and 2850 BC. This dynasty revered Horus as the High God. In the Second Dynasty (c. 2850–2780 BC) the unified empire fell apart and the South took Seth as its High God. The two kingdoms were reunited during the Third Dynasty (c. 2780–2600 BC). It is during this dynasty that the Osiris legends are believed to have come into circulation.

73 Diodorus appears to have been in Egypt c. 60 BC, and Plutarch c. 50 AD.

74 For Assman’s discussion of the Osiris myth, see Jan Assman, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, tr. David Lorton (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 123–147. Griffiths believes that ‘The Contendings’ can be dated to earlier than the myth of Osiris’ murder. In his opinion it was an essentially political myth about the union of Upper and Lower Egypt which became fused with the mythology of Osiris, the solar or fertility god, at a later date, perhaps due to Osiris’ growing popularity. The character of Seth, in the original scheme Horus’ brother, became transposed to his uncle as he took over the role of Osiris’ murderer. See Gwyn Griffiths, *The Conflict of Horus and Seth*, ch. 1.

worshipped.⁷⁵ The Egyptian (as opposed to Greek) sources frequently refer to the Osiris myth (i.e. the slaying of Osiris by Seth) but they rarely recount the myth in full. This, according to Lichtheim, is due to the fact that “it seems that the slaying of Osiris at the hands of Seth was too awesome an event to be committed to writing. Other parts of the story could be told more fully, especially the vindication of Osiris and of his son Horus, to whom the gods awarded the kingship of Egypt that had belonged to Osiris.”⁷⁶ What is clear, however, is that although there are variations in the myth, probably due to oral transmission over thousands of years, it existed in a basically coherent form which retained its fundamental meaning over time.

Nut, the sky goddess, and her consort Geb, the earth god, brought forth Osiris and Isis, then Seth and Nephthys. Seth had an ‘untimely’ birth as he was born fully grown and ripped his way out of his mother’s side. It is noted in the texts that Nut had no maternal love for him, possibly because of the nature of his birth. Isis became the consort of Osiris, and Nephthys that of Seth.

Osiris grew up to be the king of the golden age in Egypt, the time of perfection at the beginning of the world. He taught the arts of civilisation to his subjects (Plutarch has him leaving Egypt under the governorship of Isis and travelling abroad to civilise the rest of the world and teach them about the afterlife.) This idyllic order was destroyed by Seth, who, during a feast, “tempted Osiris to lie in a chest to see if it would fit him. Having Osiris temporarily at his mercy, Seth and his confederates (and Seth always has confederates) threw the chest into the Nile”,⁷⁷ where it drifted (according to Plutarch) to Byblos.⁷⁸ It was there cast up on the shore and a huge tree grew around it. The king used this tree as the main column in his palace. Meanwhile, Isis had been seeking

75 In his opinion, the exact mythological origins of the story are insignificant, it is the end result which is important. In line with the views of folklorists he sees the Osiris myth as a coherent and living whole with its own meaning, rather than as a bastardised amalgamation of older stories. He argues that throughout Egyptian history the Osiris myth exists as a set of constant motifs, rather than as a fixed text. This corresponds with theories concerning the oral transmission of mythology and accounts for the minor discrepancies between versions which upset Gwyn Griffiths. See Rundle-Clark, *Myth and Symbol*, chs 3–5.

76 Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Volume 2, p. 81.

77 Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol*, p. 103. Also: “Whatever the variation of traditions, Osiris was always reduced to impotence, if not killed, by his wicked brother.” The motif of the chest appears to be specific: Motif Z325#, ‘Sethian chest: made so as to fit only intended victim (Osiris)’. El-Shamy lists this motif as found in tales collected from Egypt, Syria and Morocco.

78 The earlier the source of the myth, the more localised the area in which the corpse drifts.

the body of her husband. She found out that it was within the tree, and ingratiated herself with the king and queen, eventually persuading them to give her the column, from which she removed Osiris' body and returned it to Egypt. Unfortunately, Seth found Osiris' body one night when she was absent, tore it apart, and scattered the pieces.⁷⁹ Isis, helped by Nephthys, set out on another quest to find the pieces of her husband's body and put them together to form the first mummy.⁸⁰ After doing this, Isis tried to bring her husband back to life but was only partially able to do so. She did, however, manage to revive him enough to conceive a son, Horus.

Isis hid Horus in the delta swamps for fear of Seth. He grew up there guarded by Isis, Nephthys and (optionally) seven scorpions (said to represent the Pleiades). There are several myths concerned with his childhood, including one in which, while Isis is absent, Seth approached him in the form of a snake and bit him. Isis had to use her magical powers to save him from death from this poison. According to Plutarch, Horus then grew up and led an army of Osiris' supporters against Seth. There was a period of arbitration between the two, however Horus eventually took up arms against Seth again, vanquished him, and reclaimed his father's throne.⁸¹

According to 'The Contendings', when Horus became adult he went before a council of the gods and tried to reclaim his inheritance from Seth. The council disagreed over who should inherit, as Seth was strong, and Horus still young (the dispute seems to be over the question of direct inheritance by the young son of the dead god as opposed to by the older brother). Isis became furious and threatened the gods, who cast her out of the council and adjourned to the Middle Island to debate the issue, having given the ferryman strict instructions not to allow her passage. However, Isis bribed the ferryman with a gold ring, transformed herself into a beautiful maiden to appeal to Seth, and tricked him into admitting that the inheritance should go to the son, not the brother. Seth was, needless to say, extremely unhappy about this turn of events,

79 "Plutarch and other Greek writers state that Seth cut the body of Osiris in pieces. The Egyptian texts are as reticent regarding the dismemberment as regarding the murder. However, Egyptian mythology presupposes that Seth is capable of doing violence to a corpse—Nut has to cover Osiris' body to hide it." Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, p. 91.

80 According to Plutarch, she was able to find all but one piece, his phallus, which had been swallowed by a fish. This is only mentioned in his version of the myth.

81 See also 'The Myth of the Winged Disk' in Lewis Spence, *Egypt: Myths and Legends* (London: Senate, 1994), pp. 88–91. In this myth, Horus and Ra drive Seth and his followers out of Egypt in a protracted battle. Spence asserts that the myth has a solar aspect, Horus is here identified with Ra and is the sun driving the night away. The story appears to be taken from Plutarch.

and asked the council that he and Horus be allowed to decide the issue by combat. (The unlucky ferryman had his lower legs cut off as punishment). On the council's agreement, the two protagonists took the form of hippopotami and entered the river to fight. Isis, worried for her son, cast a harpoon in the water at Seth, only to hit Horus. Horus called out for her to remove the harpoon, she did so, cast it again, and this time hit Seth. Seth also called out to her to remove it, again she did so. This sympathy for Seth enraged Horus, and he chopped his mother's head off and ran off to the mountains to hide. Thoth replaced Isis' head and the Ennead followed him to the mountains to seek vengeance.⁸² Seth found Horus lying under a tree, gouged out his eyes and buried them "so as to illumine the earth" and returned to the others claiming not to have found him. Horus was later found by Hathor (another aspect of Isis), who healed his eyes with gazelle milk. The two complainants again went before the council, where they were told to make their peace to give the other gods some rest.

However, Seth was not willing to let the matter lie, and made sexual advances on Horus in an attempt to prove him unmanly and unworthy of receiving his inheritance.⁸³ Horus was worried by these, as they damaged his eye, and went to his mother for help. When Isis saw Seth's semen on her son's hand she chopped it off, threw it in the river, and replaced it with a new one. She then devised a plan by which Horus put some of his semen on the lettuce which grew in Seth's garden, so that he would unwittingly eat it.⁸⁴ Soon after these events, Seth announced to the council of gods that Horus was unworthy to inherit as he had allowed unnatural acts to be done to him and Horus made a counter-claim against Seth. To decide the issue, the gods called out to the seed of each of them. Seth's replied from the river where Horus' hands had been thrown, whereas Horus' replied from inside Seth's stomach and then appeared on his head as a golden disc which was appropriated by the god Thoth who thereafter wore it on his head as a decoration. Seth again challenged Horus to fight, this time in 'stone' boats. Horus won this contest by trickery: he made a wooden boat and covered it with gypsum. When Seth saw this, he thought the boat was truly stone and fashioned his own from a mountain peak. Needless to say, Seth's boat sank immediately. He immediately transformed himself into a

82 In some versions of the myth Horus is described as violating Isis sexually rather than cutting her head off. See Gwyn Griffiths, *The Conflict of Horus and Seth*, p. 48.

83 "During the night Seth caused his phallus to become stiff and inserted it between Horus's thighs. Then Horus placed his hands between his thighs and received Seth's semen" (Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, p. 120).

84 Lettuce was considered an aphrodisiac by the Ancient Egyptians and was associated with sexual fertility.

hippopotamus and attacked Horus; this time Horus won. Seth was manacled and entrusted to Isis. Both gods then returned to the council of the gods where Seth conceded that Horus was the rightful inheritor. Horus was installed in his father's place with Seth subjugated to him, and Osiris was restored to his rightful place in the pantheon of the gods.

Osiris and Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan

The Ancient Egyptians believed in a time of perfection at the beginning of the world, the 'First Time'. Osiris was regarded as the king of Egypt during this Golden Age who taught the arts of civilisation to its subjects and created and embodied its perfection. He was the civilising and unifying god, and he was also the incarnation of God on earth:

The Pharaoh... was the manifestation of the godhead on earth, ... the ritual of the Osiris cycle connected him with the powers of nature. On the earthly plane he was the supreme man, heroic warrior and hunter, champion of right, uniquely vigorous and virtuous. All beneficial power flowed into the world through him.⁸⁵

There are basic similarities between this description of Osiris and the portrayal of Sayf in *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*. Although Sayf is by no means the incarnation of God on earth, the religious aspect to his character is a major element in the *sīra*. As a civilising, beneficent, religious conqueror he too reflects an established Osirian heroic stereotype. Although the pattern of the conquering, founding, converting, hero is an Islamic pattern (one only has to look at Muhammad, the ultimate Islamic hero) to which Sayf undoubtedly corresponds, the central significance of his diversion of the Nile to the plot, in conjunction with Sayf's persona as the founder and civiliser of Egypt, brings in interesting resonances of a specifically Egyptian, Osirian conceptualisation of the relationship between kingship, divine power and the river. The various prophesies about the diversion of the Nile mean that, like Osiris, he is inextricably associated with the river and the control of its flow:

Thy nature, O Osiris, is more mysterious than that of any other god... Indeed thou art the Nile, and thou art mighty upon the river-banks at the beginning of the season [of inundation]. Men and gods live through the emanations which flow from thee.⁸⁶

85 Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol*, p. 30.

86 Ramses IV, from Budge, *Coptic Apocrypha*, p. lxvii.

Whereas Osiris *was* the Nile, Sayf is the man who makes the fourth river of heaven flow on its pre-destined path through Egypt:

“O Shaykh, what is that river, with sweet, fresh water?” King Sayf asked [the ascetic].

“That is one of the three rivers that flow through the lands and bring water to the desert. As for the fourth, this you will cause to flow, and its name is the Nile,” the shaykh replied.⁸⁷

Although Sayf may not be the river, he is the cause and means of its existence in its current course, and thus the cause and means of the existence of Egypt itself. This corresponds significantly with the nature of Osiris’ singular identification with the Nile. The Nile is inextricably associated with divine rule in ancient Egyptian thought, and, as Frankfort says in his discussion of ancient kingship in the Near East, “Neither in Syria nor in Mesopotamia do we find a parallel for the very specific relationship which existed between Osiris and the Nile”.⁸⁸

According to Rundle Clark “The greatest religious achievement of the Egyptians was to take this general fertility god [Osiris] and make him into the saviour of the dead; or, more exactly, the saviour from death”.⁸⁹ At the risk of stretching the point, in *Sīrat Sayf* Sayf too is a ‘saviour from death’ in that he brings the message of eternal life to a variety of non-Muslim peoples. Some of these peoples instantly recognise the truth of the Islamic faith and convert (essentially) voluntarily:

[King Sayf said to his friend Sābik al-Thālath], “It is my wish that your people abandon the worship of Saturn and worship Almighty God, for Saturn is merely one of many stars and nothing should rightfully be worshipped other than God, the Living, Self-subsisting Sovereign.”

“Where is your God, so that we can worship him with you?” said Sābik al-Thālath. “If we see him we can join you in worshipping him, once we have seen that his excellence matches yours,⁹⁰ so tell us where he is.” King Sayf replied, “[God], the Living, sees but cannot be seen, He is in the

87 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 78.

88 Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, p. 290. See also Quirke, *Exploring Religion*, pp. 125–129, for the concept of travel on the Nile as a metaphor for divine movement.

89 Rundle Clarke, *Myth and Symbol*, p. 235.

90 The text has *wa-idhā ra’īynāhu fa’āla fi’ālak nataba’uk*, ‘if we see him behave as you do, we will follow you’.

highest place, time does not pass for Him, and no [one] place encompasses Him. His throne is in heaven and His power is on earth; He is One, alone, unique, eternal. He has no partner and no equal. Nothing resembles Him, and He has no associate or offspring. He has no place and no abode, and those who create partners for Him blaspheme, and they will enter the Fire on the Day of Resurrection.”

The narrator said: When Sābik al-Thālath heard these words, his body shook. He was stupefied and overcome with awe by the description of God, the Most High, and quickly said, “I believe you, King of the Age. Your words are clear proof. Instruct me how to enter your religion, and how to follow your path to truth.”⁹¹

Others already recognise the One God (often after having been visited by al-Khiḍr)⁹² and are awaiting Sayf’s arrival:

[The Princess Nāhid said], “One day, a voice came to me in my dreams, saying: ‘Do not grieve, Nāhid, for God will deliver you from your sufferings; he has decreed your release this very day at the hands of King Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan, who will slay the accursed Snatcher . . . The voice brought me, too, the glad news that you will marry me and be my husband, and command me to embrace your religion and follow your creed, for I am to be your companion too in Paradise. And when I asked the voice about your religion, and what it is you worship, I was told: ‘This man worships Almighty God, and there is no God but He.’ Then I woke from my sleep, saying ‘There is no God but God’ . . .”⁹³

Just as Plutarch’s Osiris moved on to civilising the rest of the world after founding Egypt, Sayf demonstrates a sporadic tendency to teach the various peoples he encounters the arts of civilization. Although this is not a major trope, Sayf does, for example, teach Tiliqān’s people the arts of riding, leather-working, and the crafts necessary to make saddles and bridles while on his quest to

91 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 479.

92 Such as, for example, the sorcerer Saysabān, who is converted by al-Khiḍr because the Muslims would have difficulty guiding the Nile waters through his lands if he opposed them. Al-Khiḍr visits him in his dreams and offers him the choice between an apple or a burning spear: if he chooses Islam, he gets the apple, and if not, death. See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, pp. 248–249.

93 This translation is from Jayyusi, *The Adventures*, pp. 64–65, with minor amendments. See also *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 140. These women are the first people to be converted by Sayf.

Solomon's Treasury, and towards the end of the *sīra* he teaches the inhabitants of Ḥabasha how to slaughter and cook food in a way "like that of the coming days".⁹⁴ However, although Sayf begins converting the peoples he encounters almost immediately after his own conversion by al-Shaykh al-Jiyād, he is not a true religious crusader until the last section of *Sīrat Sayf*.⁹⁵ In the first two sections of the *sīra*, he (and his sons) continually find themselves cast out and alone in a variety of societies which they more often than not convert. The emphasis of their adventures is on righting wrongs and bringing order into a chaotic situation. It is not until the third section involving the hunt for Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn that Sayf embarks on a truly expansionist religious campaign. This could be said to follow the Osirian pattern of the wandering civiliser as much as the Muhammadan pattern of the warrior crusader.

Another possible ancient Egyptian, and Osirian, parallel can be seen in Sayf's marriages to a number of women who are also his adoptive or foster sisters.⁹⁶ As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sayf marries six women in the first section of the *sīra*, of whom two can immediately be classed as foster sisters: Shāma is the daughter of King Afrāḥ, Sayf's adoptive father, and Ṭāma is the daughter of 'Āqīla, one of his adoptive mothers. This is an unusual occurrence in the genre—marriage to cousins is not uncommon, for example 'Antar's marriage to 'Abla, but the motif of marriage to a foster sister is morally ambiguous in Islamic terms.⁹⁷ The fact that Sayf, Shāma and Ṭāma have not shared their adoptive mother's milk when infants is made explicitly clear in the text; Sayf is abducted and cared for by Umm 'Aqīṣa until he is weaned, and does not meet 'Āqīla and Ṭāma until he is an adult. This avoidance of milk-brother and sister taboos does make their relationships more acceptable, but the underlying motif remains. Although the case for this 'sister-wife' trope is tenuous, it is

94 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 4, p. 110. Sayf teaches Tiliqān's people various skills in vol. 2, p. 213.

95 Sayf is converted vol. 1, p. 103. His first converts are Princess Nāhid and her companions whom he rescues from the *mārid* al-Mukhtaṭif, 'the Snatcher' (vol. 1, p. 141).

96 In the course of the *sīra*, Sayf marries seven women who can be listed as his primary wives: Shāma (vol. 1, p. 284), Nāhid (vol. 1, p. 374), Munyat al-Nufūs (vol. 1, p. 421), al-Jīza (vol. 1, p. 510), Umm al-Ḥayā' (vol. 1, p. 510), Ṭāma (vol. 1, p. 527) and Sabiḥa (vol. 4, p. 51). Although he does marry others in his various adventures, these play transient roles in minor episodes.

97 See the entry for 'Sister' in El-Shamy, *Folk Traditions* (vol. 2, pp. 464–466). There are several examples of the brother-sister incest taboo being broken, all of which are depicted in a negative light. Love and marriage between foster sister and brother appears to be regarded in a more favourable light, but is still not common. For more on the brother and sister relationship in Egyptian and Arabic folklore generally, see El-Shamy, *Beyond Oedipus*.

an interesting coincidence that Sayf's two foster sisters, Shāma and Ṭāma, are the most 'important' wives in this section of *Sayf* in terms of their function in the plot, and that their roles rapidly become virtually insignificant immediately after Qamariyya's death and the end of the first section of the *sīra*. From this point onwards, Munyat al-Nufūs becomes the love of Sayf's life. The presence of 'Āqiṣa, another foster sister, and of several mother figures, two of whom are mothers to Shāma and Ṭāma, does lend weight to reading a conceptual association between Sayf's wives and Isis, and it is also worth noting that the concept of marriage between 'Āqiṣa and Sayf is brought up in the story of the King of Death, but is not carried through.⁹⁸ Thus, at least in the first section of *Sayf*, the motif of the sister-wife can be read as playing a significant role. The original relationship may have been toned down, but the underlying motif remains, as do its associations with the character of the protective, magical mother-figure.⁹⁹

Sīrat Sayf and 'The Contendings of Horus'

Perhaps the most interesting potential connection between 'The Contendings' and *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* is in the portrayal of the relationship between Sayf and his mother. In the first section of the *sīra* there are several possible points of identification between Sayf and Horus, and Qamariyya and Seth. Horus, like many mythological heroes, is characterised as the restorer of order to a chaotic universe, which is the fundamental similarity between him and Sayf. The intertextual connection between the two is established through underlying similarities in the pattern of their respective stories and by the intriguing characterisation of the female characters, primarily Qamariyya and 'Āqiṣa. The story of the struggle between Horus and Seth is a complex, multi-faceted and timeless myth which lends itself to a number of interpretations—predominantly political (the historical story of the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt), sexual (the assertion of male supremacy), or as an expression of the sacrificial crisis (the conflict of order and chaos). The end result is that Osiris and Horus regain their rightful place in the natural hierarchy and Seth is subjugated. All of these interpretations have connotations for association of 'The Contendings' with *Sīrat Sayf*: the first in terms of the idea of Sayf as a founder and unifier, the second in respect of the identification of Qamariyya with Seth, and the third in terms of the expression of the sacrificial crisis in

98 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, pp. 225–226 and the discussion of the story of the King of Death earlier in this chapter.

99 The significance of Sayf's relationship with 'Āqiṣa will be discussed in more detail later, as will that of his various adoptive mothers.

Sayf: Just as there are grounds for identification of Sayf with Osiris, there are grounds for his identification with Osiris' son Horus. Identification of Sayf with both, rather than just one, of these figures is not, in fact, inconsistent, as Osiris and Horus were regarded as aspects of the same god and their stories were inextricably intertwined.¹⁰⁰ Rather than detracting from the identification of Sayf with Horus, the associations between Sayf and Osiris are intrinsic to it. Like Osiris, Sayf is attributed with founding the Egyptian state and a golden age of peace and prosperity. However, he can also be seen as a Horus-figure, re-establishing and expanding the peaceful state of his father, Dhū Yazan. Just as Horus was regarded as the prototype of the normal Egyptian man, Sayf is set up as the prototype of the Muslim Egyptian. Dhū Yazan may only play a small physical role in the *sīra*, but it is one of great symbolic importance; it is at the point of his death that the forces of destruction enter the scene and his son is cast out of his rightful place. Whereas in the Osiris myth this golden age is disrupted by the arrival of Seth in the universe, Sayf's struggle against the forces of chaos in the *sīra* is embodied in his struggle against Qamariyya, who is possibly his father's murderess—the narrative is deliberately vague on the cause of Dhū Yazan's death:

The king became gravely ill, by God's grace. He grew sicker, and no one knows the truth of the matter but Almighty God. It might be that Qamariyya did something to him in her wickedness, or that it was God's will.¹⁰¹

It is identification of Sayf with Horus, the re-born aspect of the god Osiris, which appears to underlie much of the common ground between Osirian mythology and *Sīrat Sayf*. There are common aspects to the underlying patterns of the first section of *Sayf* and 'The Contendings' which can be summarised as follows:

Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan

Dhū Yazan dies in suspicious circumstances, society thrown into chaos.

The Contendings of Horus and Seth

Osiris murdered, society thrown into chaos.

¹⁰⁰ "When he (the king) lived he was Horus, and when dead he was Osiris" (Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology*, p. 66).

¹⁰¹ *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 39.

Sayf is born, Qamariyya casts him out/hides him in the desert.

Horus is born, Isis hides him in the swamps for fear of Seth.

Series of adventures during which Sayf acquires several female helpers/wives

Series of myths about his childhood, many involve female helpers.

Sayf tries to regain his inheritance and undergoes a series of trials with a sexual aspect

Horus tries to regain his inheritance and undergoes a series of trials with a sexual aspect

Qamariyya is killed in a manner reminiscent of the Seth ritual¹⁰²

Seth is defeated, in later versions of the myth killed by the Seth ritual

Sayf takes back his rightful place in the world order

Horus (and his parents) regain their rightful places in the world order

By the end of this first section of the *sīra*, Sayf has moved from being an out-cast child to being a king on a throne which is his by birthright by means of his removal of his usurper, Qamariyya, as has Horus at the end of his struggle with Seth. He is then equipped to embark on the task of founding a dynasty, the central theme of the rest of the *sīra*.

Qamariyya and Seth

Although the conflict between Sayf and Sayf Ar‘ad is established in the early stages of the *sīra*, in reality Qamariyya is Sayf’s primary enemy in the first section of *Sirat Sayf* and her character can be interpreted as essentially Sethian. Identification between Qamariyya and Seth may not be immediately apparent but relies on a number of deeply buried correspondences. To clarify these the underlying nature of Seth’s persona must first be explored.

The Osiris/Horus-Seth conflict was seen by the ancient Egyptians as another expression of the conflict between Ra and his Eye. The religious and mythological symbolism of the Eye is complex and has been summarised by Rundle Clark:

Eye = Flame = Destructive Goddess = Cobra = Crown¹⁰³

¹⁰² The Seth ritual is discussed below, pp. 187–189.

¹⁰³ Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol*, p. 220. For a discussion of the symbolism of the Eye in Egyptian religion and mythology, and its relation to the Osiris myth, see pp. 218–230.

Briefly, the Eye is identified as feminine because mankind was born from the tears of rage it shed when it returned from searching for Shu and Tefnut in the Primal Abyss only to find that its place had been supplanted by ‘the Great One’ (i.e. the sun).¹⁰⁴ Ra then took the Eye, which had taken the form of a cobra, and fastened it to his forehead as protection. Thus, “[The] uraeus snake on the forehead of Rê, marking him a warlike ruler, may be specified as a separate goddess in Egyptian mythology.”¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, the Eye is also male because it is a part of Ra, the supreme God:

The Eye is the striking-power of the High God in all his manifestations. Strictly it was Horus the son of Isis who overthrew Seth, but Horus is only a symbol of the divine spirit as victor, so his aggressiveness really comes from the High God, whose aggressiveness is in the Eye. Seth is the eternal enemy, so he, too, is not only a figure in the Osiris myth but a form of the essential hostile power, whose first form was the serpent dragon of the waters who was overthrown by the High God in primeval times.¹⁰⁶

The struggle depicted in ‘The Contendings’ is therefore essentially a struggle between the destructive and constructive forces of the universe, those of chaos and order. Thus, as Stephen Quirke points out, “In writings and images, Seth regularly stands opposite Horus, as disorder twinned with or balancing order”.¹⁰⁷

According to the above, Seth and Horus can both be identified as integrating male and female aspects. However, Seth is identified in the myth as embodying a more feminine aspect whereas Horus is essentially masculine. Seth is the loner and outsider among the gods, the god of foreign lands.¹⁰⁸ Egyptian mythology also hints that his marriage to Nephthys was unconsummated, and

104 There is an alternate, and much older, version of the Egyptian creation myth in which mankind are supposed to have resulted from an act of divine masturbation and/or spitting. See Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol*, pp. 41–5.

105 Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, p. 106. Also: “The cobra is the ideal form of the female serpent; in fact, a rearing cobra became the determining sign for goddess in the later stages of the hieroglyphic script” (Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol*, p. 239).

106 Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol*, p. 223.

107 Quirke, *Exploring Religion*, p. 130.

108 Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, p. 67, pp. 109–116. Te Velde states that, from the earliest times, Seth was identified with the desert and the uninhabited world, and was feared as a demon of the desert. He is also the god of abortion and miscarriage, illness, storms and disorder. See also Quirke, *Exploring Religion*, pp. 130–131, in which he discusses the various animal representations of Seth, commenting that ‘Depictions show Seth as an animal of unidentified species, perhaps a formalised rendering of a known species or perhaps

that her son Anubis was fathered by Osiris.¹⁰⁹ The isolation of Seth is sharply in contrast with the pairings of the other gods of the Ennead who were born and remained in pairs for eternity—each pair of gods consists of a male and female aspect, with the exception of Seth. Seth's essential nature as the embodiment of chaos is portrayed, to a great extent, through this metaphor of sexual ambiguity and gender confusion. The ancient Egyptian culture was one in which much of their religious mythology was sexually expressed. As C.J. Eyre states, "The negative attitude of the Chester Beatty Dream Book towards the Sethian man and the disorder of his behaviour was also associated with the extent and range of his sexual behaviour."¹¹⁰ The concept of sexual ambiguity in the persona of Seth is highlighted in ancient Egyptian myths. Te Velde mentions two stories, both involving homosexuality. The first of these is that of Seth's "coition with [the goddess] Anat", who "is dressed like a man". The second is the story of his assault on Horus.¹¹¹ Although these incidents are generally accepted to highlight Seth's role as the instigator of chaos into an ordered universe, and it is generally agreed that the theft of Seth's seed is symbolic of the idea that Horus subdues Seth's power and capacity for destruction to such a level that it can be contained, they also display a sexual ambivalence which can also be seen to highlight the idea of the ambiguity of Seth's gender.¹¹² The fact that Seth is later castrated by Horus in some versions of the myth enhances his lack of masculinity further. It is significant that as the myth developed through time Seth is made subservient to Horus by the removal of his most essentially male characteristic, which, although not making Seth more inherently female, can only leave his feminine aspect as more predominant. Although castration is an obvious symbol of deprivation of power, it is undeniable that the idea of gender is closely tied up with sexual organs. This ambiguity of gender is a characteristic shared by Qamariyya in *Sayf* and is one of the most apparently inconsistent and confusing elements of the *sīra*.

In light of this aspect of gender confusion as a fundamental of character, one of the stories in El-Shamy's *Folktales of Egypt* also has relevance. He finds

intended as a compilation of features that never existed, the ultimate portrayal of anarchic disorder' (p. 130).

109 Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, p. 30 and Spence, *Egyptian Myth and Legend*, p. 97.

110 C.J. Eyre, 'Crime and Adultery in Ancient Egypt', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 70 (1984), pp. 92–106, p. 95.

111 Both Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, p. 37.

112 "The testicles of Seth represent the savage, elementary, yet undifferentiated urges which require to be shaped and integrated before they can be truly fruitful" (Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, p. 56).

that the second half of 'The Black Crow and the White Cheese' has echoes of 'The Contendings', and of the myth of Osiris' murder:¹¹³ The hero's mother sends him on a series of impossible quests, in the hope that he will be killed, leaving her free to marry her lover who is frightened of the boy's strength. On his return from one of these quests:

The boy stared at the chief robber, and the man dropped from fear. His mother became very angry, took the sword and killed him [her son]. She and the chief robber cut him into a hundred pieces and put him in a box and threw it into the river.¹¹⁴

The hero is later found by his wife (a princess he has rescued from becoming an offering in the annual crocodile sacrifice), put back together, and revived with the water of life he had previously obtained on one of the fraudulent quests undertaken for his mother. He then returns to his mother, who doesn't recognise him and falls in love with him, and kills her in revenge. He spares his mother's lover, who then asks to spend his life as the boy's servant. It is interesting that this story shares with *Sayf* the uncommon (in Middle Eastern folklore) motif of the male child's repeated attempted murder by his mother, who fears that he is a threat to her, and the motif of the erotically charged reunion between mother and son.¹¹⁵ It is possible that, over time, the anti-hero of the Osiris myth has shifted from being a feminine man to a female.¹¹⁶

113 El-Shamy, *Folktales of Egypt*, pp. 14–23. This story was narrated by an orthodox Copt from Cairo.

114 This episode contains the Osirian motif of the Eye as integral to the conflict, but appears to rely more upon the idea of the Evil Eye than the Eye as an expression of Horus and Seth's conflict. The motif of the Osiris figure staring at his enemy until he drops from fear echoes the 'The Book of the Resurrection' in which Jesus' corpse stares at Death who drops to the ground in terror.

115 See *Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 42, pp. 218–223, p. 288, p. 337, p. 361, p. 391 and pp. 500–502 for Qamariyya's attempts to kill Sayf.

116 In this context, El-Shamy's comment that, with regard to 'The Black Crow and the White Cheese', "It is worth noting that the religious account of Isis and Osiris . . . particularly with reference to the themes of treachery, dismemberment, resuscitation, and loss of phallus, overlaps with the ancient Egyptian tale of 'The Two Brothers,' type 318, *The Faithless Wife*" is especially relevant (El-Shamy, *Folktales of Egypt*, p. 243). In 'The Two Brothers', although the conflict is between two male characters, it is instigated and furthered by the machinations of an amoral woman. For a translation of this tale see Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 92–108. On its relationship to the Osiris myth, see Baines, 'Myth and Literature', pp. 373–377.

Qamariyya is Sayf's primary enemy throughout the Qamariyya section. She has one of the most enigmatic and sometimes self-contradictory characters in *Sīrat Sayf*. She is also one of the few women in the *sīra* genre who attempt to cold-bloodedly kill their child.¹¹⁷ Expulsion of the infant from the social unit because of the avenging or jealous father is common in folklore,¹¹⁸ and

117 Lyons lists only one example of a mother actually murdering her son under M34.6, 'Mother, (unnatural)'. This is in *Sīrat Baybars* (see his *Arabian Epic*, vol. 3, p. 440). Dalila, in *Qiṣṣat al-Muqaddam 'Alī al-Zaybāq* also murders and kidnaps several children (although none of them are her own). All the other listings he gives under this heading refer to *Sīrat Sayf* and Qamariyya's attempted murder of Sayf. It is interesting that all his examples are taken from Egyptian *sīras*. In the comparative index (also under M34.6) he gives several examples (notably from 'The Queen of Sheba' and the *Shahnamah*) of mothers abandoning or exposing their sons in order to retain their sovereignty. This idea of abandonment of the child because he is a threat to the mother's power also occurs in veiled form at the very beginning of *Qiṣṣat Firūz Shāh*. A Persian king rapes his daughter, Ward Shāh, and dies after which she takes over the throne and converts her people from fire worship to 'the monotheism of Abraham'. She gives birth to a son, Darab, whom she sets adrift in a chest with a protective amulet, on the grounds that he might punish her for fire worship when he comes of age. El-Shamy's *Folk Traditions* has several pertinent entries under S12, 'Cruel mother' (S12.2, 'Cruel mother kills child'; S12.2.0.1§, 'Mother kills her own son'; S12.2.4§, 'Violated woman murders her newly-born infant').

118 For a particularly relevant example in the current context, see Aboubakr Chraïbi's summary of the story of Sayf al-Tijān as found in the Reinhart MS version of the *Thousand and One Nights* (Aboubakr Chraïbi, *Contes nouveaux des 1001 Nuits: Étude du manuscrit Reinhardt* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1996), pp. 158–169). The story contains overall parallels with the first part of *Sayf* in that it recounts King Sharhabil's adventures, his marriage and the subsequent birth of his son, Sayf al-Tijān, who is then cast out from his family and later reunited with them, concluding with the story of his dowry quest and romance. However, the section dealing with Sayf al-Tijān's childhood is particularly relevant. According to Chraïbi's account of the story, following a dream that his son will bring disaster on his lands King Sharhabil, Sayf al-Tijān's father, orders ten of his men to take his infant son and his wet-nurse to a distance of five days travel, kill them both on the sixth day, and return with their heads. Before they depart, Sayf al-Tijān's mother gives the wet-nurse a valuable precious stone. When the sixth day of their journey arrives, the men find themselves unable to carry out their orders and instead leave their charges in a cave and return home, telling the King that they have buried the heads en route. The wet-nurse and child are discovered by a hunter whose dog enters their cave in pursuit of a gazelle. The wet-nurse shows the hunter the jewel the queen has given her and pretends to be a lost princess. The hunter, it emerges, is an amir named Jāhim al-Najwī, and he takes the strays in to his house, and adopts the infant as his son. Time passes, and 'Umar (as Sayf al-Tijān has been named) becomes a valiant warrior. Eventually, through a twist of fate, he ends up fighting in King Sharhabil's army when Sharhabil sends to Jāhim al-Najwī for help against a Sayf al-Sawārim. Following the resolution of this battle, during

Qamariyya appears to take on this persona in the absence of any real father figure. However, the conflict between mother and son is the main theme of the first section of *Sayf* and Qamariyya's consistent animosity towards Sayf indicates that her initial adoption of an aggressive 'masculine' attitude towards her son cannot be merely a narrative twist designed to fulfil genre conventions in the absence of a convenient father. As *Sīrat Sayf* has been in circulation as a fluid popular text for at least four hundred years, it would be presumptuous to deny some significant underlying pattern and meaning to both Qamariyya's unusual behaviour and the lack of a father as a fixed part of the story pattern. It is generally accepted that in folklore "the heroine may be helped by a cow or fairy godmother while she is hindered by a wicked stepmother. Similarly, in male centred fairytales, the donor figure and the villain may both be male, suggesting a son's ambivalence towards his father."¹¹⁹ Although Dundes is here talking about tales, the same patterns can be found in all folklore genres from all cultures, albeit from different narrative points of view. With regard to *Sīrat Sayf*, the most immediately striking thing about Sayf's passage into adulthood is his father's absence from the story and the enmity between him and Qamariyya—Sayf Ar'ad is too remote from the action to truly take on the persona of the father-destroyer. It is also interesting that the most important helpers, or donor figures, Sayf has at this stage are female (ʿĀqiṣa, ʿĀqila, Shāma and Ṭama). Although there are male donor figures in the *sīra*, in the initial stages they tend to take the form of followers, for example Sa'dūn and ʿAyrūḍ, or ascetics who guide Sayf on his spiritual, as opposed to practical, path. These male helpers do not tend to facilitate the action as the female ones do. As the *sīra* progresses this gradually changes, and by the end Sayf is almost totally reliant on male donor figures, however this does not really occur until the end of the Wedding Quest section.

In her introduction to *The Adventures of Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan*, Jayyusi also highlights the unusual characterisation of Qamariyya, and puts forward the theory that she may be based on the thirteenth-century Queen Shajar al-Durr:

One feature of the tale that is especially salient here is the characterization of Sayf's mother, which does not fit into the patterns of characterization of the 'mother' figure in Arabic tales, either traditional or

which Sayf al-Tijān valiantly defeats Sayf al-Sawārim in single combat, Sayf al-Tijān's real mother encounters him and 'la vix du sang lui fit sentir que ce ne pouvait être que son fils' (p. 162). The story here has many parallels with *Sīrat Sayf*, but it is significant that it is Sayf al-Tijān's *father* that casts him out, not his mother.

119 Dundes, 'Structuralism and Folklore', p. 197.

contemporary... But what could such an anomalous characterization suggest... Might it not reflect some popular cultural responses to the real-life story of Queen Shajar al-Durr, which had unfolded in Egypt in the mid-thirteenth century, within recent historical memory? Like the figure of Qamariyya, Sayf's mother in the epic, the real-life Shajar al-Durr had been a foreign-born slave girl who married a sultan after conceiving his child and who acceded to power on his death. Shajar al-Durr then ruled on her own for some three months, until she married the military commander Aybak, who took the title to the throne. Subsequently, lest she be removed from power, she had this second husband, the sultan, killed in the bath when she learned that he was planning to take a second wife.¹²⁰

The persona of Shajar al-Durr may indeed have had some influence on the portrayal of Qamariyya, and there are undoubtedly parallels between them, but these parallels neither explain her characterisation nor necessarily detract from the possibility of Osirian influences on her character. An episode from another Egyptian *sīra*, *Sīrat Baybars*, casts an interesting light on the issue.¹²¹ At one point the wise and good Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ is inadvertently poisoned by one of his concubines, Qūt al-Qulūb, an event which has been planned by the anti-hero Aybak. Al-Ṣāliḥ's wife, Fātima Shajarat al-Durr, at first wishes to rule in his stead 'being of royal stock'. However, the emir of Mecca persuades her that a woman cannot be a legitimate ruler, and she is coerced into marrying Aybak, who then becomes Sultan. Their marriage comes to an end soon afterwards when Aybak marries a second wife and "tells her that the only thing wrong with her is that 'the boy Baibars plays with you'. Al-Ṣāliḥ appears to her in a vision telling her to avenge her honour. She takes a sword, cuts off Aybak's right hand, and then kills him. Aybak's son Aḥmad attacks her and she falls to her death."¹²²

Significantly, in *Sīrat Baybars* Shajar al-Durr is regarded in a sympathetic light and her murder of Aybak is presented as rightful revenge for his outrageous accusations about her relations with her adopted son, Baybars. In this legendary version of historical reality Fatima Shajarat al-Durr is interpreted as the protective mother figure and her characterisation has little in common with that of Qamariyya. This does not prove that Shajarat al-Durr did not have associations with a Qamariyya type persona, but it does prove that one cannot

120 Jayyusi, *The Adventures of Sayf*, p. xxiii.

121 See Lyons, *Arabian Epic*, vol. 3, pp. 116–121, for a summary.

122 Lyons, *Arabian Epic*, vol. 3, p. 120.

completely explain Qamariyya's characterisation through her possible identification with her. What is even more interesting, although admittedly extremely tenuous, is the possible identification of elements in the above episode in *Sīrat Baybars* which correspond to Osirian mythology and are closely linked with the character of Shajarat al-Dūr. Firstly, there is the theme of murder of the good and wise hero (al-Ṣāliḥ) by the anti-hero (Aybak). Secondly, there is the idea of the sexually denigratory slur of the son by the anti-hero. Thirdly, this sexual slur is closely followed by the motif of cutting off of the hand, although in this case it is the hand of the anti-hero (one could argue that the motif of removal of the right hand might be a veiled equivalent to the motif of castration). Fourthly, the theme of revenge of the murder of the father (Aybak) by the son (Aḥmad) is present, albeit somewhat overturned. Finally, Shajarat al-Durr, like Qamariyya, falls to her death. As will be discussed later, this bears certain similarities to the Seth ritual, in which wax statues of Seth were symbolically 'killed'. Thus, examination of the implications of Shajarat al-Durr in *Sīrat Baybars* indicates that, in terms of folk culture, she may have had as many connotations in terms of Osirian mythology as she had in her own historical right.

When Qamariyya attempts to murder Sayf at the beginning of the *sīra*, a contradiction of motifs occurs. She simultaneously takes on the role of the destroying parent and the protective mother who tries to save her baby from some external threat by abandoning it. Qamariyya first tries to starve him for forty days. When that fails, she tries to cut off her infant son's head with a sword, but she is dissuaded from this by his nurse who catches her just in time.¹²³ The nurse persuades her instead to take the baby out into the desert and abandon him, so Qamariyya instead abandons Sayf in the desert, carefully leaving him in the shade of a tree with his head resting on a bag containing a thousand dinars:

The nurse rode one of the two horses, and Qamariyya and her son the second. They left the city and travelled through hills, plains and mountains for four days and nights. On the fifth day Qamariyya looked around her and saw that they had arrived in a wide valley with beautiful meadows. She spotted a thorn tree and, dismounting there and then, went over to it and, smiling happily, put the child down with the bag containing the thousand dinars under his tiny head. God had removed all pity from her,

123 *A dāya* is a woman or nurse entrusted with the care of a child, which doesn't have an exact equivalent in English (see, for example, Lane's *Lexicon*).

and all compassion from her heart. She left him and went on her way, happy with what she had done, without a care in the world.¹²⁴

Although the text makes it very clear that Qamariyya's motives are bad, that she has no pity for her son and is callously abandoning him to his death, treasure is left with the child in the hope that he will be found and looked after, as he in fact is. Rather than giving us an avenging father who tries to kill his son while the mother protects him, here the nurse can be seen to take on the protective role, in averting Qamariyya's infanticide and ensuring the child is left with money and jewels. But there is also a very apparant element of confusion between Qamariyya's actions in going along with this and her desire to kill her son. Qamariyya's nature is essentially destructive. Her initial reaction to the birth of her son is dismay at the possibility she will lose her usurped throne to him: she wishes to destroy Sayf primarily because he is a threat to her power and position as Queen. This characterisation has similarities with Seth's in 'The Contendings'. Like Seth, Qamariyya has murdered the rightful king and taken his throne for herself. Like Seth, she is a close relative of the murdered king, from the same generation, and seeks to disinherit the rightful younger heir. Furthermore, just as Seth is the ultimate outsider in ancient Egyptian mythology, Qamariyya is the outsider in *Sīrat Sayf* who embodies the forces of chaos within the society of Madīnat al-Ḥamrā'. This is illustrated initially in terms of her origins, race and colour: she is a black slave brought from a far away land to the court of Sayf Ar'ad and then shipped off to seduce and murder Dhū Yazan. Her status as an outsider is emphasised when her hunger for power alienates her former master and ally, Sayf Ar'ad, who eventually sends an army to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' against her.

The underlying issue behind Qamariyya's behaviour is the overturning of expected gender roles and the disruptive effect this has on the world order. This ambiguity is expressed through the overturning of a traditionally masculine story pattern, the struggle for supremacy between father and son. While it is usual for male characters to take on female aspects in folklore, generally in terms of appropriating the feminine regenerative powers, or in terms of demasculisation or appropriation of feminine aspects to signify their lack of masculinity, it is more unusual for females to take on masculine attributes. As Dundes has pointed out:

... male chauvinism in folklore is not limited to denying women the right to assume male roles or practice activities normally associated with

124 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 44.

males. Male chauvinism also includes men usurping roles or activities normally associated with women . . . The most obvious example concerns the ability to bear children. From the creation of Eve from Adam's rib and Noah's building his ark to float around for approximately nine months right down to modern folklore, we find countless instances of males denying female procreativity and in fact appropriating such activity for themselves. Patriarchal societies evidently needed male creation narratives to bolster their sense of male superiority.¹²⁵

Dundes goes on to say that "Whereas the would-be attempt of women to act like men . . . is singled out for scorn, there is no comparable conscious criticism of men's usurpation of the female child-bearing role". The examples he gives of female appropriation of male characteristics portray an idea of this appropriation as negative, undesirable, and potentially dangerous to the natural order. Although female adoption of male attributes may not always have overt negative associations in the *sīra* genre, there is an undoubted general association between 'unnatural' female behaviour and the forces of chaos. Furthermore, Arabic stories of the ancient Queens such as Bilqīs and Zenobia are often vehicles through which issues relating to the wider social order are discussed, and in which these queens are presented in a relatively positive light until and unless they threaten the patriarchal order rather than working to re-establish or maintain it.¹²⁶ In this context, it is significant that Qamariyya is characterised by her complete lack of subservience to men and that she has strong sexual associations. Women are often 'the other' in folklore and popular literature, as the audience and narrator tend to be male. It is one of the bases of all anthropological, folkloristic and literary critiques that the outsider, the undesirable, or the surrogate victim be essentially different to the protagonist, with whom the audience or reader identifies. Thus, the underlying concern of the *sīra* as well as its means of execution enhances the impetus for interpretation of Qamariyya's character as the embodiment of chaos.

Qamariyya's animosity towards her son makes her a monstrosity unnatural and dangerous figure by describing her behaviour in terms of a type which should, in this context, be male in the audience's expectations. This continues throughout the narrative until Qamariyya's death, disrupting the balance of the narrative, whilst at the same time demonstrating the social turmoil

125 Dundes, 'Structuralism and Folklore', p. 192.

126 See, for example, Jamal Elias, 'Prophecy, Power and Propriety: The Encounter of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 11: 2 (2009), pp. 55–72; Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*; and Clinton, 'Madness and Cure'.

which Qamariyya has brought to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā'. She disrupts the natural order through her departure from established gender-patterns of behaviour, just as Seth's disruption of order is portrayed in terms of gender confusion. In the same way that it is inevitable that Horus will have to restore order in 'The Contendings', it is quickly established in the audience's expectations that Sayf is going to have to rectify the chaos Qamariyya has unleashed.

The Sethian aspect of Qamariyya's characterisation relies not only on the concept of gender confusion, but also on the common theme of sexually expressed conflict: "Beyond the sexual symbolism is the violence that gives shape to the events and that literally inscribes itself—first as a cultural order, then as sexuality hidden behind that order, and finally and openly as violence".¹²⁷ Her first attempt to kill Sayf is made with a sword, an obvious male symbol.¹²⁸ Mother and son next meet when Sayf is sent by Sayf Ar'ad to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' at the head of an army tasked to deal with Qamariyya, who has been refusing to pay tribute. She comes to his tent at night and offers to settle the dispute in single combat by wrestling semi-naked with Sayf, to spare their respective armies a full scale battle, planning to seduce him with her feminine charms:

Qamariyya stood up and began taking off the clothes she was wearing, revealing a body as white as pure silver. She wore a shift so fine that a breath of air would blow it away, revealing her form underneath . . . By doing this the accursed Qamariyya intended to cast King Sayf into a sea of passion and distraction as a result of her exquisite charms and beauty.¹²⁹

This is a conventional 'suitor contest' motif in which the hero must defeat his beloved in combat.¹³⁰ However, as Sayf strips down to his own underwear Qamariyya recognises him by the necklace he wears and the contest is averted, as is violation of incest taboos. She pretends to welcome her son with open arms, but then takes him out into the desert, ostensibly on a quest to recover his father's treasure, and attempts to kill him once more, again with a sword.¹³¹ As their conflict progresses later in the section another sexual theme enters their power struggle, that of the theft of Sayf's regenerative powers. As in 'The Contendings' this corresponds to the basic idea of the theft by the antagonist

127 Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 141.

128 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 42.

129 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 201–203.

130 H331.6.1, 'Suitor contest: wrestling with bride' which El-Shamy, *Folk Traditions*, lists as found in the Nile Valley.

131 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 221.

of the reproductive powers of the protagonist and culminates in the reclamation of these powers by the protagonist. In *Sīrat Sayf*, this aspect to their conflict is expressed by the theme of abduction of Sayf on his wedding night, and also by the continual association of their conflict with the motif of the sword of Shem which, like the eye in 'The Contendings', has sexual connotations.¹³² For example:

King Sayf sat talking to King Abū Tāj in the pitch black darkness of the night when, suddenly, there was a commotion from above, and a hand seized him, and [lifted him up in the air, so high that] he heard the sound of angels in the heavenly spheres . . . King Sayf said, "Who is this?", thinking that it was Āqiṣa, but the reply came, "It is 'Ayrūd."

"'Ayrūd?" said King Sayf.

"'Ayrūd," came the response, "I am carrying you because you are the cause of both my hardship and your own."

"What do you mean, 'Ayrūd," asked [Sayf], and 'Ayrūd replied, "Oh vilest of men and most repugnant of your kind, your tenderhearted mother, the loving witch, sent me for you." He continued, "It is you who are responsible for this. She knew that you were alive because she went into the armoury and couldn't find the Sword of Sām ibn Nūḥ, peace be upon them. She asked the head armourer about it, and he said, 'My Queen, I know nothing about it,' then she summoned me and asked me about it. I was incapable of disobeying her orders because she has my *lūḥ*, and I am afraid that the names [on it] will consume me with fire. So I told her that Āqiṣa had taken it to you, and when she knew that it was you who had taken the sword she asked, 'And how did he escape the Valley of the Ghouls?' . . . and then she told me, 'Go, seize him and throw him into the Land of the Sorcerers and the Chasm of Fire."¹³³

This association continues until Qamariyya is finally killed. At the same time, the concept of Sayf's paternal identity as being an element in their power struggle for the throne is built on via the spurious quest Sayf is taken on by his mother to find his father's treasure, and his inheritance of Shem's sword.

132 The sword of Shem only features in the Qamariyya section of *Sīrat Sayf*. Soon after Sayf sets off on his quest to rescue 'Ayrūd from Solomon's treasury it is supplanted by the magic sword of Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā. This sword has also been left hidden in a treasury for Sayf to find. See chapter 2, pp. 87–90 and pp. 119–122 respectively for more on these heroic heirlooms.

133 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 337.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Sayf comes across the treasures of Shem in Ham's treasury directly after Qamariyya's second attempt to murder him. When Sayf disobeys Akhmīm al-Ṭālib's instructions and raises the veils covering Shem's face to gaze upon it, Shem awakes and shouts at him.¹³⁴ Like Osiris, Shem is neither truly alive nor dead, and is inert, essentially passive and incapable of action. The myth of Osiris expresses the donation of his regenerative aspect to Horus in terms of this essentially sexual inertia, symbolised in some versions of the story by Osiris' missing phallus. Shem's gift of a sword symbolises the legacy of Shem in what can be read as a similarly metaphorical way. The tale of Noah's cursing of Ham expresses the separation of an essentially unified world into two forces, one of which is destined to subjugate the other. Just as Horus is destined to avenge his father and subjugate Seth, Sayf is destined to avenge Dhū Yazan and subjugate the descendants of Ham. Although this does not truly happen until Sayf Ar'ad and his people have been defeated, Sayf's defeat of Qamariyya is also subjugation of the forces of chaos embodied in one of the descendants of Ham. Qamariyya's theft of the sword, and realisation that her son still lives when he steals it back, is also interesting in the context of the sexual expression of their conflict, in terms of parallels with the theme of theft of Horus' eye in 'The Contendings', another sexually charged metaphor.¹³⁵

When Qamariyya attempts to kill Sayf for a third time, she tricks him into giving into her protection the magical talisman which controls 'Ayrūḍ. Significantly, this occurs on the night of Sayf's wedding to Shāma, his first bride, and the newly-weds are subsequently carried off by 'Ayrūḍ on her orders. The attack that finally leads to Qamariyya's downfall takes place on a later wedding night.¹³⁶ This pattern is here interpreted as illustrating an Indian tale type oedipal impulse on the part of the parent responsible for the abduction. There is, however, one factor which complicates interpretation of this relationship in oedipal terms. By the time Sayf and Shāma are abducted and spirited off to the Valley of the Ghouls and the Valley of the Giants respectively, the marriage has already been consummated. If an oedipal element was present one would expect Qamariyya to have Sayf 'disappeared' and separated from his wife before the marriage had been consummated, but 'Ayrūḍ does not fetch them until he

134 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 233. See the translation of this passage in the previous chapter, n. 63.

135 See Alan Dundes (ed.), *The Evil Eye: A Folklore Casebook* (London & New York: Garland Publishing, 1981) for a comprehensive discussion of the eye as a metaphor.

136 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 510, Sayf marries al-Jīza and Umm al-Ḥayā'. That evening Qamariyya persuades Nāhid to steal his protective girdle, so that she can kill him. For the other attempts on his life, see chapter 1, n. 45.

and Shāma are sleeping later in the night.¹³⁷ This contradiction could be read as merely a confusion of the idea of the jealous parent separating the lovers and thus preventing consummation, as found in ‘Rapunzel’, and the motif of lovers being whisked off by capricious jinn found in stories such ‘The Story of the Two Viziers’.¹³⁸ However it is interesting that this apparently inconsistent theme also mirrors the sexually portrayed conflict between Horus and Seth.

A further theme common to both ‘The Contendings’ and *Sīrat Sayf* is the restoration through the son of the reproductive powers of the father. When Horus reclaims his eye from Seth he gives it to Osiris, symbolically ensuring his continued life. Likewise, when Sayf is reunited with his wives, and succeeds in having children despite Qamariyya’s best efforts to thwart him, he is ensuring the genetic immortality of his father, the only path to eternal life open to either of them. Similarly, the reclamation by both Horus and Sayf of their own fertility and place in the hierarchy coincides with the loss of their opponent’s vitality and position as usurper. The parallels are not exact; with Sayf’s reclamation of his throne Qamariyya is put back into her rightful place and her chances of taking over Dhū Yazan’s legacy and ensuring her own dynasty are negated. In the case of Seth, he is disempowered. However, in both cases the central issue is the reassertion of order.

The main obstacle to thematic interpretation of *Sayf* in terms of ‘The Contendings’ so far is the lack of reconciliation between Qamariyya and Sayf. The underlying importance of the ancient variants of ‘The Contendings’ is the reconciliation of the two opposing forces:

In many texts of the 18th dynasty the king is compared to Horus and Seth, and sometimes we see that in the unity two different aspects may yet be distinguished . . . Ruling, the king is Horus, when he must use force he is Seth. Neither of the two aspects can be dispensed with. It is the co-operation of both gods in the king which guarantees the welfare of the world.¹³⁹

137 “‘Ayrūd entered King Sayf’s room and hoisted both him and his wife onto his shoulders, then flew up into the sky with them while they were entwined together in the sweetness of sleep” (*Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 288).

138 See Haddawy, *The Arabian Nights*, pp. 157–206. In this story the lovers, Sit al-Husn and Badr al-Din Hasan al-Basri, are brought together in Cairo on Sit al-Husn’s wedding night by jinn. Her father is being forced to marry her to a hunchbacked groom by the King of Egypt. The jinn trap the hunchback in the toilet and Badr al-Din Hasan takes his place, much to Sit al-Husn’s relief. At dawn the jinn return the sleeping Badr al-Din Hasan to Damascus. The hunchback runs away terrified, and the couple are eventually reunited after several years.

139 Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, p. 71.

In *Sīrat Sayf*, Sayf and Qamariyya are not reconciled. Instead, Qamariyya is killed by ʿĀqīša. However, if one takes into account the metamorphosis of the character of Seth within Egyptian mythology this apparently fundamental difference takes on a completely new significance. In *Seth, God of Confusion*, Te Velde demonstrates that Seth became demonised with the passing of time.¹⁴⁰ He asserts that ‘The Contendings’ came into existence at a time in Egyptian history when the foreign, alien other was not regarded as something to be feared and that the myth reflects a worldview in which the ‘other’ is seen to be a force which can be integrated into the ‘self’—indeed it has to be in order to maintain the delicate balance between order and chaos. After the collapse of the Egyptian empire after Ramses III, Seth, as the god of foreigners, began to be demonised as the god of the Semites and was no longer regarded as the integral negative aspect to be assimilated, but gradually became the foreign negative aspect which must be expunged:¹⁴¹

After the New Kingdom the possibility of reconciliation between Horus and Seth begins to be doubted. People became so convinced of the demonic nature of Seth, that he can hardly be imagined any more as a foolish, hot tempered, lecherous god whom Horus got the better of, so that he has to take a second place. He can no longer be granted a place at all. He is conquered and driven out of Egypt and castrated.¹⁴²

He contends that this change in attitude was crystallised with the Assyrian invasions of Egypt in around 670 BC. To support this argument he mentions two documents in particular and quotes from the Jumilhac Papyrus: “He (Horus)

140 Lewis Spence agrees with him; “The cult of Set was of the greatest antiquity, and although in later times he was regarded as evil personified, this was not his original role” (Spence, *Egypt: Myth and Legend*, p. 98).

141 Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, pp. 109–116. See also pp. 138–151 for a discussion of views concerning the demonisation of Seth. Te Velde himself believes that the Egyptians’ “dread and discontent” at their invasion by foreigners “were unloaded not upon the whole pantheon [of gods], but upon the traditional god of foreigners, who had always had a special and precarious place in the pantheon . . . The history of the figure of Seth can be described as a piece of history of an Egyptian *theologia religionum*. Seth, who was known as a homosexual (Horus), a murderer (Osiris) and chucker-out (Apopis), was the foreign god, the lord of foreign countries, and could function in the pantheon as representative of gods who were worshipped abroad. The chief god of the Libyans, Ash, the chief god of the Western Semites, Baal, the chief god of the Hittites, Teshub, were recognised as forms in which Seth revealed himself” (Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, p. 109).

142 Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, p. 59.

defeated Seth and annihilated his gang. He destroyed his towns and his nomes and he scratched out his name in this land, after he had broken his statues in pieces in all nomes."¹⁴³ Of further significance is the description he gives of the ritual 'to overthrow Seth and his gang' which he describes as follows:

The directions for the ritual . . . which according to the superscription was carried out daily in the temple of Osiris in Abydos and in all the Egyptian temples, says that a figure of Seth is to be made of red wax, and 'miserable Seth' written upon it. Instead of a waxen image, one may also make a wooden one or a drawing on paper. The figure is to be bound with tendons from a red ox. Then one must tread on the image of Seth with the left foot, thrust the spear into it, and cut it into pieces with the knife. Finally the remains are to be thrown into the fire, so that nothing is left.¹⁴⁴

According to a study of execration rituals in Coptic and Islamic Egypt, the execration of another by making a wax figurine and mutilating or dismembering it is based in common traditional Egyptian practice which is attested in manuscripts to have continued until the eighteenth century, and, the author claims, beyond.¹⁴⁵ The figurines were often bound, suspended upside down ("a posture that was quite commonly said to be inflicted on enemies and the damned in ancient Egyptian thought"), mutilated by binding, cutting, piercing, drowning or burning, or dismembered with a knife, and placed in a jar, which would then be buried (often in a cemetery or tomb), burned or submerged in water.¹⁴⁶ When this is compared to the methods by which Qamariyya meets her end, some intriguing correspondences can be seen:

‘Āqiṣa approached, carrying Qamariyya, and she stopped high above the palace, far up in the sky. She called out in ringing tones that reverberated all around, "O King of the Age, know that this is Qamariyya. How many times have you suffered because of her treachery? I will release her from

143 Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, p. 146, from Pap. Jumilhac XVII, pp. 10–11.

144 Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, p. 150.

145 See Nicole B. Hansen, 'Ancient Execration Magic in Coptic and Islamic Egypt' in Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer (eds), *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* (Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill, 2002), pp. 427–445. An early example can be seen in the fourteenth-century Egyptian work *Shams al-ma'ārif al-kubrā*, attributed to Aḥmad ibn 'Alī al-Būnī (which is still widely available, pp. 428–429), and later works dating from the Mamlūk era (one manuscript cited in the study dates from 1713–14 AD). She traces the practice up until recent times, and asserts that the practice has its roots in ancient Egyptian ritual.

146 Hansen, 'Ancient Execration Magic', pp. 436–437.

my hands, so that she will reach the ground lifeless, and you will be free of her wickedness and trickery. What do you say about this?"

"Āqiṣa, bring her down to me, so that I can rid my heart of her," the king replied.

"I will not listen," she said, "We must follow the obligations of our bond; you will never see her alive again."

"Bring her to me," he shouted. Āqiṣa descended a bit, until there was only a mile between them, then she threw Qamariyya fifty fathoms up [into the air], and when she came down Āqiṣa caught her. She threw her up for a second time, and Ṭāma drew her sword, intending to attack Qamariyya, waiting for her [to fall] so that she could stop her from reaching the ground, but Āqiṣa snatched the sword and threw Qamariyya down upon it, shouting "For vengeance!" The sword passed through the middle of her body, and she was cut in two. [Āqiṣa] threw her down on it a second time, and the sword passed through her and she was cut into four pieces, and then a third time, and a fourth, until the largest bit of her weighed only ounces,¹⁴⁷ and then she stopped. [Qamariyya's body] fell to the ground in front of the assembled court in pieces, then [Āqiṣa] flung the head into her brother's lap.¹⁴⁸

Sayf then buries his mother's dismembered body in Nāhid's tomb. Admittedly, this is not the strongest instance of possible intertextual parallels, but it is worth noting that, like the wax figure of Seth, Qamariyya is chopped into tiny pieces. The fact that she is 'thrown down' to her death, not a common way of killing in *Sīrat Sayf*, in which this method of execution is not a narrative convention (in fact, Qamariyya is the only person to be killed this way), does bring up the possibility of the legacy of Egyptian mythological influence, as does the intriguing aside in the text that tells us Sayf did not provide his mother with her own tomb. The point of burning or drowning in the execration ritual is precisely to prevent the burial of the body in its own tomb. According to Te Velde,

147 The text has 'half a *raṭl*, a *raṭl* being a unit of weight. The exact weight varies from country to country, and can be as much as 3.25 kg, but in Egypt is apparently about 450 grammes.

148 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 522. During Qamariyya's last attempt on Sayf's life she orders 'Ayrūd to throw him down onto the swords and spears of the 'sons of Plato' (see vol. 1, p. 391). 'Ayrūd manages to avert Sayf's death by concocting a bizarre plan with Āqiṣa, by which Sayf is protected by being put inside a hollowed out tree trunk. The tree trunk turns out to be superfluous as he is caught by Āqiṣa before hitting the ground (vol. 1, p. 396). Although Sayf is not killed, he is seriously wounded and has to be nursed back to health by Āqiṣa and Barnūkh.

“It is generally agreed that (in ancient Egyptian mythological texts) the expressions ‘to throw on the ground’ or ‘on his side’ paraphrase ‘to kill’”.¹⁴⁹ This combination of ‘chopping up’ and ‘casting down’ can also be found in the Coptic story ‘How Abbaton, the Angel of Death, became the King of all Mankind’, a story that relates the expulsion from heaven of Abbaton, the angel who was too proud to obey God’s order that he bow down and worship Adam along with the other angels.¹⁵⁰ Budge translates the punishment of Abbaton as follows:

And when My father saw his pride and arrogance, and knew that his wickedness and evil-doing were as great as his pride, He commanded the hosts of heaven, saying: “Take away the writing from the hand of this arrogant one, strip off his armour, and cast him down to the earth, for his time has come. He is the chief of the rebels, and is a king to them, and he commands them as a captain commands his troops; and the names of the rebels are written in the list which is in his hand.” And the angels gathered themselves together, but they hesitated to take the list from the rebel’s hand. Then My Father commanded them to bring a sharp reaping knife, and to thrust it into his sides and through his body, and to sever the bones of his back and shoulders; and he was unable to stand. Then My Father commanded a mighty angel to smite him and to cast him out of heaven.¹⁵¹

According to a footnote, most of the above is a literal, word for word, translation from ‘The Book of Overthrowing Apepi’ in an Egyptian papyrus in the British Museum. Quite apart from the similarities in the ‘execution’ itself, the Abbaton, or Seth, depicted in this passage has similarities with Qamariyya. Both are characterised by excessive pride, and have betrayed their master, usurped his power, and spurned his ‘son’, upsetting the natural order with their pretensions to the monarchy. Just as Sayf does not kill Qamariyya himself, but leaves it to his companions, God here orders his angels to despatch Abbaton. Qamariyya’s greater similarity to the later Seth, as opposed to the earlier, as well as the development of the ideas of Horus as the king of a messianic realm, accompanied by the destruction of the Typhonians, can only be seen to

149 Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, p. 84. He gives several examples of the phrase from ‘The Pyramid Texts’. In the Qamariyya section of *Sayf*, the phrase ‘throw to the ground’ is used several times. It appears to be a narrative formula which only occurs in this section.

150 See Budge, *Egyptian Tales and Romances*, pp. 195–203. As mentioned earlier, the Copts identified the Angel of Death with the ancient Egyptian Seth.

151 Budge, *Egyptian Tales and Romances*, p. 199.

strengthen the idea of some kind of intertextual parallels at work in *Sīrat Sayf* and 'The Contendings'.¹⁵²

Umm ʿĀqīṣa, ʿĀqīṣa, ʿĀqīla and Isis

The character of ʿĀqīṣa, like that of Qamariyya, is somewhat confusing. She is Sayf's greatest and most constant helper, and is active and self-motivated. As with Qamariyya, some aspects of her role in *Sayf* can be most easily explained in terms of a possible legacy from ancient Egyptian mythology, most notably the Osiris cycle of myths. Sayf's relationship with ʿĀqīṣa begins when Qamariyya has abandoned him as a baby. Her mother, Umm ʿĀqīṣa, comes across him lying abandoned in the wilderness, breastfeeds him, then continues on her way. Soon afterwards she abducts him from King Afrāḥ for three years, until he is weaned, after her husband, the White King, admonishes her for leaving Sayf in the desert having once breastfed him. When she returns Sayf to Afrāḥ, she gives him a stern warning to take care of the child or risk her vengeance.¹⁵³ Umm ʿĀqīṣa figures in the *sīra* as Sayf's protective mother, and just as Isis threatens the Gods with her vengeance if they endanger Horus by not protecting him against Seth, she threatens Afrāḥ with dire consequences if he allows Sayf to come to any harm. This one episode is the only part of the *sīra* that Umm ʿĀqīṣa figures in, but it can be argued that her protective influence is continued in the persona of her daughter ʿĀqīṣa.

Umm ʿĀqīṣa's primary function and identity is as the mother of ʿĀqīṣa, and as the husband of the White King of the Mountains of the Moon. According to Lyons' narrative index, the Mountains of the Moon is only mentioned in one other *sīra*, *Kitāb Qiṣṣat al-muqaddam ʿAlī al-Zaybāq*, another Egyptian narrative, in a reference that relates back to *Sayf*.¹⁵⁴ Lyons summarises the relevant part of the plot as follows:

152 On this note, it is another interesting coincidence that immediately after the killing Sayf curses ʿĀqīṣa, saying, "May your hand be shrivelled" and that ʿĀqīṣa is banished 'from his sight' (*Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 522) given that these two elements correspond with two major symbols of the Horus-Seth conflict in 'The Contendings', the removal of Horus' hand and the motif of 'sight' and the eye. It is especially interesting that ʿĀqīṣa is associated with these motifs at this point given that, from this point onwards, she takes on a more Sethian aspect as a potentially disruptive, chaotic force given that the motif has further links with Seth via the motif of the removal of Seth's foreleg in 'Seth and Apopis'. *Sīrat Sayf* can be read as neatly signalling her change of persona in an apparently confused use of these motifs.

153 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 55.

154 See Lyons, *Arabian Epic*, p. 2, J5,22, narrative index. It is not mentioned in the comparative index, nor in El-Shamy, *Folk Traditions*.

‘Ali . . . is challenged to perform a number of tasks, during one of which he rescues the *jinn* princess, Saisaban . . . The grateful princess takes him to visit her father, the White King of the *jinn*, in the Mountains of the Moon, where she tells him to ask for the robe of Dummar b. Sayf. He is then seized by a Magian *mārid*, who tells him not to mention the name of God, and he is saved from execution by the White King’s rival, the Red King, on the advice of a crypto-Muslim vizier. He is then rescued, given Dummar’s robe, and returned to Cairo.¹⁵⁵

As in *Sīrat Sayf*, the White King lives in the Mountains of the Moon, traditionally believed in Egypt to be the source of the River Nile.¹⁵⁶ In this context, the marriage of ‘Āqiṣa, the daughter of the White King, and ‘Ayrūḍ, the son of the Red King, also takes on another aspect in terms of reading parallels with the symbolic representation of the union of Upper and Lower Egypt signified by the red and white double crown of Egypt.¹⁵⁷ It is not until the two have married and produced a son, ‘Ufāsha, that Sayf and his companions are able to concentrate fully on their Islamic expansionist campaigns. Just as the double crown represented the united lands of Upper and Lower Egypt, ‘Ufāsha is a symbol of the unified Egypt founded by Sayf. This reading of the colour symbolism as reflecting Ancient Egyptian concepts is not the most convincing of intertextual parallels, but it is worth mentioning because the White King and Red King seem to be characteristic to *Sayf* and thematically apposite to the subtext.

Identification of Umm ‘Āqiṣa with Isis allows for identification of ‘Āqiṣa herself with Isis. ‘Āqiṣa, Sayf’s *jinn* foster sister, can also be seen as embodying aspects of the ancient Egyptian Isis in the Qamariyya section of *Sīrat Sayf*. The points of connection between the two can be found in some of ‘Āqiṣa’s character anomalies as well as by drawing on the mythological connotations in the portrayal of her mother and ‘Āqila. ‘Āqiṣa is one of the most striking

155 Lyons, *Arabian Epic*, p. 3, p. 5. In this context, it is interesting that, according to Lewis Spence “Osiris is usually figured as wrapped in mummy bandages and wearing the white cone-shaped crown of the South” (Spence, *Egypt, Myth and Legend*, p. 64).

156 See J.H. Kramers, art. ‘al-Nīl’, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn.

157 Although there are kings named after various colours in nearly all of the *sīra*, characters named the White King and the Red King tend to appear in Egyptian *sīra*, while in non-Egyptian *sīra* the Green King and the Black King tend to make an appearance. As mentioned above, the red/white/black colour symbolism is not specific to Egypt, but is generic across much of North Africa. According to Lyons, *Arabian Epic*, p. 3, the White King also appears in *Kitāb Qiṣṣat al-muqaddam ‘Alī al-Zaybāq* (once), *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars* (three times), and the Green and Black Kings in *Sīrat ‘Antar* (once)

protagonists in *Sīrat Sayf*: there are no other examples of a jinn helper being given such narrative importance or freedom of will in the *sīra* genre. She berates her brother when she believes he is acting foolishly (as in the story of the King of Death above), often declines to help him out unless she sees fit to do so, on one occasion throws the sword of Āṣaf into the sea in a fit of pique following an argument with her brother then storms off,¹⁵⁸ on another kidnaps him,¹⁵⁹ argues with him frequently, refuses to acquiesce to Sayf's wish that she marry 'Ayrūd until he fulfills her own criteria for a husband, and generally goes her own way.

Lyons describes the conventions governing the relationship between human and jinn in the *sīra* genre as follows:

While knowledge [of the name of a jinn] can enforce control, another form of relationship exists between humans and *jinn*, not dissimilar to the superstitious connection between a man and his *qarin* (associate) or his *ukht* (sister), which, in turn, is reflected in Europe in the concept of the *possestrina*, or spiritual sister . . . The influence of the *jinn* is particularly strong at the critical moments of marriage and birth. *Jinn* can lie with a woman 'in the twinkling of an eye, before her husband' . . . the *jinn* voluntarily protect their fosterlings, but it may be that the superstition of the *qarin* adds the notion of doppelgänger to that of guardian angel.¹⁶⁰

There are some points of contact between 'Āqiṣa in the Qamariyya section and the above classification of the place of jinn in the folkloric world order, such as 'Āqiṣa's role as Sayf's protective foster sister. However, her underlying nature is too dominant and self-motivated to fulfil the conventional demands of the jinn stereotype. Unlike other jinn, she is not a servant controlled by a magical talisman, and does not seem to be impelled to appear when called upon, even by Sayf, to whom she has pledged her allegiance.¹⁶¹ 'Āqiṣa's unusual level of independence contrasts sharply with the inability of the other jinn to exercise freedom of will (with the exception of 'Ufāsha) and indicates that she has some deeper aspect to her persona than being merely another helper. Her narrative

¹⁵⁸ *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 431.

¹⁵⁹ *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 271.

¹⁶⁰ Lyons, *Arabian Epic*, vol. 1, p. 52.

¹⁶¹ There is one exception to this. In *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 402, Sayf threatens 'Āqiṣa with the spell of Solomon's seal if she doesn't report to him truthfully about events at Madīnat al-Ḥamrā'. At this point he has just been cured by Barnūkh, after Qamariyya's fifth (and most successful) attempt to kill him.

significance is made even more intriguing by her gender, especially in the light of the presence of a male alternative, ‘Ayrūd.¹⁶² There must be some design to the stark contrast in the characterisation of these two—unlike ‘Āqīṣa, ‘Ayrūd is bound by the folkloric conventions purporting to jinn and, despite his loyalty to Sayf, he is forced to transport him into a variety of potentially deadly situations when Qamariyya gains control of his *lūh*. The text states explicitly on several occasions that ‘Ayrūd is deeply upset by what he is ordered to do, but is helpless to do anything but obey:

‘Ayrūd said [to Qamariyya], “I hear and obey,” and left her presence. He wept and exclaimed, “There is no power and no strength save in God, the Sublime, the Magnificent.” Then he went on his way, his eyes flooded with tears and with a heavy heart, until he found King Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan.¹⁶³

‘Ayrūd spends most of his time in *Sīrat Sayf* in floods of tears, largely for comedic effect, but the juxtaposition of the two fundamentally different characters of ‘Āqīṣa and ‘Ayrūd raises the question why ‘Āqīṣa alone is depicted as having such free will, why her relationship with Sayf is basically one of equals, and, indeed, why she is female rather than male. The increasing role of ‘Ayrūd during the Wedding Quest section, coinciding with ‘Āqīṣa’s diminished role in this part of the *sīra*, further begs the question why she is attributed such singular characterisation during only the first section of *Sīrat Sayf*, which has essential similarities to ‘The Contendings’. In this context it is also important that her behaviour undergoes a marked change during the course of the epic. Whereas in the first section ‘Āqīṣa is Sayf’s most loyal and effective protector, she becomes somewhat unpredictable, wilful and dangerous after her refusal to marry ‘Ayrūd. Although she does still extricate Sayf from some difficult situations during the Wedding Quest section, she is relatively insignificant to the action in this part of the *sīra* in comparison with her previous, instrumental, role. Her persona changes again with her marriage to ‘Ayrūd, after which both characters effectively disappear from the text.

Freedom of action is obviously a key element of ‘Āqīṣa’s role, because although aspects of her character change in each section of *Sīrat Sayf*, her autonomy remains constant. She resists all attempts by Sayf, her mother, and the Muslim court to coerce her into marriage with ‘Ayrūd, only acquiescing

162 Although ‘Ayrūd comes into the *sīra* at an early stage (vol. 1, p. 246), his role is limited until the end of the Qamariyya section. His main characteristic at this stage is his complete lack of free will, which is in direct juxtaposition with ‘Āqīṣa’s freedom of action.

163 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 391.

when she herself decides that he is a suitable husband. Although her refusal to marry could be read as a narrative device to enable ‘Ayrūd and Sayf to undertake the quest to Solomon’s Treasury, or as a variation of the motif of the woman who refuses to marry until she meets her match, this explanation would seem to belittle the singular nature of her character. Among Sayf’s friends and allies only ‘Āqiṣa and her son ‘Ufāsha (and, to some extent, Ṭāma) display open defiance of Sayf’s wishes and remain unpunished. Although she is Sayf’s sister and servant, having pledged to assist him, following her deliverance from the *mārid* al-Mukhtaṭif at his hands,¹⁶⁴ she has no qualms about disobeying him when she fears that he is getting himself into a potentially life-threatening situation.

During the Qamariyya section of *Sayf*, ‘Āqiṣa only disobeys Sayf when he is trying to put himself in unnecessary danger, as when she takes him to see seven cities which are the marvels of their land. Sayf makes it no further than the second city before nearly coming to a sticky end, and she cuts their tour short for fear he’ll get himself into too much trouble, in spite of his pleas to the contrary:

“You are a man bold and venturesome in all things,” she said, “and I fear lest you plunge into some deep misfortune from which I cannot deliver you, as when I saw your enemies fighting against you and was powerless to come to you on account of the spells cast in those lands. And so I shall accompany you and bear you no more.”

“I demand of you,” he said, “that you show me the other realms.”

“What is this word ‘demand’?” she replied. “By God, I shall no longer, I say, go along with you. Let those who will bear their brother away to be slain. Such a thing I will never do.” With that she flew off from before him, and he began to curse her; but she neither heeded him nor turned back...¹⁶⁵

Whatever predicament Sayf finds himself in, ‘Āqiṣa is at hand watching over him, even if she does not reveal her presence or come to his aid. Even when she has sworn not to help him during his quest to Solomon’s Treasury she is on hand to rescue him when all else fails. Despite her more disruptive nature in this part of the *sīra* and the fact that Sayf is attempting to force her into marrying ‘Ayrūd, an idea to which she is implacably opposed, she still protects him:

¹⁶⁴ *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 135.

¹⁶⁵ The translation here is from Jayyusi, *The Adventures*, p. 82; see also *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 162. See pp. 145–162 for the entire episode, and Jayyusi, *The Adventures*, pp. 70–82.

The *mārid* brought out an apple and showed it to King Sayf. He held out his hand with the apple in it, and King Sayf reached out his own hand and took the apple. He was just about to eat it when a great clamour reverberated all around, and a voice said, "Don't eat, Sayf" . . . It was 'Āqīša, who had flown down to him from the sky. She slapped the *mārid* round the face with her hand and he fell down, unconscious. She seized hold of King Sayf and flew up high into the sky with him.¹⁶⁶

This illustrates the second constant aspect of her character, her role as protector and guide, which is at odds with the chaotic and destructive connotations of her character in this part of *Sayf*. This element of conflicting interests coupled with 'Āqīša's magical, protective nature and superior knowledge of the ways of the world makes it hard to explain her role. She cannot be pigeon-holed as Sayf's anima or alter ego, because the two characters are neither opposed to, or united with, each other and their personalities are neither the same nor completely different. Often they appear to have completely different agendas: Sayf is concerned with winning his woman, fighting his battle, or converting the infidel, while 'Āqīša is profoundly unmoved by his adventures, merely bailing him out when he is in trouble and transporting him from place to place. Having said that, she is given too much personality to be simply a narrative device designed to extricate Sayf from tricky situations (although there are undeniably elements of this at work). All in all, she plays such a major role in the *sīra*, and her character is so inextricably connected with that of Sayf, that her characterisation must have some underlying significance. Given her consistent protection of Sayf, coupled with her lack of subservience, her supernatural nature, and occasionally ferocious temper, reading conceptual correspondences between the characterisation of 'Āqīša and Isis seems only reasonable. Her role as the protective, magical sister/mother in the Qamariyya section conforms as much to the essential nature of Isis, also echoed in the characterisation of the other female characters, as to folkloric conventions attached to the jinn.

It is also possible to see the principles of splitting and multiplication at work in Sayf's female helpers. For example, Āqīla is Sayf's other main female protector and magical helper in *Sīrat Sayf*, although she is not as assertive and independent as 'Āqīša. She remains very influential until shortly after 'Āqīša's

166 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 329. On this occasion the evil sorceress Murjāna is trying to trick Sayf into eating an apple, which will leave him in her power. 'Āqīša helps Sayf out on five other occasions during the Wedding Quest section (see vol. 2, p. 196, p. 250, p. p. 310–13, p. 402 and p. 408). Each time she tries to dissuade him from his quest to rescue 'Ayrūd.

eventual marriage to ‘Ayrūd (which, given the present context, is interesting), after which the sorcerer al-Hudhād becomes Sayf’s most trusted aide.¹⁶⁷ Although al-Hudhād dies within a short space of time, ‘Āqila never truly regains her former status and is overshadowed by other male helpers—most notably ‘Ufāsha whose magical powers are infinitely superior to any other being, human or jinn. Even in the first skirmish of the Muslims’ expedition against Sayf Ar‘ad, ‘Ufāsha is called in to save the day:

The king said to him, “‘Ufāsha, know that these two cities are enchanted. I ordered my advisors to undo their enchantments, but they tell me that this is something that they are not capable of doing. I asked them ‘What’s to be done? Are you not strong enough to do this?’, and they told me, ‘That is so, we lack the ability and endurance to do this, no one is capable of achieving it but our superior, ‘Ufāsha Abū Yadd.’”¹⁶⁸

Osiris and Horus, Death and Rebirth: Dhū Yazan, Sayf and his Sons

Sīrat Sayf shares cyclical ideas of death and rebirth, order and chaos with Osirian mythology. This cyclical aspect of the *sīra* is common to much oral literature and expresses the order–chaos–order theme which is their underlying concern, reflecting the fact that it is a fundamental human issue. In *Sayf*, as in most epic material, this is partly expressed through the lives and deaths of several generations, and the idea of mutual obligation between the father and the son is a continuous thread in the *sīra*. Once Sayf has avenged his father and restored his dynasty at the end of the Qamariyya section, he has sons of his own to carry on the struggle when the forces of chaos rear their

167 The Muslims encounter al-Hudhād when they visit al-Halīlja’s palace (*Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 357). He has been converted to Islam by al-Khiḍr and asks to join Sayf and his followers. He quickly displays his magical prowess by providing enough food for the entourage from one egg and four grains of rice (vol. 3, p. 363) and becomes Sayf’s most influential advisor. Shortly after this ‘Āqila becomes a figure of fun; she and Barnūkh eat the fruit of a magical tree, despite al-Hudhād’s warnings. This fruit has aphrodisiac qualities, and gives both her and Barnūkh some kind of sex change, much to everyone else’s amusement (vol. 3, p. 405). In revenge for their humiliation, and jealousy because of their loss of influence with Sayf, Barnūkh and ‘Āqila poison al-Hudhād (he dies vol. 3, p. 406). ‘Ufāsha turns up almost directly afterwards (vol. 3, p. 412).

168 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 4, p. 5. The motif of the Muslims being prevented from entering a given place because of a talisman which only ‘Ufāsha is able to overcome is repeated in vol. 4, p. 152, p. 168, p. 293, p. 297, p. 300 and p. 405.

heads once more and the cycle begins again. By the end of the *sīra* it could be said that Sayf has become an Osiris figure, powerless, old and emasculated, whilst his sons have taken on the role of the Horus figure, the king reborn. From this point of view, any connection which can be read between the myth of Osiris and the *Sīrat Sayf* narrative is one that puts the character of Sayf on a more universal and cosmic level.

In this light, it is interesting that the first section of *Sayf*, although it introduces the Book of the Nile and associates Sayf with the river, both through prophecy and his visit to its source, is removed from the actual diversion of the Nile, which does not take place until well into the Wedding Quest section. Sayf's childhood struggle with Qamariyya can be read as drawing relatively heavily on 'The Contendings', and identification with the Horus aspect of Osiris, whereas Sayf as an established ruler can be identified more with Osiris the wandering, civilising king. 'The Contendings' is an expression of the idea that the forces of construction and destruction reside in every being and force in the universe.¹⁶⁹ It is only when these forces are equally balanced that an equilibrium can be reached. This equilibrium is precarious by its very nature, as those that maintain it are themselves torn by conflicting forces. Sayf can himself be seen to be the sum of these two forces. He is the product of Qamariyya, the black, southern, destructive woman, and Dhū Yazan, the white, northern, constructive man. He embodies the unstable equilibrium of order. This struggle between the two essentially opposing yet identical halves is depicted in both the legend of Sayf and the story of Horus in terms of a gender struggle. According to Henri Frankfort, the relationship between Horus and Seth reflects the underlying assumptions the ancient Egyptians had about the nature of kingship:

Another epithet of the king, "The Two Lords," would seem to suggest a similar meaning... "The Two Lords" were the perennial antagonists, Horus and Seth. The king was identified with both of these gods but not in the sense that he was considered the incarnation of the one and also the incarnation of the other. He embodied them as a pair, as opposites in equilibrium... It indicates not merely that the king rules the dual

169 "The authors of the Coffin Texts had realized that their myths were not always about different things but conformed to patterns and were symbols of certain underlying themes. They had come to see that the gods were the expression of psychic needs. The hero and the enemy remain essentially the same whatever their names" (Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol*, p. 223).

monarchy but that he has crushed opposition, reconciled conflicting forces—that he represents an unchanging order.¹⁷⁰

Frankfort later goes on to describe another pertinent characteristic of ancient Egyptian ideas of kingship which can be seen to find expression in *Sīrat Sayf*: “Behind Pharaoh we can discern a primitive conception of a chieftain endowed with power over natural forces, a ‘rain-maker king’”.¹⁷¹ It is very interesting, in terms of reading *Sīrat Sayf* in terms of a general Egyptian intertext that the final section of the *sīra*, The Hunt for Saqardīs and Saqardiyyūn, during which the Muslims conquer the realms of human and jinn, subjugating and converting everyone they meet on the way, follows soon after the diversion of the Nile and foundation of Miṣr and is marked by the birth of ‘Ufāsha, who is instrumental to the campaign. ‘Ufāsha, like Seth, appears to embody the forces of chaos harnessed for the furtherance of the cause of order. If one accepts some level of identification of ‘Ufāsha with the subjugated Seth, whose arm has been removed and is used as a weapon for the defence of Osiris/Ra, his arrival on the scene can be read as symbolising Sayf’s final conquest over the internal forces of chaos in the society he commands. There are, of course, alternative readings. The appearance of the subjugated Seth-figure could symbolise Sayf’s harnessing of the internally destructive, aggressive forces which are present in any society for expansionist purposes. Alternatively, these forces could be such that they demand an outlet, and are fortunately externalised rather than internalised. In the latter context it could be significant that it is ‘Ufāsha, the Seth-figure, who prolongs the Muslim expansion into Wāq al-Wāq. As Bridget Connelly says of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, “The genuine taboo and problem buried figuratively in the tale is the cultural ambivalence surrounding the inside and the outside, a question of personal and social boundaries”.¹⁷² All of these readings are, however, supported by the fact that it is only in the final section of *Sīrat Sayf* that the Muslims embark on a coherent expansionist campaign, and that *Sīrat Sayf* can be seen to conform thematically to Rundle Clark’s interpretation of the underlying message of ancient Egyptian religious mythology:

Divine power is ambivalent. Peace and prosperity are always precarious and depend on holding in check the powers that threaten them. The warlike defenders of order are but the powers of evil and chaos held in thrall and turned to righteous purposes. This is the underlying theme of

170 Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, p. 21.

171 Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, p. 215.

172 Connelly, *Arab Folk Epic*, p. 141.

the cycle of myths connected with the 'Eye'. Even the Sun God has to be championed by Seth when he has to overcome the demon of darkness.¹⁷³

Although an epic such as *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* deals with the conflict between chaos and order by definition, the progression in *Sīrat Sayf* is thus very interesting in the context of the Osirian approach to the subject. Not only does *Sīrat Sayf* contain motifs, tale patterns and character types which can be seen to be distinctively Egyptian, but it has three distinct sections which correspond, at a deep, subtextual, thematic level, to three major elements of ancient Egyptian mythology: the struggle between Horus and Seth following Osiris' murder, the golden age of Osiris and his mission to wander the earth, civilising and bringing enlightenment, and the role of Seth following his subjugation and the removal of his arm.

It does, then, appear that the presence of an Egyptian intertext can be seen to be at work in *Sīrat Sayf* which is not indiscriminate or random. The text does seem to be calling on an Egyptian cultural legacy at a conceptual level to inform its subtext or, more accurately, it seems that *Sīrat Sayf* gives expression to some fundamentally Egyptian ideas about kingship, the state and society.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, not only does the existence of an Egyptian intertext explain some of the individual personae of the prominent female characters, it can also illuminate the general female role in this *sīra*. By the time this *sīra* became fully evolved in late medieval Islamic Egypt there had been a gradual change in perception of the ancient female mother-goddess, so deeply entrenched in the cultural psyche for thousands of years, and a resultant shift in the underlying perception of the meaning of gender roles in narrative. It seems that, as with many other deities, the Egyptian goddess is assimilated by being simultaneously incorporated and demonised in the text. Thus, Qamariyya embodies a dangerous, threatening aspect of the goddess and takes on the characteristics of Seth, the ancient, male chaos god, in line with changing concepts of expressing the chaotic. The conflict between her and Sayf gives literal expression to the cultural conflict between the old order and the new. Isis' more positive manifestation is relegated primarily to the world of the jinn in the form of 'Āqīṣa, but still retains a chaotic aspect. This is magnified following the death

173 Rundle Clarke, *Myth and Symbol*, p. 264.

174 John Ray has briefly explored the similar presence of an ancient Egyptian legacy in *Qiṣṣat Zīr Sālīm*. See John Ray, 'Osiris in Medieval Egypt' in Christopher Eyre, Anthony Leahy and Lisa Montagnò Leahy (eds), *The Unbroken Reed: Studies in the Culture and Heritage of Ancient Egypt in Honour of A.F. Shore* (London: The Egypt Exploration Society, 1994), pp. 273–280.

of Qamariyya, at which point ʿAqīṣa herself is associated with Sethian motifs, until she is eventually incorporated into the (male) order with her marriage to ʿAyrūd. The result of this fusion is symbolically incarnated in ʿUfāsha, her male heir and offspring, in whom the female goddess is finally transformed and tamed. This transformation of the female goddess permeates the characterisation of female protagonists in the *sīra*—the ancient goddess Nut is, like Qamariyya, subjected to gender transformation and demonised in *Sīrat Sayf*, whilst the al-Thurayyā cousins, and the sisters Munyat al-Nufūs and Nūr al-Hudā, can be viewed, in one sense, as examples of the splitting of the female goddess into her beneficial and threatening aspects.

The King: *Sīrat Sayf* and the Alexander Romance

Alexander the Great, the Macedonian king who conquered vast tracts of the Middle East in the fourth century BC, is one of the most famous and universal heroes of all time. Despite his death at the age of 33 after a relatively brief reign his name has lived on, not least through the Alexander Romance, a legendary account of the life and campaigns of the hero-king. In the Middle East and Asia his stature has been enhanced by Qur’anic allusions to Dhū’l-Qarnayn and al-Khiḍr, figures associated with him in Islamic culture.¹ In one form or another ‘Alexander’ is one of the most popular narratives in Islamic popular literature,² and were especially popular in Egypt during the Graeco-Roman period, when he was viewed as a saviour-king and stories figuring him abounded. Even when one takes into account the frequency with which the Alexander intertext is referenced in premodern Arabic popular narratives, *Sīrat Sayf* does seem to be partly characterised by its correspondences with it. In his introduction to Lena Jayyusi’s recent translation of the first part of *Sīrat Sayf*, Norris, for example, describes its distinguishing characteristics as follows:

It . . . is saturated with the magical to a degree unmatched elsewhere . . . most of *Sīrat Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan* takes place within the Yemen or in the Nile Valley southward to the Nile’s mountainous source. Geography is subordinated to vast expanses of sky, monster-infested rivers, celestial

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- 1 Both are mentioned in Q. 18, *Sūrat al-Kahf*. Al-Khiḍr is not mentioned by name, but the story of his encounter with Moses (through which he is associated with Alexander) is related (see Q. 18:65–83). The story can also be found in translation in, for example, Thackston, *The Tales of the Prophets*, pp. 247–250. For the reference to Dhū’l-Qarnayn, which relates the story of his building an iron barrier to keep the people of Gog and Magog out, see Q. 18:83–102.
 - 2 “Alexander emerges as perhaps the most widely celebrated of all the great heroes. He figures prominently in many historical and literary works, in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Malay, not to mention the earlier, pre-Islamic sources from which many of the stories derive ultimately” (Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image*, p. 86). In his table illustrating story popularity of various heroes throughout the Middle East and Asia, Alexander has the third widest geographical spread after ‘Ali and Ḥamza. See also pp. 86–92 for his discussion of Alexander as an Islamic hero. See also Daniel L. Selden, ‘Mapping the Alexander Romance’ in Richard Stoneman, Kyle Erickson and Ian Netton (eds), *The Alexander Romance in Persia and the East* (Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing & Groningen University Library, 2012), pp. 19–59, at pp. 34–35, for a more global discussion of the reach of the Alexander Romance.

bodies, Pharaonic monuments, and cities and horizons that recall the Alexander romance.³

Although correspondences between *Sīrat Sayf* and the Alexander Romance have also been noted by other scholars, the extent to which *Sīrat Sayf* is informed by Alexandrian mythology has not been specifically addressed.⁴ The aim of this chapter is thus to explore the breadth and depth of intertextual relations between ‘Alexander’ and *Sīrat Sayf*. Analysis will concentrate on the relationship between *Sīrat Sayf* and the Persian and *Pseudo-Callisthenes* Alexander narratives, although the Qur’anic aspect of Alexandrian mythology will be briefly addressed first.

Exploration into intertextual parallels between *Sīrat Sayf* and this Alexander legend corpus is of interest for several reasons. First, any presence of a general Alexander intertext may add to our understanding of narrative meaning in *Sīrat Sayf*. Secondly, it may provide further hints about the role of intertextuality in the compositional structure of the *sīra*, and the ways in which these interact. Finally, any general intertextual correspondences with individual, culturally specific, variants may cast further light on the cultural identity expressed in *Sīrat Sayf*. One further consideration in this chapter will be to pay particular attention to the relationship between *Sīrat Sayf* and the popular Persian variant of the Alexander Romance. As mentioned in the Introduction, previous scholarship on *Sīrat Sayf* has commented in passing that it contains identifiable Yemeni, Persian and Coptic elements. As pointed out in an (primarily historiographical) article on the Alexander Romance by E. Baynham, Alexander narratives seem to be particularly prone to being absorbed into popular literature and folklore of the various cultures of the Middle East, and beyond.⁵ The Persian ‘Alexander’ will be a means through which to explore the extent of one particular Persian intertext, and to investigate the ways in which

3 Jayyusi, *The Adventures*, p. xi.

4 For example, see Chelhod, ‘La geste du roi Sayf’, p. 203.

5 “One feature of the Alexander Romance traditions generally is that according to individual culture they have a tendency to absorb Alexander into their own folklore... It is not uncommon to find deeds attributed to Alexander in the various Romances also ascribed to Gilgamesh, King Solomon or other heroes in other traditions” (E. Baynham, ‘Who Put the ‘Romance’ in the Alexander Romance?: The Alexander Romances within Alexander Historiography’, *Ancient History Bulletin* 9.1 (1995), pp. 1–13, p. 4). He does, however, then go on to say: “it is not so much a case of one tradition directly influencing another but rather the source of the story drawing on a common myth pool: what is used of one hero may be freely borrowed for another”. Whilst this is evidently the case, I would argue that this borrowing is not necessarily as ‘free’ as Baynham believes it is.

Persian material might work in the text. For example, how much intertextual presence of the Persian 'Alexander' can be seen in *Sayf*, and are there thematic correspondences between the Persian 'Alexander' and *Sayf*, or does the intertext work primarily at a structural level?

This chapter will briefly explore the Qur'anic 'Alexander', but it will not address the Islamic Arabic Alexander stories in historiographical works such as al-Ṭabari's *History*, or in Arabic versions of the romance such as the *Qisṣat al-Iskandar* of 'Umāra ibn Zayd, the version of the Alexander Romance included in al-Mubashshir ibn Fātik's *Muḥtār al-ḥikam wa-maḥāsīn al-kilām* ('Choicest Maxims and Best Sayings'), or the *Sīrat al-Iskandar*.⁶ This is primarily because of the focus of this chapter on exploring of the presence of the Persian 'Alexander': a detailed comparison of *Sīrat Sayf* with these Arabic Alexander narratives would be incredibly interesting, but is beyond the scope of this study. It is also important to note that the 'Alexander' intertext in the Middle East has become inextricably tied up (as has that of Solomon, another legendary world king) with the late medieval Middle-Eastern 'City of Brass' type stories. These stories are characterised by several themes and motifs, which have been convincingly defined by Norris as being of Berber and African origin.⁷

6 On which, see Z. David Zuwiyya, 'The Alexander Romance in the Arabic Tradition' in Z. David Zuwiyya (ed.), *A Companion to Alexander Literature in the Middle Ages*, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, 29 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 73–112; and the following articles from Richard Stoneman, Kyle Erickson and Ian Netton (eds), *The Alexander Romance in Persia and the East* (Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing & Groningen University Library, 2012): El-Sayed M. Gad, 'Al-Ṭabari's Tales of Alexander: History and Romance' (pp. 219–232); David Zuwiyya, 'Umāra's *Qisṣa al-Iskandar* as a Model of the Arabic Alexander Romance' (pp. 205–218); Emily Cottrell, 'Al-Mubaššir ibn Fātik and the a version of the *Alexander Romance*' (pp. 233–254). See also Michael M. Mazzaoui, 'Alexander the Great and the Arab Historians', *Graeco-Arabica* 4 (1991), pp. 33–43; Faustina Doufikaer-Aerts, 'Sīrat al-Iskandar: An Arabic Popular Romance of Alexander', *Oriente Moderno* 22(83): 2 (2003), pp. 505–520; Faustina Doufikaer-Aerts, 'Alexander Made History, Whereas Historians Made Alexander: Reconstructing the "Sīrafication" of an Ancient King' in Sabine Dorpmueller (ed.), *Fictionalizing the Past: Historical Characters in Arabic Popular Epic*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 206 (Leuven–Paris–Walpole MA: Uitgeverij Peeters en Department Oosterse Studies, 2012), pp. 95–105. For monograph studies, see Z. David Zuwiyya, *Islamic Legends Concerning Alexander the Great: Taken from Two Medieval Arabic Manuscripts in Madrid* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2001); and Faustina Doufikaer-Aerts, *Alexander Magnus Arabicus, A Survey of Alexander Tradition through Seven Centuries: From Psuedo-Callisthenes to Sūrī* (Paris–Leuven–Walpole MA: Peeters, 2010).

7 H.T. Norris, *Saharan Myth and Saga* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). The 'City of Brass' motif has also been identified as of Indian origin, for example, see Hamori, 'An Allegory from the Arabian Nights'. However, although the 'City of Brass' motif (F761.2) appears to be part of

Although there are a great many 'City of Brass' stories in *Sayf* and the relationship between this *sīra* and the Berber/African intertext is of definite interest, it will not be discussed here, partly for reasons of expediency, but also because association of such stories with both Alexander and Solomon is itself intertextual rather than directly referential.

The Qur'anic Alexander

References to the Alexander intertext in *Sayf* are almost entirely subtextual: that is to say, there are no occasions upon which Alexander stories are related, or upon which any of the *sīra*'s protagonists inherit heirlooms from the world-king himself. Direct allusion most often takes the form of references to the name Dhū'l-Qarnayn, usually in association with Sayf, and the figure of al-Khiḍr, an immortal servant of God who wanders the earth performing good deeds and helping the righteous. For this reason the Qur'anic example will be addressed before the main body of structural and motifal reference between *Sīrat Sayf* and the Alexander Romance is examined. However, both the application of the epithet Dhū'l-Qarnayn and the presence of al-Khiḍr as a supernatural helper and channel between God and the hero are conventions of Middle Eastern popular narrative and, as such, will only be treated briefly.

The figure of Dhū'l-Qarnayn, 'the two horned', is mentioned in the Qur'an in Q. 18:83–102, and there is a great deal of discussion among the medieval Islamic *mufasssirūn* about who exactly this figure is.⁸ There is a broad consensus that this reference to Dhū'l-Qarnayn refers to Alexander in the context of his expedition to the West, where he builds an iron barrier to keep out the peoples of Gog and Magog. There is also some argument over the origin of the epithet Dhū'l-Qarnayn in modern scholarship. It is variously connected with Syriac apocalyptic prophesies, the ancient Yemeni *tubba'* kings, Persian mythology and the Egyptian god Ammon, 'He whose two horns are ready to gore'.⁹ Despite the confusion surrounding its origins, it is generally agreed that

universal mythology, in the Middle East it is almost always connected with tale type 1645D§, 'Perilous trip: Search for treasure', identified by El-Shamy as unique to the Maghrib.

8 For a brief discussion of Dhū'l-Qarnayn in the Qur'an, see Emeri van Donzel and Andrea Schmidt, *Gog and Magog in Early Eastern Christian and Islamic Sources* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 50–54; and Zuwiyya, 'The Alexander Romance in the Arabic Tradition', pp. 74–75.

9 See van Donzel and Schmidt, *Gog and Magog*, pp. 15–33; Toufic Fahd, 'La version arabe du Roman d'Alexandre', *Graeco-Arabica* 4 (1991), pp. 25–31; Pierre Grillon, 'Le mythe d'Alexandre à travers le roman grec et la tradition Islamique', *Revue de l'Histoire et de Civilisation du*

this epithet relates to Alexander in Islamic tradition.¹⁰ On a number of occasions Islamic heroes, most notably Sayf, are referred to by the epithet *dhū'l-qarnayn* in *Sīrat Sayf*. It does not always appear to be a complimentary term. For example, when Sayf criticises Damar for summarily executing Sayf Ar'ad, whom he is trying to persuade to convert to Islam, Damar rebukes his father for his lenient treatment of the defeated Ḥabashī king, referring to Sayf Ar'ad as 'two-horned'.¹¹ Also, throughout the *sīra* Sayf is helped by the mysterious al-Khiḍr. Although the Islamic story of al-Khiḍr recounts his encounter with Moses, it is thought by many to have its roots in the ancient epic of Gilgamesh¹² rather than being integral to the Moses legend corpus, and to be characteristically associated with the Alexander Romance.¹³ Briefly, the al-Khiḍr story relates Moses' journey to find this immortal being who wanders the Earth, and discover his secret wisdom.¹⁴ Moses sets out for the sea, where he has been told he will find al-Khiḍr, accompanied by his servant Joshua, taking along provisions that include a dried fish. When they reach the sea, they search along the shore for al-Khiḍr. Somehow, the fish comes into contact with water (usually either while it is being prepared as food, or as the remains are thrown away), miraculously comes back to life and swims off. Immediately after this Moses encounters al-Khiḍr and asks to accompany him on his travels. They set off and al-Khiḍr performs a number of apparently harmful and unjust deeds, the justice of which he then explains to Moses. The narrative is generally interpreted as reflecting the necessity for patience and faith in the search for knowledge. The important motifs associated with al-Khiḍr in this story are the fish as

Maghreb 13 (1967), pp. 7–29; François de Polignac, 'Alexandre entre ciel et terre: initiation et investiture', *Studia Islamica* 84 (1996), pp. 135–45; François de Polignac, 'L'Homme aux deux cornes: une image d'Alexandre du symbolisme grec à l'apocalyptique musulmane', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome* 96: 1 (1984), pp. 29–51; and François de Polignac, 'L'image d'Alexandre dans la littérature Arabe: l'Orient face à l'Hellénisme?', *Arabica* 29 (1982), pp. 296–306.

- 10 El-Shamy cites it as a motif in its own right—F511.3.2§, 'Alexander, 'the dual horned'.
- 11 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 4, p. 103.
- 12 "From a critical historical perspective, the legend of Khiḍr is found to be linked with some of the most ancient legends known to us today—the epic of Gilgamesh, the Alexander Romance, and the wandering Jew, to name just a few" (Irfan Omar, 'Khiḍr in the Islamic Tradition', *Muslim World* 83 (1993), pp. 279–291, p. 282).
- 13 "Mūsā . . . represents Gilgamesh and Alexander in the first part of the Kur'ānic story and Elijah in the second" (A.J. Wensinck, art. 'al-Khaḍir', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn).
- 14 See Thackston, *The Tales of the Prophets*, pp. 247–250, for a translation of one version of this story. The references given in chapter 2 for the story of Moses in the various *qīṣaṣ* and historiographical sources all contain the al-Khiḍr story, or stories.

symbol of knowledge, the water as a symbol of life, and the sea as a symbol of the vastness of esoteric knowledge.¹⁵ The al-Khiḍr story is linked to the Alexander intertext via Alexander's quest through the Land of Darkness to find the water of life—although Alexander himself does not find this, al-Khiḍr, here a member of his army, jumps into the spring and becomes immortal.¹⁶ The motif of the fish is also often included, according to which al-Khiḍr realises he has discovered the water of life when the fish is revived.

In *Sīrat Sayf*, al-Khiḍr converts large numbers of people to help the Muslim cause, and often intervenes to provide Sayf with allies on his adventures. For example, when, during his quest to Solomon's Treasury, Sayf jumps into the sea to avoid being captured and eaten by King Shamrākh and the dog people,¹⁷ he is saved from drowning by a merman, who tells him that he has been waiting to carry him away from certain destruction:

When he heard this from the merman, he was amazed at the power of God, the All-knowing Sovereign, and said to him, "Who told you that I would be in the sea tonight?", and he replied, "O King, your shaykh, al-Khiḍr, peace be upon him, came to me and said to me, 'Young man, stay opposite the valley of the dog-men, and wait for my son. When you see him, go into the sea and carry him, and don't leave him until you reach the shore because he will not be able to escape the sea on his own.'"¹⁸

On several occasions he also appears in person to advise Sayf. For example, when Sayf is rendered unconscious in battle by a spell cast by al-Raṣd al-Fulk, one of the kings they encounter and defeat in the Hunt section, he is dumped in a desolate wadi. When he regains consciousness he prays and al-Khiḍr appears, takes him to Madīnat al-Nuḥās (the Brass City) and tells him how to get a magical ring from a treasury there. The ring turns out to control eleven *mārids* who are able to transport Sayf back to his army.¹⁹

15 See, Omar, 'Khiḍr in the Islamic Tradition'.

16 The quest into the Land of Darkness is one of the core episodes of Alexander's conquest of the further reaches of the Earth, see, for example, Albert M. Wolohojian (tr.), *The Romance of Alexander the Great by Pseudo-Callisthenes* (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 56–59.

17 For this episode, see *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, pp. 353–372.

18 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 368.

19 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 4, pp. 327–332.

Al-Khiḍr does not restrict himself to helping Sayf, but also appears when his sons and allies find themselves in trouble, on one occasion even managing to prevent Naṣr from straying from the path of righteousness when he is overcome by lust for his sweetheart Dajwa (Sayf Arʿad's daughter) as they flee the city of al-Dūr, chased by her furious brother al-Muqalqal. Al-Khiḍr struggles with Satan for Naṣr's soul and warns him that he must resist the temptations to seduce Dajwa because she is an infidel:

Naṣr wanted to seduce her, but suddenly al-Khiḍr, peace be upon him, approached them and chased the devil away from them. When al-Khiḍr drew near to Naṣr, he said to him, "Your name is Naṣr, and your father is King Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan, king of Islam. It is not seemly for you to commit such vile deeds and commit adultery with this tortoise while she is a non-believer and worships Saturn. If your intention is to be a companion to her, she must enter your religion and follow your convictions."²⁰

Dajwa overhears him and converts, upon which al-Khiḍr marries them, enabling the couple to consummate their love in sanctified bliss.

The Qurʾanic Alexander intertext also appears in *Sīrat Sayf* in the form of motifs and fragments of tale patterns. For example, the motif of the water of life is referred to when Sayf comes across an enchanted spring just after he has rescued ʿAyrūḍ from Solomon's Treasury in the Wedding Quest section. The guardian of the spring allows ʿAyrūḍ to bathe in it and heal his wounds.²¹ The journey into the Land of Darkness is also referred to towards the end of the Wedding Quest section, when Sayf and his companions are taken by the magician al-Hudhād to the Treasury of al-Halīlja, which is full of marvellous treasures. Whilst there, Barnūkh and ʿĀqila, who are increasingly jealous of al-Hudhād's influence, poison him. Although the several previous attempts they have made to kill him have been unsuccessful, this time he dies and the treasury falls into total darkness. Sayf calls out to God for help and al-Khiḍr appears with a light and guides them out. Damar is determined to get hold of as much treasure as possible, and he and ʿAṭamṭam argue about how to split the treasure they are carrying. The argument becomes so heated that Sayf is called in to arbitrate. However, when they get outside, the treasure has turned to pebbles and sand, much to Damar's chagrin and everyone else's amusement.²² This trope of the jewels from the Land of Darkness

²⁰ *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 186.

²¹ *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, p. 215.

²² *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 410. See vol. 3, pp. 407–410 for the entire episode.

is characteristic of the Alexander narrative, in which, in direct contrast, Alexander's army emerge from the darkness to find that the stones they have picked up are in fact precious jewels:

For four months, they had not seen the sunlight or the moonlight, or their own faces, and had not been able to tell the night from the day. They marched on gravel, not knowing what was under their feet. They tasted and smelled the stones, but because of darkness they could not tell what they were. Therefore all who had gone to the Land of Darkness were filled with remorse because of those stones. For when they left the darkness they discovered that the stones were all precious gems, rubies, and chrysolite.²³

The function of reference to Dhū'l-Qarnayn, al-Khiḍr and the Qur'anic mythology associated with them is to invest the hero with more religious kudos, making him not only heroic but divinely sanctioned. Although the Alexander legend is a pretext for the Qur'anic Alexander mythology and the two legend corpuses are undeniably interdependent, the Alexanders they portray differ. The Alexander of the romance is essentially a worldly hero-king, whereas in the Islamic legends he takes on a more ascetic, religious persona, and his journey becomes primarily a quest for spiritual knowledge. The presence of these religious connotations in *Sayf* help to reinforce the perception of Sayf as a crusading hero, bringing light to the heathen darkness.

The Alexander Romance

The Alexander Romance consists of a corpus of legends and stories, loosely based on the military campaigns of Alexander the Great, that appears to have found a stable form during the first and second centuries AD. It is thought that the first known written account of the romance, now lost, was written in Greek in Alexandria sometime before the fourth century AD and was attributed to Callisthenes, Alexander's official historian and a nephew of Aristotle. This variant, known as *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, is generally believed to be the source of all later written versions, both Middle Eastern and European.²⁴ Although

23 Minoo S. Southgate (tr.), *Iskandarnamah: A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 58.

24 For a general overview of the history of the Greek 'Alexander' narrative tradition, see Richard Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp.

European variants of the Alexander Romance have been subject to a great deal of literary and historical research, their Middle Eastern equivalents have, until very recently, received relatively little attention. Such critical attention as has historically been bestowed upon them has tended to concentrate on the Persian variants, most notably those literary accounts in the *Shahnamah* and Nizami's *Sikander Namah E Bara* (as opposed to the popular *Iskandarnamah*).²⁵

A number of variants of the Alexander Romance have been used here to determine the Alexander intertext. These will be used to create a composite of the essential elements of the Alexander Romance. Albert Wolohojian's translation of the Armenian *Pseudo-Callisthenes*,²⁶ Budge's translation of the Ethiopic *Pseudo-Callisthenes—The Alexander Book in Ethiopia*, and Minoo Southgate's translation of a variant of the Persian popular romance, the *Iskandarnamah*,²⁷ are the three main sources.²⁸

7–23. He also provides a really useful discussion of the relationship of the various recensions of the romance, at pp. 28–31. Stoneman's translation of the Greek romance has not been used here as a source.

- 25 This is probably because most medieval Arab historians followed the Persian story of Alexander's birth. This has led to a perception amongst scholars of Middle Eastern literature of the Alexander Romance as being somehow 'Persian'. For example, in *Islam and the Heroic Image*, Renard states that "traditions from a wide range of Islamic societies suggest that the Persians adopted Alexander as one of their own and that Iskandar even considered himself Persian" (pp. 86–87). Although he mentions that the romance travelled widely throughout the Islamic world, he does not address its adoption by any other Middle Eastern society, or point out that in several other versions Alexander also appears to regard himself as Egyptian. This may be the result of a long-held view among orientalists, steeped in the European tradition of written as opposed to oral culture, that because of the preponderance of literary romances and epics in Persian cultural history, the romance and epic are essentially a Persian genre. In a relatively recent article J.C. Bürgel claims that "whereas in Arabic literature the epic genre was virtually non-existent, in Persian literature it flourished from the very beginning. Nomadic life with its concomitant unrest and insecurity may have been unfavourable to the development of so time-consuming an art" ('The Romance' in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *Persian Literature*, Columbia Lectures on Iranian Studies (3 vols. New York: Bibliotheca Persia, 1988), vol. 3, pp. 161–178).
- 26 Albert M. Wolohojian (tr.), *The Romance of Alexander the Great by Pseudo-Callisthenes* (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1969). See also E.L. Ranelagh, *The Past We Share: The Near Eastern Ancestry of Western Folk Literature* (London: Quartet Books, 1979), pp. 45–80.
- 27 Minoo S. Southgate, (tr.), *Iskandarnamah: A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).
- 28 On the Syriac version, see C.A. Ciancaglini, 'The Syriac Version of the Alexander Romance', *Le Muséon* 114 (2001), pp. 121–140.

Albert Wolohojian's *The Romance of Alexander the Great by Pseudo-Callisthenes* is part translation and part summary of a thirteenth-century Armenian copy, made by a monk, Kečaroweci Xacatowr, of a fifth-century manuscript. (The fifth century was a golden age for Armenian literature and many foreign works, mainly Christian, were translated at this time). According to Wolohojian, the copyist, although registering his disapproval of 'unseemly' and 'baseless' 'pagan writings', appears to have made no more than a few superficial alterations to the text which definitely falls into the category of popular narrative. Due to its 'narrative coherence', textual evidence that it was translated from Greek, and frequent references to Alexandria throughout the narrative, the Armenian variant is believed to be closely related to the Alexandrian *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, if not a direct copy.²⁹

The Alexander Book in Ethiopia is a translation of several Alexander texts from manuscripts in the British Library and Bibliothèque Nationale by Earnest Wallis Budge in the form of translations interspersed with summary.³⁰ These texts belong to the class of popular oral tale and legend, have a strong Christian flavour, and were probably intended as edifying entertainment. The longest text is what Budge calls *Pseudo-Callisthenes* (but is otherwise known as the *Zena Eskender*), and was found in a cache of manuscripts stolen from Ethiopian monasteries and brought to England in 1868. Budge does not give precise dates

29 "The original Graeco-Egyptian fourth-century manuscript of the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* is lost, but a copy made in the thirteenth century has preserved a fifth-century translation from the Greek into Armenian that very closely follows it. Because the thirteenth century Armenian copy has recently been translated into English we have the happy circumstance of being able to read, as if just received from fifth-century Egypt, this Near Eastern progenitor of the western Alexander epics" (Ranelagh, *The Past We Share*, p. 47). See Wolohojian, *Romance of Alexander*, pp. 8–21, and Ranelagh, *The Past We Share*, pp. 45–48, for further details.

30 The stories are as follows: "The Ethiopic version of *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, the historical summary of AL-MAKĪN, the Christian Romance, and the story of ALEXANDER's visit to JERUSALEM by JOSEPH BEN GORION... translations of a few of the stories about ALEXANDER and his great master ARISTOTLE which were collected by GREGORY BAR-HEBRAEUS (the great Maphrian of the East who was born in 1226 and died in 1286)" (E.A. Wallis Budge (tr.), *The Alexander Book in Ethiopia: The Ethiopic Versions of Pseudo-Callisthenes, the Chronicle of Al-Makīn, the Narrative of Joseph ben Gorion, and a Christian Romance of Alexander* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. vi). For more on the Ethiopian Alexander Romance, see van Donzel and Schmidt, *Gog and Magog*, pp. 34–35; and Peter Christos Kotar, 'The Ethiopic Alexander Romance' in Z. David Zuwiyya (ed.), *A Companion to Alexander Literature in the Middle Ages*, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, 29 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 157–176. This latter provides a detailed plot summary.

for any of the manuscripts, but places them all sometime between the thirteenth and nineteenth century AD.³¹

The third main variant of the Middle Eastern Alexander Romance is the *Iskandarnamah*, translated and summarised by Minoos Southgate. He describes the romance as “an anonymous twelfth to fourteenth-century Persian prose romance of Alexander belonging to the fabulous tradition... The unornamented, simple style of the romance and the infrequency of Arabic words in its vocabulary suggest that the author or compiler intended the romance for a general audience”.³² It appears that this is a verbatim copy of another manuscript, since at one point the scribe disclaims responsibility for narrative inconsistencies, stating “the original copy reads thus”.³³ It also appears, from narratorial comments, that this version is shorter than some others; the narrator states that he has omitted material that he finds irrelevant or uninteresting. Unfortunately, the end of the manuscript is missing, but the general pattern of the story is clear.³⁴

Further to the above three popular variants of the Alexander Romance, there are several other works useful in determining the Alexander intertext. The story of Alexander as immortalised in Ferdowsi’s *Shahnamah* is perhaps the most famous of these.³⁵ The *Shahnamah*, or king book, took 40 years to compose and was completed in 1010 AD. It is an immense poem (some 60,000 couplets) which chronicles the reigns of historical, legendary and mythical rulers of Persia and is regarded as the greatest epic in Persian literary history. Although the *Shahnamah* has gained supreme status as a result of its

31 See Budge, *The Alexander Book*, pp. xxiii–xxiv. On the Syriac recension, see Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala, ‘Alexander the Great in the Syriac Tradition’ in Z. David Zuwiyya (ed.), *A Companion to Alexander Literature in the Middle Ages*, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition, 29 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 41–72.

32 Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 2. See pp. 2–5 for further details of the manuscript.

33 Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 115. Furthermore, “information provided by the scribe indicates that his source was not the original but rather a manuscript copied by ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn Abī al-Barakāt, another scribe, who had access to several other copies of the text, among them the original manuscript, and was able to compare his source against them for accuracy” (Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 3).

34 It appears that the narrative may be nearly complete as, shortly before the manuscript comes to an end, Alexander laments the fact that he has only a few months left to live.

35 For a discussion of Ferdowsi’s sources, see Halia Manteghi, ‘Alexander the Great in the *Shāhnāme*h of Ferdowsī’ in Richard Stoneman, Kyle Erickson and Ian Netton (eds), *The Alexander Romance in Persia and the East* (Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing & Groningen University Library, 2012), pp. 161–174. For more on the Persian recensions of the Romance in general, see Stoneman, *Alexander the Great*, pp. 27–48.

poetic, highly literary form, its roots are firmly founded in the bedrock of the Persian popular tradition as it is a retelling of the popular Persian national epic, the *Khwaday Namag*.³⁶ The version used here is a relatively recent translation from the Persian by Reuben Levy, which takes the form of prose translation interspersed with summary.³⁷

Another valuable work for determining both the Persian and the general Alexander intertext is William Hanaway's 'Persian Popular Romances Before the Safavid Period'.³⁸ Although this contains no direct translation or detailed summaries, it does contain plot synopses of the Alexander Romance as depicted in the Syriac and Greek *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, the *Iskandarnamah*, *Darabnamah* and *Shahnamah*. Although brief, these are sufficient to help establish a general structural intertext.

There are also fragments of a Coptic version of the Alexander Romance.³⁹ Nine of these have been collated and translated by Maspero in his *Popular Stories of Ancient Egypt*.⁴⁰ Composed in Sahidic dialect, and thought to have been written down during the first period of the Arab conquests of Egypt, these were probably produced in the White Monastery near Sohag in Upper Egypt, and then copied in the tenth or eleventh century. The romance is of the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* tradition and contains several otherwise unknown episodes. In Maspero's opinion the romance is, at least partly, a direct translation from the Greek. Although these fragments are not substantial enough to be of use in determining a structural intertext, they do cast some light on the use of tone, theme and motif.

36 Ferdowsi himself states that (amongst other sources) he has used older versions of the *Khwaday Namag*, especially that of Abū Mansūr of Tūs. See Dick Davis, *Epic and Sedition: The Case of Ferdowsi's Shāhnāme* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1992), pp. 10–17.

37 Reuben Levy, *The Epic of the Kings: Shah-Nama, the National Epic of Persia by Ferdowsi* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1967).

38 William L. Hanaway, 'Persian Popular Romances Before the Safavid Period' (unpublished PhD thesis: Columbia University, 1970).

39 On the Coptic Alexander Romance, see Daniel L. Selden, 'The Coptic Alexander Romance' in Z. David Zuwiyya (ed.), *A Companion to Alexander in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 133–158, which is also published with only minor differences as D.L. Selden, 'Guardians of Chaos', *Journal of Coptic Studies* 13 (2011), pp. 117–155 (the latter is slightly more expanded and contains more references and notes); and van Donzel and Schmidt, *Gog and Magog*, pp. 33–34.

40 See Maspero, *Popular Stories of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 243–255 for details of the manuscript fragments.

Finally, *The History of Alexander* is another informative account of the Alexander story.⁴¹ This is an historical work attributed to Quintus Curtius Rufus and apparently written in the first century AD. It also follows the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* tradition and draws heavily on Greek Alexandrian works written around the third century BC. It is believed to be largely based on the writings of Livy, Cleitarchus, Herodotus and Ptolemy (one of Alexander's companions and subsequently ruler of Egypt). Although primarily an historical work, there is some evidence of the influence of popular tradition in the form of Alexander stories which can also be found in the romance. The structure of this account also casts a different light on the thematic and structural forms of the various romances.⁴²

Summary of the Alexander Romance

The various recensions of the Alexander Romance used here vary on a great many details, arrange shared material in different orders, differ in length, and contain a range of independent episodes. They also—predictably given the variety of their cultural and geographical backgrounds—are diverse in characterisation, tone of treatment, and theme. Nevertheless, all of the cited recensions have in common a number of narrative episodes and elements in an overall tripartite structure which both define and maintain the stability of the Alexander Romance (and vice versa). The brief summary below is formulated on the basis of these common elements.⁴³ The Middle Eastern 'Alexander' appears to have two sub-groups, the Persian (which will be referred to as version B) and the non-Persian (version A). Obviously, there are distinctive differences between the non-Persian variants, but the Persian Alexander legend is the only one to change fundamental story elements. That is to say, the Ethiopian legend translated by Budge may make Alexander a cold, calculating ascetic while Wolohojian's Armenian Alexander is fiery, unpredictable and sometimes even irrational, but the two agree on all basic narrative elements while the Persian Alexander legends do not. The main differences between the two sub-groups occur at the beginning of the legend and relate to the paternal identity of Alexander.

41 Quintus Curtius Rufus, *The History of Alexander*, tr. John Yardley (London: Penguin Books, 1984).

42 See Rufus, *The History*, pp. 1–15.

43 The Alexander legend is long and complex. It is thus unavoidable that the summary provided here is somewhat subjective. For more detailed and comprehensive summaries of various Alexander legends, see Hanaway, 'Persian Popular Romances'.

Version A

Nectanebus, an Egyptian king with magical powers, wages an unsuccessful battle against the invading enemies of Egypt. He flees to Macedonia and takes refuge in the Macedonian court disguised as a magician. The Macedonian king, Philip, is away on a military campaign. Word of Nectanebus' magical powers spreads until Queen Olympias summons him into her presence. The magician tricks her into believing he is a god and seduces her with the intent of fathering a son with a great destiny. Alexander is conceived, duly born with appropriate auspicious timing and miraculous signs, and Philip, now returned from his foreign excursions, is persuaded, generally through Nectanebus' magical intervention, to bring him up as his son. While Alexander is still young Nectanebus acts as his tutor, an arrangement which comes to an end when he tries to tell Alexander his true identity on a cliff-top walk and plunges to his death in what can only be described as mysterious circumstances.⁴⁴

Version B

Darab (or Darius), king of Persia, defeats Philip, king of Macedonia, in battle and marries his daughter. He returns her soon afterwards because of her bad breath, but not before she has conceived a child. The princess's pregnancy is kept secret and the infant is brought up as Philip's son.

Alexander is a child of unusual strength, intelligence and capability, as befitting a future hero, and a variety of episodes outlining his youthful exploits are often included at this point. The exact nature of these tend to differ from version to version of the Alexander legend, largely—it would appear—according to the specific cultural characterisation of the hero. They do, however, conform to a general pattern in that all such anecdotes depict his martial ability. At this point the two intertexts converge with Philip's death and the accession to the throne of his heir, Alexander.

At this point the variants become more consistent and both continue as follows. Very soon after becoming king, Alexander becomes embroiled in a

44 The majority of the narratives are distinctively ambiguous about Alexander's role in Nectanebus' death. Although it is implied in most variants, only the Armenian and Ethiopian *Pseudo-Callisthenes* explicitly state that Alexander intentionally pushed him to his death (see Wolohojian, *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, p. 35; and Budge, *The Alexander Book*, p. 16). The reasons differ—in the Armenian variant Nectanebus is killed because Alexander becomes angry at Nectanebus' practice of astrology, being of the opinion that he should limit himself to studying the earth rather than the heavens. In the Ethiopian variant Alexander kills him in a fit of anger when Nectanebus reveals that he is, in fact, his father.

dispute with the Persian king, Darab (in the Persian variants he is the son of the Darab mentioned above, i.e. Alexander's half brother), who is demanding tribute. The two kings exchange insulting messages, often sending each other riddles in the form of objects.⁴⁵ Alexander ultimately refuses to pay, raises an army and marches off to settle the argument permanently. At some point in his campaign (the exact schedule varies), he reaches Egypt where he finds the city of Alexandria and takes time out for a trip to visit the oracle at Siwa, who confirms his right to the Egyptian throne. Although the Macedonians are repeatedly victorious in battle and take over ever-increasing amounts of Persian territory, Darab himself continues to elude them as he retreats and regroups. Finally, the Persian king is betrayed and mortally wounded by Persian traitors.⁴⁶ Darab is brought in front of Alexander, on his deathbed, and his nobility is such that Alexander is overcome with remorse. The two kings are reconciled and Darab asks Alexander to marry his wife and look after his other female relatives. The Macedonian army then continues to march on those parts of the Persian Empire as yet unconquered. At some point after the death of Darab, version B introduces a queen who is defeated by Alexander, marries him and becomes his foremost ally.

Once the Persian Empire has been subdued, Alexander turns his attention to India.⁴⁷ He fights a mighty battle against an Indian king, which he eventually wins by using bronze or brass soldiers, or red-hot metal elephants (depending on the variant). Different versions of the story expand this theme to varying degrees: in some variants Alexander faces several Indian kings in series. At this point the narrative moves outside the world of reality and into that of miracle and fantasy as Alexander embarks on a number of sight-seeing visits and adventures in India and beyond, in the lands to the East and West. (The Persian variants have Alexander visiting Mecca, Yemen and Adam's tomb before departing to the supernatural world). The different texts contain a wide variety of independent stories within this framework, but there are some which appear to be more integral than others: the story of Alexander's visit to the

45 For example, see Budge, *The Alexander Book*, pp. 18–19; and Wolohojian, *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, pp. 57–60.

46 In some variants Alexander is completely absolved from responsibility for Darius' death by portraying the Persians' betrayal of their king as a spontaneous act on their part, in an attempt to appease the invading Macedonians. For example, see Wolohojian, *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, pp. 102–103.

47 Hanaway's summary of *Darabnamah* includes an extra, unique episode at this point, in which Alexander is attacked by Darab's daughter, Buran Dokht, which is discussed later in this chapter. See Hanaway, 'Persian Popular Romances', pp. 298–300.

Indian sages, his encounter with the talking trees which predict his death, his visit to the Land of Darkness in search of the water of life, and a number of encounters with strange and ferocious beasts.⁴⁸ In many of the texts he also encounters Queen Candace during this section of the narrative.⁴⁹ She is a wise and powerful queen who recognises the disguised Alexander when he infiltrates her court and allies herself with him. (In some variants Alexander comes to the aid of her son who is tracking down his abducted beloved, and the two combine forces to rescue her from the Amazons). Eventually, Alexander's wanderings come to an end and he returns to the world of reality only to die abruptly. His body is transported to Egypt in a coffin and buried in Alexandria.

Structural Comparison

The main convergences between *Sayf* and the 'Alexander' intertext are summarised below in chronological order. Although the initial analogies follow a chronological scheme, many of the later ones rely instead on a motifal or thematic foundation. The concentration of direct parallels between *Sayf* and 'Alexander' in the primary stages of *Sīrat Sayf*, the most stable part of the narrative, follows the pattern found in other intertextual presences in the *sīra*.

Sīrat Sayf

Story of Dhū Yazan's successful campaign against King Ba'labak. After a migration, Dhū Yazan settles in Madīnat al-Ḥamrā'. Sayf's father dies before his birth in questionable circumstances. He is abandoned by his mother and brought up by a foster father, King Afrāḥ, in a foreign land.

'Alexander' Intertext

(a) Story of Nectanebus and his unsuccessful battle against the enemies of Egypt. He flees to Greece. Alexander's real father dies in questionable circumstances in Alexander's youth. He is brought up by a foster father, Philip, in a foreign land.

(b) The Persian king, Darab, marries Philip's daughter and sends her, pregnant, back to her father because of her bad breath. Alexander is brought up by a foster father, Philip.

48 See, for example, Wolohojian, *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, pp. 121–123 for Alexander's visit to the Indian sages and pp. 128–131 for the journey into the Land of Darkness and encounter with the talking trees. This variant includes a 'letter' sent by Alexander to Aristotle which recounts the strange and fabulous creatures they have experienced on their travels, see pp. 111–116.

49 She is sometimes identified as Andalusian in Persian variants and as Asian by the Ethiopian variant. Rufus has Alexander visited by an Amazonian queen, Thalestris, who wants Alexander to father her child (see *The History*, p. 127).

Sayf Ar'ad instigates war with Qamariyya over tribute payments. Sayf is sent to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' as a soldier in the army, Qamariyya recognises her son and they are reunited. Qamariyya repeatedly tries to kill Sayf on his wedding nights until, finally, she is killed by 'Āqīṣa and Ṭāma. Sayf mourns her death. The section concludes with his final set of marriages.

[Munyat al-Nufūs section: Sayf goes to the City of Women to retrieve his runaway wife and son.]

Sayf embarks on a quest to rescue 'Ayrūd from the Treasury of Solomon, encountering many wonders, ascetic wise men and different peoples—several of whom he converts. This is followed by the similarly solitary adventures of his sons Damar, Miṣr and Naṣr following their abduction by an evil magician. Sayf builds the city of Miṣr and changes the course of the Nile to its current course.

Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn revive the conflict between Sayf Ar'ad and Sayf. Sayf leads his army against the Ḥabashīs to victory. Sayf Ar'ad is killed and his throne taken, Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn flee through the Seven Climes on earth, then the Qāf mountains, the realm of the jinn. Sayf pursues them, conquering all that stands in his path. He then retires to Miṣr, divides his lands amongst his three sons, and departs to live the life of an ascetic in the Muqaṭṭam hills.

Darab's son, also named Darab, instigates war with the Greeks over the non-payment of tribute. The war continues until Darab is betrayed and killed by two of his own men, on Alexander's instigation. Alexander mourns his death, inherits his throne, crown and womenfolk.

[Candace section: Alexander visits Queen Candace who outwits him (or at least matches him) in a Solomon style recognition test.]

Alexander wanders the rest of the earthly world with his army, conquering countries, exploring wonders, seeking advice from wise men, talking trees and birds. He visits the shrine of Amon-Re at Siwa where the oracle declares him rightful king of Egypt and founds the city of Alexandria.

Alexander and his army depart the earthly world after their Indian expedition. They have several adventures in the supernatural realm, after which they return to reality. Alexander dies, his lands are divided amongst his inheritors, and his coffin is taken to Alexandria to be buried.

Obviously the correlations between *Sayf* and 'Alexander' are not necessarily as clear cut as they have been portrayed here. Nevertheless, there is an overall sense of correspondence in the structure of the two narratives. The existence of a tripartite structure in itself might not be regarded as significant, since the ability to read some form of tripartite structure is common, but there are analogies in the form that this structure takes in the two narratives which hint at a more specific relationship. In both *Sayf* and 'Alexander', the first section deals with personal conflict between Sayf and Qamariyya, and Alexander and Darius respectively, a conflict which not only takes place on a personal level, but encompasses nations. In the case of the Alexander intertext this theme then gives way to a second section in which the king wanders the various countries of the world with his army, conquering all that lies in his path and exploring such things as he finds interesting on the way. Eventually, in the final section he leaves the real world to explore the wonders of the supernatural realm. There are echoes of this scheme in *Sayf*. During the second section of the *sīra* our hero wanders the earth in a voyage of discovery, following an intermittent quest to rescue his friend 'Ayrūd from imprisonment in Solomon's Treasury, whilst haphazardly indulging his curiosity and converting various peoples on his way. Finally, just as Alexander passes through the gates of reality into the mysterious realms beyond India, Sayf leaves the real world for the Seven Climes and the Qāf mountains in pursuit of Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn. The parallels are not exact, but they are striking.

Further to these structural parallels 'Alexander' and *Sayf* share a number of narrative elements. 'The Journey Into the Land of Darkness' and other episodes found in the Qur'anic legends have already been mentioned. In addition, there are a number of narrative elements encountered by both heroes as they wander the Earth. These are scattered throughout *Sayf*, maintaining Alexander's intertextual presence in the *sīra* at a constant background level. Many of the strange and fantastic lands Sayf encounters are peopled with fabulous creatures such as dog-headed people, fruit with a human appearance, and mermaids, all of which can also be found in the Alexander Romance. One further element that should also be mentioned is one of the more bizarre episodes of *Sayf*: the underwater adventures during which Sayf raises the City of Mars from the sea bed where it has been consigned by a magician.⁵⁰ This finds a loose thematic parallel in the so-called 'diving bell adventures' of Alexander, in which Alexander uses a glass bottomed vessel to explore the seas at the end of the world.⁵¹

50 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 2, pp. 375–387.

51 See, for example, Budge, *The Alexander Book*, pp. 169–172.

Conception, Birth and Childhood: The Hero's Introduction

As indicated in the narrative comparison above, the introductory section of *Sīrat Sayf* and the story of his birth and conception find many parallels with 'Alexander A' in terms of major narrative elements, many of which are essential to the development of the respective plots. Both begin with the migration of the hero's father, a narrative element that is, in both cases, linked with warfare. In 'Alexander A' Nectanebus flees his homeland after an unsuccessful battle, while in *Sīrat Sayf* Dhū Yazan leads his army out of Yemen to do battle with the only earthly king whose power rivals his. In contrast to Nectanebus, Dhū Yazan is successful and it is the unfortunate King Ba'labak who flees. Both Dhū Yazan and Nectanebus then settle in foreign lands, where they father a son—the future hero-king of the narrative—and die.

The case for some kind of relationship between *Sīrat Sayf* and 'Alexander' in this introductory section of the *sīra* becomes stronger the more closely one examines the two narratives. As already stated, both *Sīrat Sayf* and 'Alexander A' begin with the travel away from the homeland of the hero's father to the land of the hero's birth on a journey motivated by war. Associations are created through the use of similar motifs presented in the same order, both literally and in terms of plot chronology. These associations are then further exploited for the good of the plot by narratorial reversal of the basic premises of the Alexander story; the weak and defeated ruler, fleeing for his life from the land of Egypt, is implicitly juxtaposed with a mighty and victorious king marching towards the same land. *Sīrat Sayf* introduces itself partly through a kind of dual reference to the Alexander narrative which infers two things to the audience: Dhū Yazan's son will be a world conqueror, and the story will be about his foundation of a great Egyptian empire.⁵² This interacts with, and bolsters, predictions made in the introductory section about Sayf's heroic destiny.

What may not be so clear from the narrative summary is that there are also some extremely interesting correlations between *Sīrat Sayf* and 'Alexander B'. These coexist with the Dhū Yazan-Nectanebus intertext with which they are intertwined. In contrast to the case of 'Alexander A', in which the references are concentrated around the father, all occurrences of an 'Alexander B' intertext in the introductory section of *Sīrat Sayf* surround the character of Qamariyya, Sayf's mother, and draw on that of Alexander's mother. As with the case of the Nectanebus intertext, broad structural relationships can be found in the

52 This use of reversal to rewrite history through intertextuality has similarities to the use of the Moses intertext Chraïbi finds ('Le roman de *Sayf ibn dī Yazan*'), which has been discussed in chapter 2 above and which has implications for the reading of *Sayf* in terms of the Prophetic *Königsnovelle* form in the following chapter.

plots relating to the two queens. In 'Alexander B', Philip's pregnant daughter is returned to him by her husband, Darab, because of her bad breath. She later gives birth to a son who is adopted by Philip as his own and takes over the Macedonian throne when Philip dies. As in *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, the birth of the hero is accompanied by the motif of his bastardy; in this case Philip's wife, Cleopatra, taunts Alexander's mother about the illegitimacy of her son.⁵³ In the case of *Sīrat Sayf*, in a reversal of imagery similar to that found in the Nectanebus pretext, Qamariyya is sent by Sayf Ar'ad to Dhū Yazan, who marries her and fathers her child (as opposed to being impregnated and sent away). This child, Sayf, is also connected with the motif of allegations of illegitimacy; in a manner reminiscent of Cleopatra's slanderous taunts, Qamariyya repeatedly refers to her son as '*ibn al-zinā*' ('son of adultery', or 'bastard') throughout the introductory section.⁵⁴

However, whereas in 'Alexander B' the infant grows up in the care of his mother and foster father, to inherit the throne when the latter dies, in *Sīrat Sayf* he is cast out by his mother, who takes the throne for herself, and then grows up in the custodianship of a foster father, King Afrāḥ. This last narrative element is a fairly striking divergence from the expectations set up by both the Alexander intertexts so far and helps to raise narrative tensions. Simply by abandoning the Alexander pattern which dictates that Sayf should accede to Dhū Yazan's throne on his death, the unnatural nature of Qamariyya's actions in abandoning her child is heightened. When Sayf is adopted by Afrāḥ soon afterwards, conforming to the pattern of Alexander's adoption by a foster father, the resumption of expectations goes some way to assuring the audience that Sayf is indeed the hero and his path to success will eventually be realised. At the same time, a new set of thematic expectations of the *Sīrat Sayf* narrative have been facilitated which are expressed through the conflict between Sayf and his mother. By invoking and then abandoning an established narrative pattern, the narrator has helped to create a sense of chaos; all is not right in the world and things are not happening as they should. By the rules of narrative convention, Sayf cannot rest on his heroic laurels until everything in his world is in its rightful place.

The structural and thematic parallels surrounding the conception and birth of the heroes of *Sīrat Sayf* and 'Alexander B' are made more concrete through the inclusion of one further shared motif, the poison damsel, which

53 It may worth noting that in both 'Alexander A' and 'B' the motif of Alexander's illegitimacy is connected to that of his Egyptianness.

54 See, for example, *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 42.

is associated with both Sayf's and Alexander's mothers.⁵⁵ In 'Persian Popular Romances', Hanaway argues for reading the bad breath of Alexander's mother as derivative from the Indian motif of the poison damsel, a kind of female assassin who was fed small amounts of poison from an early age in increasing amounts until she herself became extremely poisonous.⁵⁶ He notes that this is an unusual motif in Persian romances; although it is found in the *Shahnamah*, *Darabnamah*, *Iskandarnamah*, and al-Tha'labī's *Qiṣaṣ* in the context of the Alexander story, it only occurs on two other occasions, (both of which are in *Firūz Shāh* and relate to the same character, the sorceress Zarda).⁵⁷ These poison damsels were associated with royal courts and the murder of princes and kings, to whom they were often sent as gifts. The methods by which such women killed varied, but it could be done with the breath. The introduction of Alexander's mother as a poison damsel coincides neatly with Qamariyya's entrance as a gift to Dhū Yazan with a vial of poison secreted in her hair:

[Sayf Ar'ad] gave her the vial of poison, and said to her, "Hide it, and don't let anyone find it." She took it and hid it between the locks of her hair. The king was pleased by her idea. He reached his hand between the locks of her hair, but couldn't find it, and was happy.⁵⁸

Like Darab, Dhū Yazan survives his encounter with the damsel, thanks to a letter warning him about Qamariyya from Baḥr Qufqān, Sayf Ar'ad's sympathetic, proto-Muslim vizier. He challenges Qamariyya, who hands over the poison and bides her time:

She put a smile upon her face, and straight away began to deceive him and flatter him with her tricks and stratagems, and her honeyed words. She said, "I give myself to your protection,⁵⁹ O King of the Age, whoever

55 This motif is listed in El-Shamy, *Folk Traditions*—F582, 'Poisonous damsel. Woman nourished on poison is fatal to her husbands'—but no listings are given for its regional distribution or associated tale types. Lyons does not mention it at all in his motif index.

56 Again, see Hanaway, 'Persian Popular Romances', pp. 55–65. He states that this motif is also connected to the European Alexander narrative: "in the case of European literature, the poison-damsel motif became widespread and was associated with persons other than Alexander although it was introduced in connection with Alexander in the *Secretorum Secretorum*" (pp. 63–64).

57 See Hanaway, 'Persian Popular Romances', pp. 55–65.

58 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 30.

59 Literally, *Allāh Allāh yā malik al-zaman fī mithlik*. This is an idiomatic phrase used when one entrusts something to someone else's protection, asking them to take care of it. "I give

follows your example will indeed be a great king.” Reaching up to the back of her neck she brought out the vial from between the tresses of her hair, and handed it over to him in all her guile. She said to herself, “You missed the target, but wait, what is not caught today can be won tomorrow.”⁶⁰

Despite the averted poisoning, Dhū Yazan disappears from the scene by means of a timely but mysterious death, allowing Sayf to have a fatherless childhood that reflects the Alexander pattern. The use of the poison damsel motif in concurrence with the narrative element of a territorial dispute between two kings, and the resulting conception of Sayf (not to mention the other correspondences with Alexander) hints to the audience that, in accordance with the Alexander story, the death of Dhū Yazan and Sayf’s exile and loss of paternal identity will not prevent the re-emergence and escalation of the Ḥabashī-Yemeni conflict.

Thus, a convergence of essential motifs from early stages of both ‘Alexander A’ and ‘B’ can be found in these introductory sections of *Sīrat Sayf*. These early allusions to *Pseudo-Callisthenes* are then built on by a number of characteristic narrative elements from the Persian Alexander variant when Qamariyya enters the stage. These motifs are not dropped haphazardly into the narrative but retain the chronological order in which they appear in the Alexander Romance. Furthermore they are presented, in *Sīrat Sayf*, in association with the parent of the same gender as in the Alexander Romance; that is to say, those motifs associated with Alexander’s mother and father are also associated with Sayf’s mother and father respectively. These intertextual associations, whether worked into the *sīra* as a conscious narrative strategy or accidental, also help to create audience expectations of Sayf’s heroic character and destiny before he has even been born and colour one further important concept of the *sīra*: that of the nature of Sayf’s claim to legitimacy as king.

One of the main things that splits *Iskandarnamah* and *Pseudo-Callisthenes* into specific variants is the fairly substantial differences in their respective treatment of the conception and birth of Alexander. The narratives use different groups of motifs to define character and events and change his paternal identity, thereby creating two apparently distinct birth stories. In ‘Persian Popular Romances’, Hanaway states that the differences in the Persian

myself to your protection” is the best, but inadequate, translation I could come up with in this context.

60 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 38.

Alexander birth story most probably came about because they give him legitimacy to the Persian throne:

The new birth story is the most important step in the Persianization of Alexander, for it brings him into the Achaemenian line of kings. This gives him a legitimacy as king of Iran which he could not have had if the legends had left him as a full-blooded Greek.⁶¹

The ideas of both the naturalisation and the legitimisation of the hero through his paternal identity are also present in *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, in which Alexander is portrayed as a descendant of the kings of Egypt who reclaims his paternal identity along with the throne of Egypt: *Pseudo-Callisthenes* even changes the historical itinerary of Alexander's journey to make Egypt the first of his conquests. Although the Nectanebus story is retained in all *Pseudo-Callisthenes* variants, the treatment of the theme of Alexander's paternal identity seems to change according to the regional origins of the variant in ways that would seem to indicate that the theme of Alexander's paternal identity is fundamental to the Alexander intertext. In the Armenian version, Alexander visits Siwa where he receives a dream visitation from the god Serapis who promises to help him in his conquests and prophesies his eternal fame. He then visits Alexandria where he is told of a prophecy that the old king will return, reinvigorated and youthful, recognises a statue of his father Nectanebus and ascends the throne amid general rejoicing.⁶² This account of Alexander's birth and parentage has been acknowledged as reflecting a specifically Egyptian discourse pattern, the Prophetic *Königsnovelle*, as part of a conscious effort to propagandise the Ptolemaic dynasty on the part of the priesthood, the bearers of cultural tradition, using historical discourse models to ground the kings of the time in models of legendary kingship from the past.⁶³ The Ethiopian *Pseudo-Callisthenes* has Alexander beginning his kingship before Philip has died, when he conquers a city 'in the East' called Alexandria. There he con-

61 Hanaway, 'Persian Popular Romances', p. 87. Renard echoes this in *Islam and the Heroic Image*: "Iskandar serves as perhaps the best example of a hero whose literary journey across the world from west to east found him serving to Islamize as he himself became more Islamic and to legitimize the royal claims of any king who could trace his lineage back to Iskandar" (p. 19).

62 See Wolohojian, *The Romance of Alexander*, pp. 53–56.

63 See Richard Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 6–24; Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, pp. 176–8; and Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, pp. 11–12. See also the discussion of the Prophetic *Königsnovelle* in the following chapter.

verts to Christianity and becomes King by God's decree (perhaps fittingly, as the Ethiopic Alexander is conceived by a supernatural being summoned by Nectanebus, rather than Nectanebus himself). Immediately after this, Philip dies and Alexander inherits his title as well. His conquests then begin with an expedition to Egypt, Nubia and Ethiopia which "were opened out before him without fighting", and founds Alexandria in Egypt.⁶⁴

Thus, despite appearances, both the Persian and *Pseudo-Callisthenes* variants remain true to the underlying narrative framework of the Alexander legend precisely by being different. Popular narrative is, by nature, a fluid form where narrative elements may be interchanged, added to or omitted from the basic narrative framework, creating the potential for an infinite number of tellings of the same story. Conversely, if changes are made to the framework of the story, it ceases to be the same story and becomes something else. The naturalisation of Alexander in the *Iskandarnamah* through his paternal identity is a common element to both the Persian and *Pseudo-Callisthenes* variants of the Alexander narrative.⁶⁵ Furthermore, Alexander's first adult adventure is the reclamation of his paternal identity through his conquest of apparently foreign lands, either Persia or Egypt, to which he is the legitimate heir. This narrative element is replicated in *Sīrat Sayf*. In fact, it would appear that, just as the *Iskandarnamah* and *Pseudo-Callisthenes* respectively Persianise and Egyptianise the Greek invader of historical fact, *Sīrat Sayf* may, at some level, be using the Alexander intertext to nationalise the reality of Egypt's Arab invaders.

Darius and Sayf Ar'ad: Territorial Conflict, Fratricide and Matricide

Sīrat Sayf's overall plot motivation, and the framework issue around which it is built, is the conflict between the Ḥabashīs and the Yemenis. References to the Alexander narrative help to establish and inform this power struggle between Sayf and Sayf Ar'ad. In addition to general correspondences in the narrative patterns of both plots, there are several themes and motifs, most of which are again in the Qamariyya section of *Sīrat Sayf*, which draw upon both the general

64 See Budge, *The Alexander Book*, pp. 20–22, pp. 39–40.

65 Baynham also notes this in his article, although he draws no conclusion from it: "the Romance traditions often have a specific definition of their country's association with Alexander. For instance in *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, Alexander is not the true son of Philip, but rather the sorcerer, Nectanebus, the last of the Pharaohs, who disguised as the god of Ammon, seduces Olympias and sires Alexander. According to the *Iskandarnamah*, a Persian medieval Romance and other Islamic versions, Alexander, identified as Dhu'l Qarnayn, the Two-horned and hero of the Koran, is the son of Philip's daughter and Darab, the Persian King" (see Baynham 'Who Put the 'Romance' in the Alexander Romance?', p. 4).

'Alexander' intertext and the specific Persian and *Pseudo-Callisthenes* variants of the pretext to create common ground between *Sayf* and 'Alexander'.

In addition to the correspondences in the portrayal of the hero's childhood in both narratives, the war between *Sayf* and *Sayf Ar'ad* and that between Alexander and Darius have certain similarities in general pattern. In both cases the conflict is on a vast scale, between nations with a long history of hostility, and finally ends with the hero's complete victory over his enemy, who loses his throne and lands and is killed. Furthermore, for both Alexander and *Sayf* this victory is not the climactic end to their conquests, but merely the first stage in world domination. The general correspondences in story pattern (as opposed to narrative structure), although obvious, would not necessarily denote anything more than the vaguest existence of an Alexander intertext if it were not for the presence of several intriguing motifs at work in both narratives, which point to the possibility of a more specific level of intertextuality.

When *Sayf Ar'ad* discovers the existence of the Yemenis soon after they have settled at Madīnat al-Ḥamrā', he is furious and determines to wage war against the upstart invaders. However, Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn tell him of the curse of Noah and urge caution. He is still contemplating their advice when he is visited by a group of merchants who have been taxed by Dhū Yazan as they passed through Madīnat al-Ḥamrā':

A group of merchants entered [the court]. They greeted him and kissed the ground before him, then said, "O King of the Age, Mighty Sovereign, we were travelling to your city and we found a fortified, well-established, city in our path, in the land of Madīnat al-Ḥamrā', which we had never seen before . . . and when we approached it its king demanded tribute from us."⁶⁶

It is this challenge to *Sayf Ar'ad*'s authority that is the trigger that sets the main events of the *sīra* in motion. Not only has Dhū Yazan had the impudence to settle in his lands uninvited but, by charging taxes on his own behalf, he has set himself up as the ruling authority:

When King *Sayf Ar'ad* heard this, his face darkened, and his fury knew no limits. He raged, and cursed, and swore at the sun and the moon. . . . Then Saqardīs said, "Know, O King of the Age, Mighty Sovereign, that if this king did not have the strength to go to war with kings, he wouldn't have come to our lands and followed this path, building this city in our land

66 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 28.

and contesting our authority. But, O King of the Age, we must deceive him and take him by trickery and cunning.”⁶⁷

The trope of taxation of merchants as a motivating factor for territorial conflict may not be unusual, but it is here presented as the trigger for all ensuing conflict between Sayf’s people and the Ḥabashīs in *Sīrat Sayf*.⁶⁸ It is also repeated when Sayf Ar’ad comes into conflict with the Yemenis for a second time. On this occasion the Ḥabashī king unwittingly undermines himself further, ensuring the accession of Sayf to his father’s throne, by sending an army against Qamariyya after discovering that she has sent him no tribute since her accession to the throne of Madīnat al-Ḥamrā’:

King Sayf Ar’ad turned to Saqardīs and said to him, “This Qamariyya began as my concubine and I sent her to King Dhū Yazan under your advice. Dhū Yazan has died, so why has she not sent me tribute for nearly twenty years?”⁶⁹

Coincidentally, the demand for tribute payments as the trigger for conflict is a narrative element consistently identified as the factor that propels the conflict between Alexander and Darius in ‘Alexander’.⁷⁰ When Darius sends messengers to the Macedonian king on his accession to the throne demanding tribute, Alexander refuses, and the two nations go to war. In ‘Alexander’ Darius’

67 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 28–29.

68 I am unable to determine how common the motif of taxation or tribute payments as the cause for conflict is in Middle Eastern literature as I cannot find this specific motif in any of the indices. El-Shamy, *Folk Traditions*, has P531, ‘Taxation and payment of fines or tribute’ and two associated motifs concerned with the extraction of tribute by conquering factions from their defeated enemies, all of which are listed as found in the Nile Valley, but there are no entries in which the question of tribute payments actually causes conflict. Lyons lists a number of motifs to do with tribute (See T.24), none of which are appropriate to the demand for tribute as the instigating factor in conflict. He does list another relevant motif, M.18(1), ‘Merchants complain/plundered’, which he finds in *Sīrat Sayf*, *Sīrat Baybars*, *Sīrat Dhāt al-Ḥimma*, *Sīrat Ḥamza* and *Sīrat ‘Antar*. This generally refers to merchants complaining of their caravan’s being raided on their journey, a situation which often leads to conflict. The one exception to this, other than those found in *Sayf*, occurs early in *Sīrat Ḥamza*, where the young hero objects to the payment of tribute to the Persian King, Chosroe, and attacks his vassal.

69 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 190.

70 In all variants of ‘Alexander’ used here, Darius’ demand for tribute payments from the Macedonians, and Alexander’s refusal to pay them, instigate the conflict between the two nations.

attempt to extract payment from the Macedonians results in the downfall of the Persian Empire. Likewise, in *Sīrat Sayf* the consequences of these initiations of conflict are disastrous for the Ḥabashīs as, despite Sayf Arʿad's best efforts to thwart fate, they ensure the appearance of the hero who will carry out the curse of Noah and end his rule. Thus, as well as influencing audience perception of Sayf Arʿad's character, reference to the theme of the Darius-Alexander conflict in the initial stages of *Sīrat Sayf*, reflecting as it does the narrative structure of 'Alexander', enhances the sense of futility of Sayf Arʿad's actions and portends the fall of his empire at Sayf's hands in the *sīra* to come.

Although the taxation motif is not used in relation to Sayf Arʿad's second expedition against the Yemenis at the end of the Wedding Quest section when he drives them out of Madīnat al-Ḥamrāʾ, setting them on course for their final migration to the land of Egypt, it does make one further appearance in *Sīrat Sayf*. Significantly, this is at the point where Sayf finally takes to the offensive and embarks on his expedition against the Ḥabashī king. The actual trigger for Sayf's campaign occurs when a group of merchants arrive at Miṣr and complain to him that they have been attacked by an army led by Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn. It then emerges that the magicians have persuaded Sayf Arʿad to go to war on the basis that his fame will die out if he lets Sayf grow more and more prosperous, as a consequence of which his tax revenue will fall because no one will pay it.⁷¹ Sayf is finally persuaded that he must be rid of the Ḥabashī thorn in his side and it is at this point that the nature of the Ḥabashī-Yemeni conflict becomes a religious crusade, Muslims versus infidel:

Sayf said to his court, "Know that I have only gathered you to impose my conditions [upon you]. Will you agree to them?"

"We are yours to command," they replied, "We will not disappoint you." Sayf then said, "It is my intention to embark on a holy war in obedience to the Lord of Mankind. If you enter a city and its people submit without bloodshed, none of you is to take anything from any of its people, neither human nor jinn. But if we come across a city or castle or fortress and enter its lands and its people resist us, then we go to war and destroy their heroes and soldiers, but none of you will attack their women, or steal anything..."⁷²

Thus, this aspect of the Alexander intertext is replicated and brought back into the forefront of the narrative subtext at this climactic moment when, after

71 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 433.

72 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 435.

the diversions of the Wedding Quest section with its accounts of the individual adventures of Sayf and his sons, the *sīra* returns to the subject of the war between Sayf and Sayf Ar'ad. The use of the taxation trope at this point both recalls the earlier events of *Sīrat Sayf* and re-affirms the perception of Sayf as an Alexander-like king, effectively acting as both a reminder of earlier events and a reiterated portent of the fate of the Ḥabashī kingdom.

There are also a number of other aspects of the Ḥabashī-Yemeni conflict that find echoes in Alexander. In the Alexander legend, the war between the Macedonians and the Persians concludes with the defeat of the Persian army and the death of Darius as he flees from the battlefield. *Pseudo-Callisthenes* and *Iskandarnamah* differ in their portrayal of these events, but the death of Darius is invariably accompanied by a set of narrative elements. In all cases, the mortally wounded Darius, or his corpse, is brought before Alexander whereupon the Macedonian king recognises the nobility and honour of his enemy and laments his death. In those variants of the narrative where the Persian king is still alive, he responds in a similar vein and entrusts his womenfolk and throne to Alexander's care before breathing his last. For example:

I beg to entrust to you as your own parent my wretched mother, Queen Rodogoune, and care for my wife as a blood relative. And I give you my daughter Roxiane for a wife . . . Honor my sister, Gagipharta, and consider her your own sister.⁷³

In *Pseudo-Callisthenes* variants Darius' murder is usually instigated by Alexander who offers a fit reward to any Persian prepared to undertake the dastardly deed rather than carrying out the murder himself.⁷⁴ The *Iskandarnamah* distances Alexander even further from Darius' death, portraying his killers as acting independently in the belief that the Darius' death will appease Alexander.⁷⁵ It would appear that in all versions the opportune killing of Darius by someone other than Alexander is an essential element of the Alexander narrative. This 'averted murder' motif is also one that occurs in *Sīrat Sayf*.

The death of Qamariyya is one of the strangest episodes of the *sīra*. Sayf is finally persuaded that she must be dealt with when his wife Nāhid dies

73 Wolohojian, *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, pp. 104–105.

74 The reward does not turn out to be quite what Darius' murderers might have expected—they are executed by Alexander for their treacherous behaviour.

75 See Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 13. Here Darius is betrayed by two of his ministers, who stab him to death.

as a result of her plotting.⁷⁶ (Incidentally, her name is very similar to that of Alexander's mother, Nāhīd, in Ferdowsī's *Shahnamah*, which is the more modern Persian form of the name of the goddess Anahit, who has been identified in turn with Buran Dokht, whose intertextual presence is explored later in this chapter⁷⁷). Sayf orders 'Āqīṣa to find Qamariyya, as she has fled the Muslim court in fear of her life. 'Āqīṣa agrees to do this, only on the condition that she is allowed to deal with her herself.⁷⁸ 'Āqīṣa insists on this as, she says, Sayf is bound to relent when his mother is actually in front of him. Despite his protestations to the contrary 'Āqīṣa is correct—Sayf is furious when she kills Qamariyya and throws her severed head into his lap. He banishes her from his sight and weeps uncontrollably, lamenting his mother's fate:

[Sayf] said [to 'Āqīṣa], "May your hands be paralysed, accursed one. Do not look on me again, nor will I look on you. After the death of this accursed wretch, I have no more care for you. If you fall into my hands I will make you just like her, you evil jinn . . ." Then Sayf was cast into anguish over the death of his mother. He gathered the pieces of her flesh with his own hand and buried her in Nāhīd's tomb. Then he mourned her for a month.⁷⁹

Given that Qamariyya is Sayf's arch-rival during the first section of the *sīra* and has repeatedly tried to kill him, not to mention a number of his wives, Sayf's reaction to his mother's death is somewhat strange, even within the behavioural bounds of the *sīra*. Later on Sayf Ar'ad dies in similar circumstances, only this time it is Damar (who is, coincidentally, both another relative of Sayf and another figure with chaotic overtones) who executes him. This, again, is a job that realistically has to be done—in terms of narrative expectations and patterns—but Sayf is absolved from responsibility for the murder of his enemy. As in 'Alexander', Sayf recognises the heroic qualities of his opponent and is loath to see him die, despite his stubborn refusal to convert to Islam and save himself. For a second time Sayf is pre-empted by his companions and, while Sayf continues to try and persuade Sayf Ar'ad to convert, Damar takes matters into his own hands:

76 Nāhīd is killed by Ṭāma when Ṭāma finds her trying to steal Sayf's talismanic girdle, which protects him from harm, having been tricked into doing so by Qamariyya.

77 Manteghi, 'Alexander the Great', pp. 165–6.

78 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 517.

79 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 522.

The narrator said: The most astonishing thing about this story is that King Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan was having a conversation of this kind with King Sayf Ar‘ad, and that he wanted to cajole and threaten him to the Islamic faith and the will of God, the All-knowing Sovereign who created man and taught him the Qur‘an. While they were thus, Şamsām’s sword glittered and danced amongst the gathering, and swooped down on the neck of God’s enemy, chopping off his head. God cast his soul into the Fire, the evil abode. Sayf and the other men looked at the one who struck the blow, and, behold, it was Damar, the son of King Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan. They did not realise that it was he who struck the blow until they saw him holding the sword, covered in blood. When the king saw this, he was overcome by rage that knew no bounds.⁸⁰

Damar’s killing of Sayf Ar‘ad, like ‘Āqīşa’s murder of Qamariyya, invokes his father’s wrath.⁸¹ Thus, Darius’ averted murder can be related to two of the most interesting oddities of *Sīrat Sayf*, the averted murder of Qamariyya in the first section of the *sīra*, and that of Sayf Ar‘ad in the third section. In terms of the averted murder trope, the Persian variant of the Alexander Romance has one more relevant aspect. This can be found in the relationship of Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan and Sayf Ar‘ad, brothers in their descent from Noah, whose fraternal relationship (made explicit in their identical names) bears comparison with that of Alexander and Darius, both sons of the previous king of Persia, also called Darius. The concept of the ultimate brotherhood of man is by no means unique to either *Sīrat Sayf* or *Iskandarnamah* and itself proves nothing. However, the constant re-iteration of the story of Ham and Shem, and the descent of the two warring factions in *Sīrat Sayf* from one common ancestor brings an undoubted fratricidal element into the *sīra*.

As already mentioned, this theme is far from unusual in Middle Eastern epic, especially in the context of the desert *siyar* such as *‘Antar*, where warring tribes are often related, but it is interesting to note that the *Iskandarnamah*, in Persianising Alexander, makes him and Darius brothers through the paternal line. This adds a dimension of familial conflict to their war, which is reflected not only in the power struggle between Sayf and Sayf Ar‘ad, but in that between Sayf and Qamariyya. It is also worth noting that, although the *Iskandarnamah* retains the motif of the averted murder of the Darius, it distances Alexander further from fratricide by absolving him from even the responsibility of ordering the death of his half brother. This motif of averted murder of a family

80 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 4, p. 103.

81 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 4, p. 103.

member is almost directly reproduced in *Sīrat Sayf*, not once, but twice: not only in the maternal, oedipal conflict with Qamariyya but in his fraternal power struggle with Sayf Ar'ad.⁸² The real significance of these averted murders and their relationship with the Alexander intertext is very simple. Use of the averted murder motif highlights the fact that in neither case has Sayf found his ultimate victory. Just as the conquest of Persia was a first step for Alexander on his path to world domination, the defeat of Qamariyya and Sayf Ar'ad are merely steps on the way to the ultimate vanquishment of the real villains of *Sīrat Sayf*, the magicians Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn. They are the ultimate source of all the misadventures that befall Sayf and his people and the ultimate restoration of order at the end of the *sīra* is attained through their destruction. The climactic nature of Sayf's defeat of Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn is enhanced by the fact that they alone of his primary enemies meet their ends at his direct orders and with his express permission.⁸³

The Persian Alexander Romance

Thus far the discussion of the intertextual parallels between *Sīrat Sayf* and 'Alexander' has been reliant on both the Persian and *Pseudo-Callisthenes* variants simultaneously. This section will deal with the relationship between *Sayf* and the Persian popular romances, primarily *Iskandarnamah*, though *Darabnamah* will also be referred to.⁸⁴ Although the Persian Alexander Romance would seem to have a more prominent intertextual relationship with *Sīrat Sayf*, it does not appear to affect perception of the *sīra* in terms of theme or underlying meaning. Instead, the references function at a much more superficial level and primarily take the form of structural and motifal material.

Sīrat Sayf and Iskandarnamah

As illustrated by the narrative summaries of *Sayf* and 'Alexander' above, Southgate's translation of the *Iskandarnamah* shares an overall pattern with the other Alexander narratives used as sources in this study. While conforming

82 This ties in neatly with the intertextual references to ancient Egyptian mythology that surround the relationship of Sayf and Qamariyya.

83 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 4, p. 445.

84 Summaries of both *Darabnamah* and *Iskandarnamah* can be found in Hanaway, 'Persian Popular Romances', pp. 291–319. The former tells the story of King Darab, Alexander's father, as well as Alexander himself.

to the Alexander scheme *Iskandarnamah*, like all Alexander romances, is obviously a culturally distinct and individual telling and, as such, has many unique and distinctive elements. Some of the most prominent of these find correspondences in *Sayf*.

Further to the altered account of Alexander's conception and birth, there are two points of significant differentiation between the *Iskandarnamah* and *Pseudo-Callisthenes* accounts of the Alexander Romance. The first of these is the inclusion in *Iskandarnamah* of an episode in which Alexander meets and marries a *pari* princess called Araqit during the course of his world conquest; the second is the introduction of a quest against the Zanji cannibals in the final section.⁸⁵ Araqit is the ruler of the Land of the Jinn across which Alexander stumbles on his journeys and determines to restore to mankind, its original inhabitants. Following a series of battles and a turbulent courtship (during which the couple alternate between trying to murder one another and falling in and out of love repeatedly), she is captured, shackled in iron fetters and taken by Alexander as his wife. Although Alexander is in love with her, he shows 'manly restraint' and threatens to put her to death before he allows his advisors to persuade him of the wisdom of marrying her instead, primarily to ensure the obedience of her jinn subjects. From the point of their marriage she becomes his most prominent advisor and ally. In fact, on the occasions when Alexander is kidnapped by one foe or another she takes over leadership of his army, organises the rescue attempt and rules, unquestioned, in his stead:

Having been reassured that the King was alive, she called all the fairies and she asked the Sage to order that the treasury, the spare goods, and the women be carried to the fort and the passage between the fort and the sea be sealed. Then Araqit armed herself, and 400,000 horsemen armed themselves to accompany her.⁸⁶

As can be seen from the narrative comparison above, the inclusion of the Araqit episode at this particular point of *Iskandarnamah* results in a structural outline which broadly reflects that of *Sayf*, providing a greater degree of structural convergence between the two narratives than can be found with the other Alexander narratives. This is enhanced when, in a departure from the rest of the Alexander corpus, *Iskandarnamah* then has Alexander engage in a protracted conflict with the Zanjis, during which he conquers one region under their control after another, a campaign broadly reflected in the

85 A *pari* is essentially a Persian jinn.

86 Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 138.

final third of *Sayf*, which is devoted to the defeat of the Ḥabashīs, and the invasion of the Seven Climes and the Qāf mountains. Furthermore, there is a correspondence in the common reliance of both the Candace/Araqit episodes of *Iskandarnamah* and the entire central section of *Sīrat Sayf* (including both the City of Women and al-Thurayyā' episodes) on the Solomon pretext, specifically the part relating to his encounter with the Queen of Sheba. In all variants of the romance Alexander's encounter with Candace includes the characteristic Solomonic motif of the wisdom/recognition test.⁸⁷ The meeting between Alexander and Araqit is also accompanied by a number of other Solomonic references.⁸⁸ The parallels between *Iskandarnamah* and *Sīrat Sayf* are, admittedly, far from exact as the Solomonic intertext occurs predominantly in the Candace and Araqit episodes of *Iskandarnamah*, whereas in *Sīrat Sayf* the reference is most overt during the central part of the section which deals with the actual quest to Solomon's Treasury. Furthermore, there are few textual parallels between the Candace/Araqit episodes of *Iskandarnamah* and the City of Women/al-Thurayyā' stories in *Sīrat Sayf*.⁸⁹ There is, however, an overt mutual reliance by both *Iskandarnamah* and *Sīrat Sayf* on the Solomon-Bilqīs intertext.

Finally, there is one further connection of significance between *Sīrat Sayf* and the Persian Alexander Romance. This takes the form of a number of related motifs to do with the attempted murder of the hero by, or by means of, his wives and concubines. In both narratives, attempts on the hero's life (as opposed to challenges to combat) are primarily associated with female antagonists, sex, and the concept of female relatives. This occurs on a variety of occasions in *Sīrat Sayf*, both in the context of Qamariyya's attempted murder of Dhū Yazan and in relation to the attempted murder of Sayf by his mother. *Sīrat Sayf* includes a number of variants on this basic concept, including the abduction

87 In *Iskandarnamah* the queen has had the foresight to secretly commission a portrait of the Macedonian king, enabling her to recognise Alexander when he visits her court in disguise, following which the two engage in further intellectual sparring, see Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, pp. 48–51.

88 When they first encounter Alexander and his army the (hairy-legged) jinn are so impressed at his control of magical powers that they wonder if he is in fact Solomon returned to life. Alexander and Araqit (who is “fond of human males, for her mother was human and her father a fairy, as in the case of Bilqays, the Queen of Sheba” (Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 83)) then engage in a battle of might, will and cunning that, although substantially different to that of Solomon and Bilqīs, undoubtedly owes a great debt to their story. See also pp. 76–98.

89 Araqit does kidnap Alexander and refuse to set him free out of love for him on the grounds that “it would be a strange thing to set free the bird that one has caught” (Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 81).

and intended murder of the hero, the wife as unwitting accomplice to her husband's murder (i.e. Nāhid's theft of the talismanic belt), and several related motifs, such as the abduction of Sayf whilst he is asleep and unprotected by his talisman, having taken it off prior to making love to his wife. This theme of female hostility can also be found in *Iskandarnamah*. For instance, the latter example from *Sīrat Sayf*, cited above, finds a direct equivalent in Alexander's abduction by Araqit during one of their pre-marital battles:

When Araqit heard this, she rose and with those two fairies flew to the King's tent in the camp. The King was making love to the concubine, and had removed the amulet containing the name of God from his body. When he had finished, he fell asleep. The fairies came and lifted him in his sleep and with the help of Araqit they carried him away.⁹⁰

To give just one more example, Southgate describes an episode in *Iskandarnamah* in which Alexander's aunt attempts to murder him and lures him into a trap by taking him to search for buried treasure in the women's quarters of the palace:

Alexander's aunt dug a hole in the hallway in the women's quarters for Alexander to fall into. She told Alexander that she had discovered a treasure there. The King and Aristotle went to see the treasure at her request. But when they reached the hallway, Aristotle refused to follow any further; and a cat, clinging to the King, would not let him enter the hallway. Seeing that the King had not followed her, the woman returned. But as she carefully passed by the edge of the pit the cat jumped at her and caused her to fall into the pit.⁹¹

Although the correspondences are by no means exact, this has some similarity to Qamariyya's first attempt to kill Sayf after luring him off to hunt for buried treasure:

So that I may discharge my trust, and you may thus receive your father's monies and treasures," [Qamariyya said,] "let me tell you now that after his death I loaded them onto camels and mules and horses, and went out to a desert place three days journey from the city . . . I came, with this wealth and treasures to a valley remote from the world, accompanied

⁹⁰ Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 81.

⁹¹ Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 73.

only (so as to have the greatest assurance of secrecy) by forty men of Ethiopia; and there I buried it in the ground.⁹²

In both cases the antagonist is a female relative from the hero's parental generation and both episodes describe the first such attempt on his life, effectively the introduction of the theme—in *Iskandarnamah* it is followed by an episode in which the Emperor of China sends Alexander a concubine with poison concealed on her person and instructions to kill him.⁹³

Sīrat Sayf and the Darabnamah

The *Darabnamah* is a popular Persian work which tells the stories of Darab, the Persian king and father of Alexander, and his sons Darab and Alexander. The following is a brief summary, based on Hanaway's account of one variant.⁹⁴ This consists of 33 chapters, of which thirteen are devoted to the life of Darab, followed by an account of the life of Alexander which conforms, to some extent, with the *Iskandarnamah*.

The story begins with an introductory story about Zal and his sons, one of whom, Bahman, goes to Egypt and marries a princess named Hodaya. He is then killed by a dragon and Hodaya is crowned queen of Iran after which she gives birth to a male child, Darab. His birth is kept secret and his mother puts him in a box which she places in the Euphrates River from which he is rescued by a washerman who brings him up for several years, after which he is adopted by the local Amir. The Amir owes tribute to Hodaya, which he refuses to pay, and she sends an army against him, which Darab holds off single-handedly. Darab then travels to Hodaya's court in disguise. She recognises him and offers him his rightful throne. However, Darab feels that he is not yet ready for kingship and sets off to travel the world.

Darab then sets out on a series of seafaring adventures during the course of which he marries and makes himself a name and fortune. His wife gives birth to a son, also named Darab, and the family return to Iran laden with riches. They are shipwrecked on the way and Darab is forced to work in a caravan-serai until he is recognised by a rich merchant (who just happens to be the washerman who originally rescued him from the Euphrates) and taken back to Iran, where Hodaya has been deserted by her army and imprisoned by the ruler of Rum. Darab rescues her, imprisons the King of Rum, and is crowned king.

92 Translation from Jayyusi, *The Adventures*, pp. 98–99, with minor modifications. See also *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 218–219.

93 See Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 74.

94 See Hanaway, 'Persian Popular Romances', pp. 291–305.

The King of Rum's brother attacks Iran, and Hoday is killed by a black slave who tries to rape her. Darab and Feylaqus, the new king of Rum, go to war, but are reconciled by the marriage of Darab to Feylaqus' daughter, Nahid, whom he sends back to her country, pregnant, because of her bad breath . . .

The narrative now follows the Persian Alexander pattern until the death of Darab II (son of Darab) who dies of old age. It then departs from both the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* and *Iskandarnamah* patterns. After the death of Darab II his daughter, Buran Dokht, swears vengeance and raises an army against Alexander. After a series of battles Buran Dokht finally capitulates when Alexander comes across her bathing naked in a stream, and the two are married. Alexander leaves her in command of Iran and heads off to the East on a voyage of conquest. Unfortunately, he is not very successful and is forced to call on his wife for reinforcements. Buran Dokht comes to the rescue and, with her help, Alexander is able to carry out a series of conquests of strange and magical lands. They return to the world of reality via Yemen (where Alexander goes on pilgrimage to Mecca), and Alexander sends Buran Dokht back to Iran with the treasure they have accumulated. He continues to the West, conquering Egypt and visiting the Land of Darkness, after which he returns to Jerusalem and dies. Buran Dokht dies soon afterwards.

Comparison of *Darabnamah* and *Iskandarnamah* would seem to indicate that there are several characteristic elements of the Persian Alexander Romance. The accounts of Alexander's birth agree on all major points. It is also noticeable that both romances introduce a strong female character in the latter stages of the romance who initially goes to war with our hero, but when defeated becomes Alexander's wife and major ally for the rest of the narrative. Recent works on the Persian romances also attest that Alexander's characterisation is another constant of the popular romance. Although Alexander does tend to be presented as a somewhat flawed hero, in the Persian Alexander Romances he takes on a distinctly fallible persona: "In both *Eskandar Nama* and *Darab Nama* we see an Alexander who is at once a famous world-conqueror and a bumbling, ineffectual leader beset by indecision, fear and lust for women".⁹⁵ However, what is perhaps most interesting about *Darabnamah* is that, although the narrative summary from which the synopsis above is drawn is not very detailed, it is immediately apparent that many of the individual episodes and story elements are very similar to those found in *Sirat Sayf*. Both Darab and Alexander encounter sea monsters, dog-headed men, miraculous trees, human looking fruit and a host of other marvellous creatures, places and events which would

95 Hanaway, 'Persian Popular Romances', p. 125.

be instantly recognisable to Sayf.⁹⁶ Although these creatures also play a role in the *Iskandarnamah*, it would appear that, in terms of the fantastical world in which many of the adventures take place, *Darabnamah* may in fact be closer in spirit to *Sīrat Sayf* than the *Iskandarnamah*. In addition to this there are obvious similarities between the Qamariyya section of *Sīrat Sayf* and the part of the *Darabnamah* dealing with the life of Darab. The account of Darab's conception, birth and childhood follows the same essential pattern as that of Sayf and, as in *Sīrat Sayf*, *Darabnamah* has Darab's mother ruling as queen, recognising her estranged son when he is sent against her in battle and giving up her throne to him.

Sayf and Iskandar

There are several other indications that the *Iskandarnamah* may be more closely related to *Sīrat Sayf* than its non-Persian brethren, not least in its depiction of Alexander and his relationships with women. Although the characterisation of Alexander varies widely in the variants cited here, generally he does not appear extremely concerned with matters of the flesh. However in the *Iskandarnamah* he is portrayed as having many wives—this perhaps reflects both Persian storytelling tradition and the presence of a Solomonic intertext in the Persian romance. Unlike the Ethiopian Alexander, who is a (disconcertingly sadistic) puritanical ascetic type, the Persian Alexander is a womaniser who marries frequently and boasts of his prowess with inordinate numbers of partners at the slightest provocation. (In his defence, he is not alone in the extremity of his appetites, the king of Egypt is also reported as having ravished 1,000 maidens in one night).⁹⁷ In this, he is much closer in character to Sayf than the other Alexanders—Sayf accumulates wives to such an extent that his eldest son Damar complains of it repeatedly, and at one stage picks a fight with his father because he marries all the women himself. Needless to say, his father, although ageing, trounces him. He does, however, have the tact to put his son back on his horse before the dust cloud kicked up by their horses dissipates, so that Damar won't lose face.⁹⁸ (Damar, it has to be said, is not lucky with women—his first wife, al-Jābiyya, a pious and godfearing woman, has him thrown out into the arid wastes and moves to Jerusalem to do good works, then moves again to Damascus where she converts the inhabitants,

96 Hanaway says that *Darabnamah* is characterised by Alexander's sea journeys and the presence of sea monsters upon which he rides across the oceans. This has also been said of *Sayf* by Norris in his article on *Sīrat Sayf*.

97 See Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 44.

98 See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 4, pp. 289–291.

and finally becomes a hermit rather than return to her husband). Later, Damar even threatens to go to war with his father on the grounds that he is hoarding all the women at the expense of his own sons:

Damar said to al-Bahmūt, “By God, brother, I have only one adversary and enemy, and that is my father, King Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan. He’s the only person in this entire land that I’d like to kill.”

“You want to kill your father? Why?” al-Bahmūt asked. Damar replied, “Because he takes all the women for himself, despite the fact he’s an old man.”⁹⁹

Damar is so serious about this that al-Bahmūt has to intercede and reconcile father and son. Indeed, Sayf is probably closer to Iskandar in terms of persona than any of the other Alexanders. Both are meant to be great heroic leaders but are often depicted as impetuous, indecisive, foolhardy, lustful and hot tempered. Although these characteristics can be found in the other Alexanders, most notably the Armenian, and may indeed be intrinsic to his persona, given the nature of the flawed hero of history, they are most pronounced in Iskandar:

In spite of his higher roles as a sage, a protector of mankind, a fighter for religion, and a prophet, the Alexander of Persian romances remains essentially human. The hero of *Iskandarnamāh* is outwitted by women and harassed by domestic squabbles. He falls in love against his better judgment, he is kidnapped and flown away by fairies because he forgets to wear his amulet, and he suffers great losses in some battles. Perhaps the secret of Alexander-romances was the appeal of a hero balanced between man and superman.¹⁰⁰

‘Āqiṣa, Araqit and Buran Dokht

As already mentioned, ‘Āqiṣa is one of the more unusual characters in *Sayf* in terms of *sīra* conventions. Although one of the characteristics of *Sīrat Sayf* is the abundance of beautiful young warrior women and wise old sorceresses, most of whom are by no means backward in their dealings with Sayf, ‘Āqiṣa is unique. Despite basically conforming to the warrior princess pattern of the chaotic, powerful female figure who is eventually subdued by marriage, she is not simply a warrior woman, but acts as a guide, advisor and protector,

99 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 4, p. 321. Note that the familial conflict again has a sexual aspect.

100 Minoo Southgate, ‘Portrait of Alexander in Persian Alexander-romances of the Islamic Era,’ *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 97 (1977), pp. 278–284, at p. 284.

transcending the boundaries of any single character type. She is not, to such an extent as, for instance, Ṭāma, a stock character to which the audience can easily apply preconceived narrative expectations.¹⁰¹ The relationship between Āqīṣa and the specifically Egyptian character of Isis, the mother-sister figure, has been explored in the previous chapter, but another potential intertextual parallel for the Sayf-Āqīṣa relationship can be found in the Alexander story in the characters of Buran Dokht and Araqit.

In his study of Persian folk epics, Hanaway finds that Buran Dokht, like Āqīṣa in *Sīrat Sayf*, does not fall into the normal warrior women pattern and is unusual to the extent that he describes her as “almost non-Iranian”. He notes that, after her capitulation to Alexander and their marriage, she retains her warrior characteristics and becomes one of his most important generals, providing military and tactical expertise: “Alexander is shown as a weak and vacillating world conqueror, lacking imagination and the ordinary qualities of leadership. Buran Dokht has all the qualities which Alexander should have.”¹⁰² Furthermore, Buran Dokht also exceeds the defined boundaries of the warrior women stereotype in other ways, being “not only a fighter, but an advisor and organizer” to her husband and generally having more common sense and ability than might be expected. He concludes, from her unusual characteristics, that “what suggests itself is that Buran Dokht is like a protective goddess, some sort of divine figure sent to help Alexander and the Iranians” and traces her origins back to the ancient fertility goddess Anahit.¹⁰³ Anahit was the Zoroastrian cosmic goddess associated with water, the stars and moon, love and fertility, but also with the legitimacy of kingship and, during the Sassanian Empire, the concept of victory in war. She was the daughter of Aramazd (Ahura Mazda), the creator of heaven and earth, who was father of all the chief deities. There are some obvious superficial parallels between her and the figure of Isis, and there are also parallels between her and the figure of Bilqīs as depicted in *Sayf* in terms of their association with water—in *Sayf* Bilqīs is associated with pools, springs, and the story of Solomon building a fountain peopled with fish reoccurs on several occasions.¹⁰⁴

101 For a brief discussion of the warrior woman motif and type see the section on gender roles in the Introduction.

102 See Hanaway, ‘Persian Popular Romances’, p. 33. See pp. 29–55 for his treatment of Buran Dokht.

103 Hanaway, ‘Persian Popular Romances’, p. 40.

104 See William L. Hanaway Jr, ‘Anāhitā and Alexander’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 102: 2 (1982), pp. 285–295, esp. pp. 228–290.

Although Buran Dokht is unique to the *Darabnamah's* account of the Alexander legend, she finds a close counterpart in the figure of Araqit in the *Iskandarnama*.¹⁰⁵ Despite their differences, and variations in the plot and structure of the two romances, the two characters seem so similar that it is difficult not to regard them as essentially performing the same function. Although Araqit is a *pari* princess, rather than a human one and, unlike Buran Dokht, is not a blood relative of Alexander, they share many characteristics, not least their prominence in the narrative. Both are initially hostile warrior females whose martial ability and enthusiasm does not evaporate on their defeat and marriage to Alexander but is turned instead to the furtherance of his cause. Their relationship with their husband is a stormy one, characterised by sexual jealousy which sometimes tempts them into contemplating betraying him for a more constant partner. Despite this, both Buran Dokht and Araqit can be relied upon to come to Alexander's aid in the case of dire emergency, no matter how furious they might be with him. Araqit even takes Alexander's sword and horse while he is sleeping and leads the final conquests of his empire in an attempt to win back his trust and approval following one of their many disagreements.

Given the predominant role Buran Dokht and Araqit play in their respective romances, not to mention the fact that they are both noteworthy because of their lack of correspondence to perceived mores of Persian medieval popular literature, it is possible that the presence of this particular type of female character is a characteristic of the Persian Alexander Romance. It is also intriguing to note that Anahit is mentioned in the Armenian *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, according to which Alexander is recognised by both Serapis and Anahit when he asks for divine protection on his visit to Siwa:

Opposite the shrine of the god [Sarapis], he set up a great altar which, from that time on they call the altar of Alexander. He offered elaborate sacrifices upon it and stood at prayer and said, "whatever god you are, who have the divine responsibility for this land and watch over the endless earth, accept my sacrifices and be my help in war". And having said this, he placed the sacrifice upon the altar. Suddenly a great eagle swooped down, seized the entrails of the sacrifice, and flew off into the air. It circled around and released them upon a different altar . . . And he

105 Despite the clear similarities in the general attributes of Buran Dokht and Araqit, Hanaway does not extend his identification of Anahit with the Alexander Romance to the character of Araqit, "the most intriguing female in *Iskandarnamah*", although he does not say why he does not do so—in fact he doesn't mention her at all in this context.

inquired of the inhabitants there as to which god it was. And they said that they did not know; but according to the story of their forefathers, it was said to be the shrine of Aramazd and Anahit.¹⁰⁶

However, it is impossible to say whether the presence of Anahit in this *Pseudo-Callisthenes* variant is coincidental. According to Wolohojian, the Armenian translator chose to replace Hera with Anahit, “The supreme goddess of the Armenian pagan pantheon”¹⁰⁷ but, in the light of the potential presence of Anahit in the Persian Alexander, not to mention her wide popularity in the ancient Near East, her inclusion here is, at the very least, interesting.

Many of the traits Buran Dokht and Araqit have in common can also be found in ‘Āqiṣa. In the first two sections of *Sīrat Sayf*, ‘Āqiṣa can be seen to be a protective, guiding figure who rescues her foster brother from a wide range of dangers. There is also, as with Buran Dokht and Araqit, an aspect of ‘Āqiṣa and Sayf’s relationship that revolves around marital conflict. Obviously, there are significant differences between the ways this conflict is presented in *Sayf* and ‘Alexander’ (in *Sīrat Sayf* the conflict takes place before, not after the marriage, and it does not involve the hero but rather one of his chief allies, ‘Ayrūḍ) but the theme is similar and is introduced on several levels in *Sīrat Sayf*. In addition to ‘Āqiṣa’s attempts to evade marriage to ‘Ayrūḍ, whom she (quite justifiably) despises, she is also called upon to pretend to be willing to marry al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad, who demands her hand in marriage as the price of his co-operation in diverting the Nile.¹⁰⁸ These two narrative threads relating to ‘Āqiṣa’s marriage are set against the background of marital and gender conflict which dominates the entire Wedding Quest section. Finally, although ‘Āqiṣa herself is more respectful of literary convention than Buran Dokht and Araqit and retires from action following her eventual marriage to ‘Ayrūḍ, therefore being unable to lead Sayf’s army to victory as Buran Dokht and Araqit do, her son ‘Ufāsha takes over her role (and, in many aspects, her persona) almost immediately and is instrumental in leading Sayf’s armies to conquest of the Qāf mountains.

Whether or not one accepts the Araqit type persona as a fundamental of the Persian Alexander Romance, it is undeniable that the Persian romances referred to here include such a figure. Furthermore, it is undeniable that this persona has much in common with that of ‘Āqiṣa in the Egyptian *Sīrat Sayf*. It would appear that these three female characters, all of whom are described

106 Wolohojian, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 52. Soon after this, Alexander is visited by Sarapis in a dream and promised his divine support. Anahit was identified with birds of prey.

107 See Wolohojian, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 168.

108 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 243.

as being atypical of female characters in the regional narrative genre, are essentially alike. Given the presence of Anahit in the Egyptian Armenian *Pseudo-Callisthenes* Alexander legend and the fact that Hanaway describes Buran Dokht as essentially un-Iranian it is impossible to draw conclusions as to whether or not the character of Āqiṣa in *Sīrat Sayf* demonstrates ‘Persian’ influence in the *sīra* or not. What is, however, undeniable, is that both narratives seem to take the presence of a Āqiṣa type character as an essential element. Furthermore, it is plausible to assert that familiarity with the Persian Alexander Romance could have a twofold effect on the audience of *Sīrat Sayf*. When taken in total with the many intertextual references to the Alexander story in *Sīrat Sayf*, implicit identification between Āqiṣa and Buran Dokht/Araqit simultaneously reinforces identification of Sayf and Alexander, two conquering world kings, and, if one digs a little deeper, also supports the perception of Āqiṣa as an Isis-like, mother-goddess character through associations with the Zoroastrian Anahit, another ancient fertility goddess. As is so often the case with intertextual presences in *Sīrat Sayf*, the intertexts support each other, acting as a strong indicator to the audience that they interpret elements of the *sīra* in a particular way.

Gender Roles, Theme and Meaning in Sīrat Sayf and the Persian Alexander Romance

It is noticeable that the points of specific intertextual convergence between *Sīrat Sayf* and *Iskandarnamah* are predominantly those which revolve around the role of women in the narrative. Furthermore, it is these same elements which set the *Iskandarnamah* apart from the other Alexander variants cited. In fact, one could go so far as to say that the characteristic that distinguishes the Persian Alexander Romance from the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* is the inclusion of material relating to the female role in the romance, in terms of the heightened significance of female characters. Women play a far more prominent role in the *Iskandarnamah* and *Darabnamah* than in *Pseudo-Callisthenes*: In addition to Araqit and Buran Dokht, a variety of other female characters populate the narratives including warrior women (nearly all of whom end up marrying Alexander), older women advisors and a large contingent of miscellaneous princesses to be added to the royal collection. Furthermore, the Persian Alexander Romance is alone in depicting its hero as a man of enormous appetite for women—again, this is a point of contact between it and *Sīrat Sayf*. Thus, it would appear that the Persian Alexander Romance has a closer relationship with *Sīrat Sayf* than *Pseudo-Callisthenes* does. However, whilst this may be true in terms of narrative structure and the heightened role of the feminine, there is very little correlation in terms of theme or tone between

this variant of *Sīrat Sayf* and the *Iskandarnamah* text it is compared with here. Whilst both make gender relationships a central theme, the way this is done, and the end to which these relationships are used, is very different.

One of the most immediately noticeable differences between the *Iskandarnamah* and *Sīrat Sayf* is the attitude of the narrative towards women. The depiction of women in the Persian variants has a much more misogynistic feel. For example, despite the importance of her role in the *Iskandarnamah*, Araqit is repeatedly described as being “injudicious and half-witted like all women”,¹⁰⁹ whilst Alexander bewails the potential humiliation of being “defeated by the fairies, or, still worse, by a woman”.¹¹⁰ Although there is a humorous element to statements like this in the text, it is underpinned by a worldview in which women are duplicitous and inconstant. Without exception, female characters are untrustworthy. There is often reason for their flighty behaviour—after their marriage Araqit is tempted to betray Alexander (and successfully resists) because she is afraid that her role will be usurped by another woman—but this does not detract from the fact that the worldview reflected in *Iskandarnamah* is one of cynicism where the female gender is concerned. This is in direct contrast with the worldview expressed in *Sīrat Sayf* which is peopled with a large number of women in whose characters the motif of feminine duplicity is, for the most part, lacking. Furthermore, there is a great deal more violence perpetrated against female characters in *Iskandarnamah*, in which female characters are killed and women are frequently raped *en masse* by Alexander’s army:

Their females were unable to escape and they were very beautiful. Alexander’s men ravished many of them, for they had been away from home for many years without having seen any women.¹¹¹

This just does not happen in *Sīrat Sayf*, in which female characters are never harmed at times of war, and go unpunished by their menfolk for even the most flagrant misconduct, unless they are unrepentantly evil. For example, at one point Munyat al-Nufūs tricks Ṭāma into stealing her flying cloak for her, which she then uses to leave her husband and return to her home in the City of Women with her baby Miṣr. Ṭāma and her mother ‘Āqila are initially terrified at

109 Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 82.

110 Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 93. In contrast, the Armenian *Pseudo-Callisthenes* portrays Queen Candace in a much more favourable light: she has the wisdom not only to outwit Alexander, but to recognise his divinely ordained superiority and submit to him.

111 Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 37.

the thought of Sayf's reaction and they try to cover things up by making a life-like wooden figure of Munyat al-Nufūs and telling him that she and Miṣr have both died. Sayf is so grief-stricken that ʿĀqila relents and tells him the truth. When Sayf discovers what has happened he is not angry with either Ṭāma or her mother ʿĀqila, but is instead relieved to find that his beloved wife is still alive and makes a point of not expressing any displeasure with either woman. On the contrary he makes a point of spending the next night with Ṭāma, and waves aside her apology:

He spent the night with Ṭāma, happy and content. Ṭāma confessed to him, "O King, I was wrong to take the feathered cloak that belongs to Munyat al-Nufūs, but she worked on me until I took it and tried it on. Then she took her son and went back to her homeland." King Sayf laughed, and told her, "Ṭāma, Munyat al-Nufūs has the right to wind me round her little finger,¹¹² and I must bear it. He who aspires to a precious thing must be prepared to risk losing it. So long as she is still alive I will not lose hope that I will be reunited with her."¹¹³

Neither does he reprimand or punish Munyat al-Nufūs when he finally retrieves her from the City of Women.

The difference in the treatment of gender in the *Sīrat Sayf* and Persian Alexander narratives can be seen as reflecting fundamentally different underlying themes and meaning in the two works. As previously stated, *Sīrat Sayf* explores its central issue, the balance of order and chaos, predominantly through the theme of gender relations and conflict. It does this by presenting the audience with a vast number of episodes, recounted anecdotes and tales all of which work around this one concept. Hanaway also finds this to be true of the Persian romances he has investigated, saying that "They are in fact composed of clusters of folk motifs and the body of the romance itself can be thought of as a single folk motif expanded to enormous length . . . The romance itself may be no more than a lengthy elaboration of a folk motif such as the hero's quest for his father, his pursuit of his beloved, or a search for adventure."¹¹⁴ Thus the two narratives can be seen to follow the same principles of construction. However, *Sīrat Sayf* and the Persian Alexander romances are about different things. *Sīrat Sayf* uses the issues of sex, marriage and gender difference to explore its central issues, using gender issues to

¹¹² The text has *yaḥiqqu lahā an tatadalla ʿalayya*.

¹¹³ *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 539.

¹¹⁴ Hanaway, 'Persian Popular Romances', p. 13.

demonstrate the fine balance of forces necessary for the attainment and maintenance of order. It is a narrative which expresses a cyclical and dualistic worldview, in which chaotic forces must be absorbed in a continuing struggle for balance, rather than defeated. The Alexander Romance, on the other hand, seems to be a much more linear narrative, which takes as its central issue the journey of Alexander to world domination. Its primary function is telling the story of the hero's quest, rather than using the quest to discuss other questions. Perhaps because of this, there appears to be a difference in the way in which gender conflict is approached in the Persian 'Alexander'; female characters are still essentially chaotic entities, but in this universe they symbolise the domination by Alexander over the forces of chaos and the lands he conquers. The differences in narratorial attitude to gender issues can perhaps be most clearly demonstrated through an example of their respective uses of the Solomon-Bilqīs intertext. The episode in *Iskandarnamah* where Alexander encounters Queen Candace takes as its theme a straightforward recognition test à la Bilqīs. The queen is wise enough to recognise Alexander's superiority and willingly submits to him. This has very little relation to the City of Women subsection in *Sīrat Sayf*, which mirrors it structurally and which also relies on the wisdom test motif. In *Sīrat Sayf*, the intertextual reference is more abstract—Sayf is faced with two physically identical women, one good and one bad. The intertextual emphasis has shifted, so that in this case, rather than using the intertext to emphasise Alexander's heroic status and assert his patriarchal supremacy, the reference is underlining the importance of Sayf's ability not only to dominate the forces of chaos, but to recognise the inner truth from the outer appearance, and choose between good and bad, order and chaos. This different use of the Solomon intertext is consistently repeated during the course of the two narratives, supporting the interpretation of the two texts as being, despite their similarities, essentially different in meaning.

The Alexander Intertext

Several conclusions can be drawn about the role of the Alexander intertext in *Sīrat Sayf*, not least of which is the fact that it appears to have a strong presence, in terms of structural and motifal material, and that this presence relies on the Islamic legends and the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* and Persian variants of the romance. Both the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* and Persian variants would appear to inform the early stages of the *sīra*, influencing audience expectations of plot and the characterisation of some of the major players. In the later stages of *Sīrat Sayf*, the Alexander intertext is retained through the use of motifs

from the Islamic legends and general structural reference to the Alexander Romance, with a further dimension added by more specific reference to the Persian Alexander Romance. Much of this is found in material that could be dismissed as incidental detail, but there are some very interesting correspondences which indicate that the Persian Alexander intertext plays a significant role in *Sīrat Sayf*. As with the other intertexts discussed in this study, correspondences between the two are most concentrated and coherent during the early part of *Sīrat Sayf*. As the fundamental issues of the *sīra* are developed and Sayf's hero identity is established in the audience's perception the level of intertextual reference drops off, although it is never totally relinquished. Furthermore, the nature of the intertextual correspondences changes slightly as the *sīra* progresses. In the early stages of *Sīrat Sayf* they primarily take the form of chronologically pertinent use of motif and theme together, whereas later references are generally more abstract, often relying on the use of motif alone. This is in line with the relation of the various Alexander pretexts to each other. All variants are strongly conformative in the early stages, up until the point of Darius' death. After this, although they still follow a general pattern, the divergences outweigh the convergences, and the number, type and chronology of his adventures appear to be open to narratorial discretion. Yet again, the correspondences address the same thematic elements as identified in the intertexts discussed in previous chapters—family and familial conflict, gender issues, the struggle between Sayf and his Ḥabashī foes—and are clustered around the same points of the narrative.

Although the relationship between *Sīrat Sayf* and the Persian *Iskandarnamah* variant addressed here appears to be closer than that between *Sīrat Sayf* and *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, any statement that this might reflect an essentially Persian nature on the part of *Sīrat Sayf* should be viewed with caution as many of the factors found in the Persian romance that bring the two narratives closer, i.e. the treatment of gender issues, the Buran Dokht/Araqit character, and the inclusion of the quest against the Zanjis, do not appear to be intrinsic to *Iskandarnamah* as they are to *Sīrat Sayf*; that is to say, the quest against the Ḥabashīs is fundamental to *Sīrat Sayf* from the beginning pages of the *sīra*, whereas Alexander's conflict with the Zanjis simply pops up, unheralded, in *Iskandarnamah*. All in all, *Sīrat Sayf* appears to be a much more complex and 'epic' narrative than *Iskandarnamah*, which somehow makes it hard to see it as some kind of adopted retelling of the Persian Alexander story. Furthermore, it must be pointed out that, although *Sīrat Sayf* would seem to have a significant intertextual relationship with the *Iskandarnamah*, it appears to have a different, but perhaps equally pronounced, relationship with the Ethiopian Alexander book in terms of initial structure, the role of divine intervention, and

common motifs such as the Book of the Nile and the Book of Law (presented to Alexander on his conquest of Jerusalem in the Ethiopian *Pseudo-Callisthenes*). The most that one can say would appear to be, from the specific examples of *The Alexander Book* and *Iskandarnamah*, that *Sīrat Sayf* reflects many convergences in worldview and narrative conventions and that there would appear to be some kind of quite close relationship between *Sīrat Sayf* and the Alexander intertext. In this context, it is interesting to note that, in *Islam and the Heroic Image*, Renard finds that although ‘Alexander’ is one of the most popular and widespread narratives in the Islamic world, it is least popular in Egypt and Sudan and that, in an aside, Chelhod notes the similarities between *Sīrat Sayf* and an early, tenth-century manuscript of the Alexander Romance.¹¹⁵ In overall terms, the relationship between *Sīrat Sayf* and ‘Alexander’ is an intriguing one, and it may be that the two narratives are more closely related than has previously been thought. Sayf may well be not so much referring to ‘Alexander’ as expressing an offshoot variant of the Alexander story (the exact nature of the relationship of the two would be an intriguing area for further study), and similarities between *Sīrat Sayf* and *Sīrat Iskandar* have been noted by Faustina Doufikar-Aerts.¹¹⁶ Although the thematic content is different, the general structure and framework is similar—indeed, in his Introduction Southgate describes *Iskandarnamah* in terms which could, if one substitutes ‘Egyptian’ for ‘Persian’, also be applied to *Sīrat Sayf*:

The loose structure of *Iskandarnāmah* provides room for heterogeneous materials. In addition to Alexander’s wars, love affairs, and domestic problems engendered by jealous wives, it includes Islamic religious lore, legends of the prophets, and stories of Persian kings.¹¹⁷

In terms of the effects that intertextual reference to the Alexander legend has on *Sīrat Sayf*, one can reach some more definite conclusions. There is a certain amount of plot enrichment courtesy of the Alexander intertext, but the main influence it has on *Sīrat Sayf* is on the audience’s perception of the hero, his quest and his status as divinely sanctioned world conqueror. There are strong correspondences between the heroic identity of the two characters:

115 See the narrative distribution chart in Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image*, p. 32; Chelhod, ‘La geste du roi Sayf’, p. 203.

116 Doufikar-Aerts, ‘Sīrat al-Iskandar’, pp. 516–517, and *Alexander Magnus Arabicus*, pp. 269–270.

117 See Southgate, *Iskandarnamah*, p. 4.

Alexander seems to have developed into an amalgam of several heroic sub-types. He functions in the present typology as a transitional figure between the royal and religious types. As king he shows a remarkable willingness to seek guidance, accepting the advice of the sage Aristotle and the mysterious Khadir [al-Khidr]. As conqueror, he shows a compassion to the vanquished that brings him celebrity status. As a world ruler, he becomes a model, so that a later leader can hope for no higher accolade than to be called the “Alexander of the Age”.¹¹⁸

Although the character of Alexander does differ in temperament in each of the variants used as source material, there are some general points that can be made about his persona. The first, and perhaps most obvious link between Sayf and Alexander is that fact that both are essentially itinerant wanderers. Although Sayf does pause in his travels long enough to found Madinat al-Ḥamrā’ and Miṣr, he is basically permanently on the move. Like Alexander, Sayf leads his army on a journey of exploration and conquest to the ends of the earth and beyond. Sayf also displays the curiosity that is a defining trait of Alexander: like Alexander, wherever Sayf goes he cannot resist investigating anything that catches his interest, to the extent that he is often sidetracked from his main quest. Sayf shares another characteristic with Alexander in his fallibility and reliance on wise advisors throughout his adventures, and he consults with wise men whenever he comes across them. In general terms, it is noticeable that neither character is particularly heroic *per se*, in fact both are frequently portrayed as, irrational and displaying bad judgement. Furthermore, both characters, although essentially human and fallible, have a distinct religious aspect to their persona.¹¹⁹

Thus, the Alexander intertext affects audience perceptions of plot and characterisation, but it does not seem to inform the narrative at such a deep, subtextual level as do the references to ancient Egyptian mythology and prophetic tales discussed in previous chapters. Finally, as with all the other intertexts examined in this study, the Alexander intertext appears predominantly

118 Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image*, p. 86.

119 In his article ‘La figure d’Alexandre chez les Arabes et sa genèse’, Mario Gringnaschi highlights the way that Alexander has been transformed into a religious (but not prophetic) figure, in Islamic, Judaic and Christian Middle Eastern medieval popular literature. The adoption of Alexander as a religious hero (either because of or resulting from his mention in the Qur’an) is not culturally specific, but—as with Sayf—appears to be a fundamental basis of his persona. See Mario Gringnaschi, ‘La figure d’Alexandre chez les Arabes et sa genèse’, *Arab Sciences and Philosophy* 3 (1993), pp. 205–234.

in the earlier stages of the *sīra*. However, although discernible references to 'Alexander' may no longer be found in the latter stages of the *sīra*, the intertextual relationship established during the initial pages is not lost. *Sīrat Sayf*'s sense of global conquest as the Muslims advance through the Seven Climes relies at least partly on the contribution of the Alexander intertext and the world conquest of its hero: as Sayf's forces march through these distant lands, undefeated by the human and supernatural forces they face, the ghosts of Alexander and his army travel with them.

Intertextual Dialogue in the Diversion of the Nile

A number of important observations can be made about how intertexts function in the narrative construction of *Sīrat Sayf*. The first point of interest is the fact that the various intertexts operate at different strata of the *sīra*'s subtext and work in different ways. The Egyptian intertext discussed in chapter 3 would seem to be the most deeply buried, and manifests itself primarily in characterisation and theme, referencing deeply ingrained concepts of gender roles and ancient mythological narrative personae. Correspondences to various Egyptian intertexts are scattered throughout the *sīra* in various forms but also impact on *Sīrat Sayf* at the global level, in terms of the fundamental tripartite order-chaos/sacrificial crisis theme that runs throughout the narrative. Examples of this kind of interaction can be seen in the story of the King of Death in the Wedding Quest section and in the motif of 'Ufāsha's third arm in the final, Hunt section. However, they perhaps play their most prominent role in the first section of the *sīra*, during which Osirian mythology can be read as informing the characterisation of several of *Sīrat Sayf*'s central characters and the main theme of the section, namely the power struggle between Sayf and his mother.

The Islamic prophetic intertexts addressed in chapter two generally rely on more direct reference at strategic points, in the form of heroic heirlooms and prophetic tales told by various characters to one another, although replication of tale patterns and characteristic story elements is also used. In fact, in addition to Noah's curse, nearly all the heroic heirlooms in the *sīra*—the sword of Āṣaf, Bilqīs' gown, the sword of Shem—are infused with the Islamic prophetic intertext. There is also a sense of progression in the way the Islamic intertext is called upon. In general terms, those prophets referred to in the Qamariyya section are the ancient patriarchal prophets (Adam, Abraham and Noah) while the Solomon intertext dominates the Wedding Quest section. The Moses intertext can be found in general thematic and structural parallels between 'Moses' and *Sīrat Sayf*, bolstered by the presence of a number of motifs which can be identified with both ancient Egyptian mythology and the Moses pretext. Finally, structural parallels between *Sīrat Sayf* and the *Sīra nabawiyya* overlay the entire narrative, endowing Sayf's expansionist campaign in the final section with overtones of the Islamic Conquests.

The Alexander intertext has perhaps the most complex relationship with *Sīrat Sayf*, not least because it is possible to discern two variant narrative

threads, the Persian and the *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, operating at the same time. In one sense the Alexander intertext is the most superficial—in that it essentially functions at a supratextual level, using overt parallels in plot structure to add a layer of connotation (much as in the case of the Muhammad intertext), rather than direct reference (as in the case of the pre-Islamic prophets) or more veiled references to culturally specific motif and theme (as in the Egyptian intertext). *Sīrat Sayf* and ‘Alexander’ follow similar patterns and, in terms of global narrative structure and form, the Persian ‘Alexander’ can be read as informing *Sīrat Sayf* to a far greater extent than any of the other intertexts. The two narratives additionally share a number of correspondences, such as the background situation to the hero’s conception and birth, and the characters of Buran Dokht, Araqit and ‘Āqiṣa. However, the underlying world-view expressed in *Iskandarnamah* and *Sīrat Sayf* is profoundly different. It is tempting to speculate that these overt, basically structural correspondences between ‘Alexander’ and *Sīrat Sayf* might reflect the fact that they are, to some degree, different branches of the same story pattern (although definitely not the same story) rather than this being a case of *Sīrat Sayf* relying on ‘Alexander’ as a pretext.

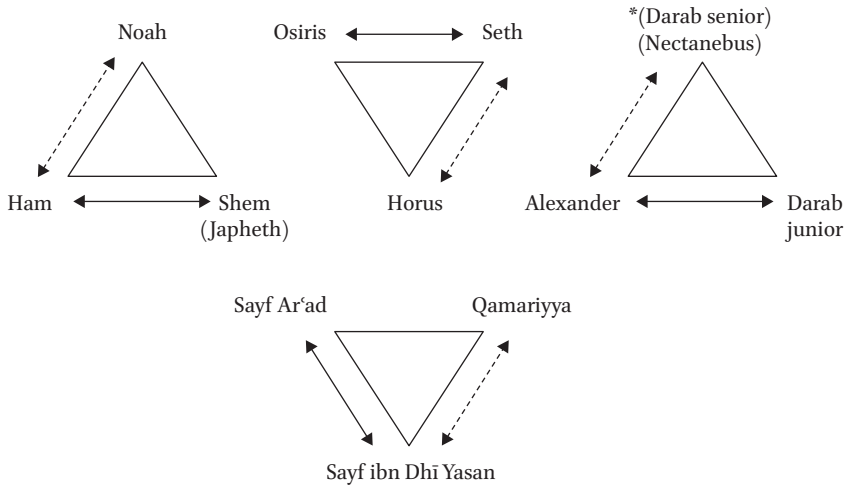
Through focussing on a limited number of episodes of *Sīrat Sayf*, the previous chapters have tried to foreground how, despite working in different ways and at different levels, the various intertexts addressed in this study share a number of common themes and functions. To some extent this is unsurprising, given the fact that it is a fundamental tenet of the *sīra* genre that each constituent episode or element of the narrative reflects the overall issue addressed by the whole. However, it is still worth noting that the degree of subtextual correspondence between the pretexts referred to in *Sīrat Sayf* is remarkably consistent, and that it is largely through the thematically consistent reference to these pretexts that the *sīra* conveys its own themes. For example, Noah’s curse, which informs the Sayf/Sayf Ar‘ad conflict and underpins the entire narrative framework of the *sīra* (as discussed in chapter 2 above), relies on a subtext of familial conflict that is expressed (as retold in the *sīra*) in a distinctive way.

Reading the Noah legend in terms of the conflict as encompassing a sexual aspect, expressed through the metaphor of ‘seeing’ which here stands for an act of aggression by Ham against the procreative abilities of his father, seems to be only logical, from a broadly Girardian standpoint. The subtext of the Noah story is, according to this reading, that of a generational, sexually-expressed conflict between the old (patriarchal) order and the new: that is, it is an articulation of the sacrificial crisis that occurs when the forces of innovative chaos and conservative order meet. In this case, Ham’s challenge to the patriarchal

order is quashed, and the baton is passed on by Noah to his son Shem, who, we can infer from his reverence for his father, can be counted on to maintain the status quo obediently. It is significant, however, as has been pointed out by Marianna Klar, that *Sīrat Sayf*'s account of this part of the Noah legend deviates from the norm. Rather than Noah 'knowing' what has transpired when he wakes up and cursing his son(s) of his own volition, in the *Sīrat Sayf* account it is Shem who informs his father what has transpired while he slept.¹ Here, then, it is Shem's active involvement in relaying Ham's disrespectful behaviour to their father that elicits Noah's fury, leading Klar to observe that 'Shem (and Japheth?) may be less innocent in the events that bring about Ham's downfall than is manifestly acknowledged'. In this version of the story, Ham's conflict is with both his brother, Shem, who shouts at him for laughing at his father's exposed genitals, and his father, Noah, who curses him for it. Thus, the father/son conflict in *Sīrat Sayf*'s version of this legend is also accompanied by an element of fraternal conflict that does not appear to be a core theme of the story in Islamic Noah legends overall. Furthermore (although this is admittedly more speculative), it is hard to not see a further element of fraternal rivalry in the story in the repeated accounts of Noah's division of his lands between his sons, and his punishment of Ham by subjugating his ancestors to theirs.

This dual theme of paternal/fraternal conflict is almost exactly replicated in the subtext of 'The Contendings', the ancient Egyptian story of Horus and Seth's conflict which has been read as informing the Qamariyya/Sayf conflict in chapter 3. As in the story of the cursing of Ham, the basic premise for conflict in 'The Contendings' is the implied theft of procreative ability/genitalia which is, again, expressed through the symbolism of 'seeing' and the eye. The relationship dynamics in this narrative are also extremely similar, consisting of a triangle made up of two brothers (Osiris and Seth) and a son (Horus)—although it could be said that the conflict between Horus and Seth is also one between brothers, given that Horus is an aspect of Osiris as well as being his son. Thus, the conflicting characters in 'The Contendings' pretext form the same basic triangle as those in the Noah pretext, but from a different narrative point of view, as expressed in the diagram below.

1 Klar, *Interpreting al-Tha'labī's 'Tales of the Prophets'*, p. 178. She notes that only one other account, that of Ibn 'Asākir, has Shem informing his father of the transgression, but points out that in this version he denounces both Ham and Japheth. She also discusses reading the division of lands between the sons in an oedipal light, as Noah's attempt to distance himself from the potential threat posed to him by his sons (see pp. 173–175).



Key: \longleftrightarrow indicates fraternal conflict (i.e. conflict with the same generation)
 \dashrightarrow indicates paternal conflict (i.e. conflict with the parental generation)

* Both version A and B contain an element of paternal conflict with these figures, albeit at an abstract level

As with the Noah pretext, the theme of the conflict in the case of ‘The Contendings’ is again the sacrificial crisis caused by the clash of the forces of order and chaos, although the worldview expressed may be different. The same fraternal/paternal conflict theme can also be identified in the Alexander intertext, in which Alexander’s conflict with Darius, which also informs the Sayf/Sayf Ar’ad conflict, is one between brothers (although in this case, it contains no sexual element). As with theme, the characterisation of many of the major players in the *sīra* can also be read as relying quite heavily on intertextual reference. The characters themselves conform to Todorov’s ‘narrative men’, in that personality is predominantly exposed through function and action.² (Qamariyya is, true to form, somewhat of an exception in this respect, and has internal dialogue when her internal motivations are at odds with her external

2 Tzvetan Todorov, “Narrative Men,” in Ulrich Marzolph (ed.), *The Arabian Nights: A Reader* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), pp. 226–238.

actions through which her duplicitous nature is laid bare to the reader.³) To a large degree, intertextual references and associations between characters in *Sīrat Sayf* and the various pretexts seem to be a means of adding motivation, depth, complexity and even personality to characterisation, and are often a means through which character development is expressed. This can be seen most clearly, perhaps, in the portrayal of some of the female characters in *Sīrat Sayf*. For example, in the Wedding Quest section ‘Āqiṣa takes on a more chaotic persona, which can be read both as her adopting Sethian characteristics in response to her changing role in the *sīra* following Qamariyya’s death, and as reflecting the Solomon-Bilqīs intertext that dominates the section and informs her and Sayf’s characterisation. In both cases, the subtexts of the intertexts that inform the persona of ‘Āqiṣa rely on the image of her character as embodying the potential disruption of gender boundaries which threatens the patriarchal order. In both pretexts these female forces must be incorporated into the patriarchal order. The Alexander intertext also conforms to this, in form more than in meaning, in both the Persian and *Pseudo-Callisthenes* variants, but has less thematic consistency. Although ‘Alexander’ includes a potentially chaotic female of the Bilqīs/‘Āqiṣa type, in ‘Alexander’ she is subjugated to the patriarchal order in which she is regarded as an inferior rather than incorporated as an equal as she is in *Sīrat Sayf*. This concept of ‘characterisation through intertextual association’ can also clearly be seen in the identification of Sayf with the patriarchal, founding prophets in the first section of the narrative, with the prophet-king Solomon in the second section, and (implicitly) with the Prophet Muhammad in the final section.

These correspondences between the subtexts of the various intertexts referred to in *Sīrat Sayf* occur throughout, helping to signpost how the story should be read. On some occasions, for example in the case of the story of Sayf’s encounter with the King of Death discussed in chapter 3, familiarity with the intertext(s) is fundamental to understanding the underlying point, here through allusion to ‘Mari Girgīs’ and ‘Setne Khamwas’, and/or the characterisation of the various narrative personae. In another instance, Sayf’s lack of direct responsibility for the death of his mother Qamariyya makes narrative sense in that it means that it absolves him from the sin of matricide. However, in terms of narrative patterns and expectations, his characterisation in this episode is arguably most intertextually understandable in terms of the parallels it has to Alexander’s lack of direct involvement in Darius’ death, and his reaction to it.

3 To give just two examples, see *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, p. 38 and p. 41; Jayyusi, *The Adventures of Sayf*, p. 12 and p. 15.

Furthermore, as the themes of *Sīrat Sayf* shift subtly during the course of its three sections, the thematic subtexts of the various layers of intertextual reference also change. Thus, when it comes to the presence of Islamic prophetic legends, the issue of the establishment of patriarchal order that dominates the Qamariyya section of *Sīrat Sayf* is a predominant theme of the Noah, Abraham and Adam subtexts, while the exploration of the optimal balance of order and chaos through gender conflict (specifically marriage, via the troubled courtship of ‘Āqiṣa and ‘Ayrūd) that preoccupies the Wedding Quest section is mirrored in the Solomon-Bilqīs subtext. Likewise, albeit in a more abstract sense, the subtext of Egyptian intertextual references moves from the subjugation of chaos (Seth/Qamariyya) by the forces of order (Horus/Sayf) in the Qamariyya section through to the externalisation of the harnessed forces of chaos in the ‘Ufāsha/Seth persona in the Hunt section. Again, this does not appear to be reflected in such a subtextual way in the Alexander intertext, where the thematic parallels rely on the tripartite structural convergences between *Sīrat Sayf* and ‘Alexander’: the rise to domestic kingship, the territorial conflict with the ‘brother’, and the externalisation of the hero’s military expansion to the furthest realms.

Not only do the various intertexts tend to reflect the same themes and symbolism, they also come together at significant points of the *sīra*, where they are woven into the *Sīrat Sayf* narrative and interact both with it and each other. This first happens in the introductory stages of *Sīrat Sayf*, in which the narrator is setting the scene and laying out his intertextual agenda, but also occurs at a number of other climactic moments. For example, in the episode dealing with the death of Qamariyya, the ancient Seth ritual intertext, the Islamic averted oedipal, sacrificial crisis intertext which has run throughout the preceding section, and the motif of the averted murder of Darius by Alexander can be read into the text as working together to invoke a heightened sense of drama. These intertexts are later brought back into the narrative at the point of Sayf Ar‘ad’s death by the repeated use of the averted murder motif, in effect by internal intertextual reference to Qamariyya’s earlier death. Perhaps the most prominent example of this interaction of the intertexts takes place at the central climax of the *sīra*, the subsection that recounts Sayf’s diversion of the Nile. In this climactic central episode of the *sīra*, Sayf fulfils one of the predictions made of him: that he will divert the course of the Nile and found Egypt (the other major prediction being that he will be the means through which Noah’s curse is implemented, and the sons of Ham subjugated to the sons of Shem, the fulfilment of which takes up the rest of the narrative and provides the final climactic plot point). Superficially, this section of the *sīra* presents itself as a fantastic account of Sayf’s quest to divert the river to its current course through

Egypt in order to provide water for the newly-founded city of Miṣr, full of magic and fanciful details, but, when read in the light of a specific set of intertexts, what becomes apparent just below the surface is a far from fanciful retelling of a moment of great social and cultural upheaval: *Sīrat Sayf*'s account of Egyptian history, in which it is founded by a united group of Yemeni Muslim migrants on virgin soil in an uninhabited land is, beneath its skin, a story of confrontation, war, and the trauma of conquest.

The Diversion of the Nile

At this stage of the story, the Muslims have been evicted from their city, Madīnat al-Ḥamrā', by the Ḥabashī king, Sayf Ar'ad, and Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' has been razed to the ground.⁴ The subsection begins just after Sayf has been rescued from the clutches of the voracious queen al-Thurayyā' al-Zarqā' by a group of his trusted allies. Sayf is reunited with his people at Wādī Saysabān, where they had fled after the sacking of Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' by Sayf Ar'ad's army. Sayf, who was not present when Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' was destroyed, goes back there to survey the ruins of his city, and is distressed. He then takes the decision to lead his people out of Wādī Saysabān for a new land, despite the warnings of his advisors that he is taking them into a waterless desert where they will all perish. After travelling for some time, Sayf himself becomes worried that they will die of thirst, and scouts ahead for water on Barq al-Burūq, his enchanted emerald steed. He soon arrives at a lake surrounded by lush vegetation, and encounters a woman he recognises as being his wife, Takrūr. They are reunited, and she tells him her story: it emerges that, some seven years ago, Takrūr and her infant son Būlāq had been abducted by jinn and abandoned in the desert to die on the orders of Queen al-Thurayyā' al-Ḥamrā'. As she prayed to God in despair and bewailed her and her son's fate, an auspicious thunderstorm provided a lake, which attracted animals and provided

4 For the episode in its entirety, see *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, pp. 205–259. Lyons, *Arabian Epic*, provides a more concise summary at vol. 3, pp. 618–619, but this misses a number of key elements included here. Chelhod discusses this subsection in Chelhod, 'La geste du roi Sayf', pp. 190–195, as does Chraïbi in 'Le roman de *Sayf ibn dī Yazan*', at pp. 123–128 and pp. 133–134. I describe the episode as 'central', despite its physical positioning around two thirds of the way through the four-volume work, on the basis of the structure as seen in fig. 1 in chapter 1. This makes it apparent that the adventures of Sayf and his sons which take up much of volume 2 and the first half of volume 3 are, temporally speaking, happening in parallel.

sustenance.⁵ Not long afterwards, a group of Arab bedouin arrived and took up residence there as well, and they took her as their leader until Būlāq became old enough to rule. Būlāq, who is out hunting with the rest of the tribe when Sayf arrives, instantly recognises his father on his return (despite having never met him before), and he and Sayf take water to the rest of the Muslims, and guide them to the oasis. The Muslims decide to found their new home at this spot: ‘Āqila and Akhmīm al-Ṭālib use their magical skills to create two wells, ‘Āqila tells Sayf about the city he will found on the banks of the River Nile and the story behind the creation of the Book of the History of the Nile,⁶ and the jinn are set to work building a new fortress in the hills.⁷ A subsection detailing the adventures of Sayf’s third son, Naṣr, who was captured by Ḥabashī soldiers on their way back home from their siege of al-Madīnat al-Ḥamrā’, and rescued from imprisonment by the princess Dajwa, Sayf Ar’ad’s daughter, is inserted into the narrative at this point, and the diversion of the Nile is resumed some 40 pages later, after father and son have been reunited at the site of Madīnat al-Ḥamrā’ and then returned to the new city, which Sayf announces will be called Miṣr.

Having begun to settle in to their new home, the Muslims complain that more houses are needed, following which ‘Āqila casts the sands to perform a divination. They foretell the cities that the Muslims will build, and also reveal the existence of an infidel king, Nūt, living nearby in Madīnat Nūt (‘the City of Nūt’).⁸ Sayf is enraged, and immediately rides off with an army to lay siege to the city, which is duly conquered and converted. Nūt himself is killed, but his sister Fustuqa, who is also a sorceress, hides away in a mountain cave to scheme revenge. At this point, the Muslims realise that they need to find more water to supply their growing needs. ‘Āqila tells Sayf the story behind the creation of the Book of the History of the Nile (which had originally used to flow past Miṣr, but had been diverted in the distant past by two quarrelling sorcerers who created and used the Book) and reminds him of the prophecy (made earlier in the *sīra*) that he will divert the Nile. This requires a number of heroic heirlooms:

5 See ch. 2, pp. 105–107 for more on this episode.

6 See ch. 3, pp. 144–148 for more on the story of the Book of the History of the Nile.

7 Presumably a reference to the historical fortress in the Muqaṭṭam Hills.

8 For more on Nūt, see chapter 3, pp. 150–152.

King Sayf asked, “What are these seven things [I will need]?”, and ‘Āqila told him, “The first is the Sword of Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā, for it is by this that you are able to restrain the jinn helpers and the sorcerers, and if you did not have it the jinn would destroy you. Then, the Book of the History of the Nile because the river will only flow behind it. Also, the horse named Barq al-Burūq al-Yāqūtī, because you must be riding only him. If you rode another horse it would be of no use, and you would not be able to endure the shrieks of the jinn. Also, the pick of Noah’s son Japheth, peace be upon him, because the cataracts and rapids can only be broken up by this. The talismanic jewel of Kūsh ibn Kin‘ān, because it controls jinn servants who will be useful in [helping to clear] the river bed and, for the same reason, the talisman of al-Khiliġān and his brother al-Kilikān, and [finally] al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad (‘the Black Devourer’) is the last of these seven things.”⁹

Luckily the Muslims already have five of these things. Sayf has obtained the sword and the horse, Miṣr the talismanic jewel of Kūsh ibn Kin‘ān, and Naṣr the talisman of Khiliġān and Kilikān, while ‘Āqila has the Book of the Nile in her keeping. This means that they only need to obtain al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad and Japheth’s pick. ‘Āqila informs Sayf that he also will need his army and advisors to accompany him in the quest ahead, as the task will be Herculean. She also reminds Sayf of his quest for the Book of the Nile as dowry for Shāma, and tells him that she has the book in her possession.

Sayf has his people informed that they will be departing their new city to find al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad and the pick. When the Muslim jinn hear of this, they are mortally afraid because of the stories and legends of al-Rahaṭ’s legendary strength and murderous tendencies, and offer to undertake the diversion of the Nile themselves in the Black Jinn’s place. Sayf says that he has never heard of this al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad and asks ‘Āqila who he is. She replies that he is a mighty and terrible jinn who, unlike other jinn, cannot be controlled by the sword of Āṣaf, and goes on to tell him the story of how al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad came to be imprisoned in a pillar by Solomon (discussed in chapter 2). When ‘Āqila finishes her account, Sayf asks her where al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad and the pick are now, and ‘Āqila tells him the legend of Noah’s division of the world between his three sons: Ham is bequeathed the Sudan, the land of the Berbers and the Crimea (?); Shem is bequeathed the land of the Arabs and the Rūm and Persia; and Japheth is bequeathed the land of the peoples of Gog and Magog (Jūj wa-Mājūj). Japheth, she tells him, foresaw that Alexander would build a wall to keep out the people of Gog and Magog, and made a pick, planning to use it

9 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, pp. 222–223.

to break through the wall if he were still alive in Alexander's time. It is thick as a walnut tree, and extremely sharp, and is also (fortuitously) charmed specifically to be of use in carving out river channels. Solomon, it emerges, had been given predictions of our hero's future need and had had the pick entombed with al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad.

When 'Āqīla has finished her account, Sayf sends 'Ayrūd to fetch 'Āqīša, prepares his army, and sets off to retrieve the jinn and the pick. On arrival at the Treasury of Hūd, Sayf and 'Āqīša venture inside to let the jinn out of his column. Sayf asks al-Rahaṭ to give his word that he will behave and obey his new master, to which the jinn pretends to agree, only to seize hold of Sayf as soon as he is released. The Black Jinn is on the point of dashing Sayf's body to the floor when he catches sight of 'Āqīša, who is weeping in distress at her brother's predicament, falls instantly in love, and agrees to serve Sayf loyally in return for her hand in marriage. Sayf and 'Āqīla play up to him, requesting that he break up the seven cataracts which are currently obstructing the desired course of the Nile as dowry payment.

With the now docile Black Jinn in tow, Sayf and his followers set out to recover Japheth's pick, and then locate the Nile. 'Ayrūd, hysterical with grief at losing his beloved betrothed to another, shreds his clothes to rags in his despair, and has to be reassured by Sayf that his promise of 'Āqīša's hand to the Black Jinn is merely a ruse. Once the pick has been recovered, and the Nile located, al-Rahaṭ starts to dig out a new course for the river, with encouragement from 'Āqīša who feigns girlish enthusiasm for his strength and manly physique, and the waters begin to flow.

At this point, Sayf decides to go and check where exactly the water is flowing *from*, and heads out to look for the source of the Nile. En route, he has an encounter with a stranger, a man whose face gives off a radiant glow. The stranger tells Sayf that it is God's will that he divert the Nile to make it flow through his new lands, and warns him that al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad cannot be trusted. The stranger then tells Sayf he must ride in front of the waters on Barq al-Burūq, holding the Book of the Nile to his chest, with the jewel talisman of Kūsh ibn Kin'ān tied to his right forearm, and the *lūḥ* talisman of al-Khiliḡān and al-Kilikān tied to his left forearm, carrying the sword of Āṣaf in his right hand. He must also take 'Āqīša with him, so that she can use her womanly wiles to cajole al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad into using the pick to break up a course for the river and keep him on track, while the rest of the Muslims must follow behind, moving the broken earth to clear a channel for the waters. Sayf enquires if the stranger happens to know the location of the source of the Nile, and it emerges that he does. When Sayf expresses a desire to see it, the stranger instantaneously transports him there. He tells Sayf again that he must mount his horse

and lead the waters, warning him not to pause until he has reached the sea, whatever shrieks and awful noises he may hear.

The stranger and Sayf bid each other farewell and Sayf finds himself back at the Muslim camp at the time of the morning prayer. He greets 'Āqila, who tells him that she has also had an encounter with the mysterious stranger, and that she has made sure that everything is prepared for the quest ahead. Turning to 'Āqisa, she gives her a slip of paper upon which are written magic enchantments, and tells her to place it under her tongue. Next, she tells her, she must go to al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad and pretend that she is desperate to marry him, but cannot unless he performs some specific tasks for Sayf first. 'Āqila coaches 'Āqiṣa until she is satisfied with her performance, then sends her to al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad. 'Āqiṣa says her piece, but al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad has heard from some of the jinn that Sayf is planning to trick him and has no intention of giving 'Āqiṣa to him in marriage. With honeyed words, 'Āqiṣa eventually persuades al-Rahaṭ that she is determined they will marry, but that this cannot happen unless he pays her dowry, and, for her part, she wants to be able to say that her husband has done something that no one else is capable of doing. Al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad finally agrees to wield the pick. 'Āqiṣa shows him where the river is to flow, and everyone sets to work.

Once al-Rahaṭ has begun digging a channel for the river, 'Āqila instructs Sayf to get on his horse and start leading the waters with his advisors and the kings of the jinn following behind him. Lightning flashes, terrible shrieks and crashes ring out, bolts of fire start to rain upon the Muslims like spears, and many of Sayf's followers perish. 'Āqila rallies the remaining troops and they press on behind Sayf, who continues, unflinching, until they reach the southern boundary of the city of Miṣr, where the clamour grows even more deafening. Suddenly, Sayf sees a figure approaching: it is a stranger who approaches Sayf, bringing with him Sayf's eldest son, Damar. The stranger strikes Damar's head from his shoulders, and throws it on the ground before Sayf. The same fate befalls Sayf's other sons, Miṣr, Būlāq and Naṣr, in turn. Believing the truth of what he has seen, Sayf is overcome with grief. Despite this, he perseveres and tries to move on, but finds he can go no further. The waters stop with him. 'Āqila goes forward from the ranks to find out what the problem is while the Muslims try to withstand the awful clamour which surrounds them. In the confusion and tumult, and without 'Āqila's encouragement to sustain them and keep them steady, the army is overcome by panic and splinters into groups, some digging out the Damietta and some the Rashid branches of the Nile delta.

The narrator now intervenes to tell us that Sayf has stopped at this point because of a magician called Saysabān. In the wadi in which Sayf and the Muslims now find themselves there used to be, we are told, 70 castles, each

of which was inhabited by a fire-worshipping magician, hence it was called Birkat al-Siḥra ('The Well of Sorcery'). These fire-worshippers had discovered that Saysabān (who also lived in the wadi, in a fortress) was not of their faith and had tried to persuade him to convert to their beliefs. When he refused, they had surrounded his fortress and threatened to kill him unless he turned to fire worship. Saysabān defeated every one of them, killing them one by one with a magical spear of white fire. Some time after this, we are then told, Saysabān had cast the *raml* sands of divination and discovered that a *tubbaʿī* king would be coming who would make the waters flow through the now arid land, and that he would be helped by advisors and sorcerers, and would worship the One God. Saysabān also foresaw that his fortress would be flooded by the waters, and so he constructed a brass cow, and installed in its hollow body magical spells that would prevent anyone from interfering with it. He then placed this in Sayf's path and enchanted it so that it would prevent his magic horse from passing it.

The story then shifts back to the action. When ʿĀqila sees that Sayf has stopped, she approaches him and asks him what has happened. He is unable to explain, so she next asks the jinn, who tell her about Saysabān and his brass cow. Sayf, enraged, declares his intention to kill the infidel magician. While the Muslims are discussing what to do, Saysabān makes his entrance, descending from the sky on a flying couch. The jinn realise instantly that they are no match for him in battle and scatter, leaving Sayf and ʿĀqila to face the enemy alone. Saysabān introduces himself by pointing out to Sayf that he is flooding lands with no thought to the fact that they might already be inhabited, and asking Sayf point blank if he intends to kill him. Sayf reassures Saysabān that he means neither him nor anyone else any harm, and then urges him (somewhat wordily) to convert to Islam and join him, or be killed in battle. Saysabān now discloses that Sayf's sons are in reality safe and well and their beheading was a magical illusion, and that he has, in fact, recently converted to Islam. He tells the story of his conversion: while he was shut up in his fortress making the brass cow, he was visited in his sleep by a stranger who urged him to convert to Islam and presented him with a choice of two gifts: either a seven-sided apple the size of an ostrich egg or, alternatively, death by means of a seven-sided spear of fire. Saysabān chose the apple and conversion and made his profession of faith. The stranger then introduced himself as al-Khiḍr.

Sayf is astonished and amazed at this story, and asks to see the brass cow, which Saysabān willingly shows him. Saysabān then reveals that only Sayf can overcome the magical powers exerted by the cow, by reciting his lineage over it, which he duly does. Saysabān is persuaded to join the Muslims and they, and the waters, then continue on their route north to the sea, while the cow is

submerged beneath the river. As they travel, Sayf and Saysabān continue talking, and Sayf reveals to the sorcerer that he is concerned someone may steal the Book of the Nile in the future, as was done in the past, and expresses his wish to make sure somehow that the Nile remains flowing on its new route, past the city of Miṣr. Saysabān promises to make a container in which the Book can be safely kept, thereby ensuring its safety and the permanence of the Nile's current course. He then takes the Muslims to a nearby castle that belongs to his daughter, al-Rawḍa, where they rest for a while.¹⁰ Once the diversion is complete, and the waters have been led all the way to the Mediterranean, Sayf and his people retire back to Miṣr. The arrival of the river is welcomed, and people come to settle in Egypt from all around, including Syria and Yemen. However, the waters also bring crocodiles, which cause alarm amongst the local populace. Saysabān, luckily, knows of a talismanic pillar in Syria that will help deal with the crocodile problem. He fetches it and uses it to create the Nilometer, into which he places the Book of the Nile, both to safeguard the continued flow of the waters and as a deterrent to crocodiles. The subsection concludes with the first flood of the Nile waters, and Sayf's reassurance to his frightened people that the rising waters will eventually fall and are a blessing rather than a cause for distress.

The Dialogue of Intertexts

The episode summarised above in which the Nile is diverted and the new city of Miṣr established is effectively the point at which the Yemeni Muslims have reached the end of their journey and founded their new homeland. As is clear from the synopsis, Egyptian intertexts (several of which have been discussed in previous chapters) help provide underlying theme and characterisation for the action. The inclusion of the expedition against Nūt immediately before the segment devoted specifically to the Nile diversion brings the ancient Egyptian intertext overtly into this subsection in its initial stages, and Sayf's conquest of the unrepentant infidel can be read as a symbolic expunging of the ancient pagan past. During the diversion itself Sayf leads the waters by riding a magical steed, a motif that has also been identified as ancient Egyptian (see below). Towards the end of the Diversion subsection, Sayf encounters a second pagan magician, Saysabān. This magician is less obdurate; after initially

10 Al-Rawḍa is the name of one of the two large islands that fall within Cairo; the Nilometer is housed on the southern tip. The current Nilometer was built in 861 AD, but it is thought that there has been a Nilometer on this site since around 500 BC.

confronting and resisting the Muslim army, he sees the light, converts to Islam and builds the Nilometer. He places the Book of the Nile inside an enchanted brass crocodile, and puts these inside the Nilometer to ward off crocodiles. The Book of the Nile itself, and the placing of it in the river, can both be read as making intertextual reference to stories of the ancient Book of Thoth. The protective enchanted brass crocodile here mirrors the brass cow Saysabān made earlier in this subsection to stop Sayf leading the waters through his lands, and, coincidentally, the cow and the crocodile were representations of the two most popular gods of late Ancient Egypt, Hathor and Sobek.¹¹ Sobek, the crocodile god of water and marshes, was traditionally identified with Ra and associated with Pharaonic power and kingship. For example, the imagery in the 'Book of Faiyum', one of the latest religious texts we have, which was popular during the Roman period (c. 30 BC to 395 AD), is dominated by Sobek. The Book was extremely popular and fragments of many copies exist, in both illustrated hieroglyphic texts and also as unillustrated hieratic texts, and temple inscriptions can be found spread over a wide geographic area. The 'Book of Faiyum' depicts the sun god as rising in the morning as a young sun god riding the back of the heavenly cow, setting in the evening having become old, in his underworld form with the head of a ram, and becoming a crocodile as he enters the waters. During the night, he swims from east to west in crocodile form, recreating himself in the primordial waters to arise anew the next morning.¹² Thus, in the same way that Nūt symbolises the demonisation of the Egyptian past, Saysabān can be seen to symbolise the incorporation of elements of an ancient Egyptian legacy into the Muslim unit. Over and above all of this, Sayf is presented as Osiris-like, not only in his physical identification with the flow of the water, and his role as the founder of Egyptian civilisation, but in his knowledge of the beneficial nature of the floods, about which he has to reassure the frightened populace.

11 The last functioning temple of the ancient Egyptian Gods was closed down by Emperor Justinian I in 550 AD. The Book of Faiyum was popular during the Roman period, c. 30 BC to 395 AD, and is thought to have been compiled as a major project over about 200 years. Fragments of many copies exist, both illustrated versions in hieroglyphics and also unillustrated hieratic texts. Sobek was the local god of Faiyum, but was recognised throughout Egypt: for example, there was a temple to Sobek and Horus in Kom Obo, near Aswan, building on which started in the second century BC, which has inscriptions from the 'Book of Faiyum' on its walls ('Egypt's Mysterious Book of the Faiyum' exhibition, 2013, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore MD).

12 For a brief discussion of other depictions of Sobek, and crocodiles, see Jørgensen, 'Egyptian Mythological Manuals', pp. 281–283.

The Islamic-prophetic intertext enriches the Diversion subsection at another level. At the very beginning of the subsection, reference to the Abraham intertext, when God sends down water to succour Takrūr and Būlāq, not only brings in the concept of Sayf as an Abraham-like patriarch, but introduces the site of Egypt's future capital city as a second Mecca—a reference that is built on when Akhmīm and ʿĀqila also found wells. References to the heroic heirlooms of the sword of Āṣaf, al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad, Japheth's pick and Barq al-Burūq (the magical horse whose name resonates with that of Muhammad's legendary horse, al-Burāq) further overlay Sayf's undertaking with Islamic sanctity through intertextual reference to the stories of Solomon, Noah and Muhammad respectively. The seven-sided jewel of Kūsh ibn Kinʿān can also be traced back to Noah, as Kūsh ibn Kinʿān is one of the sons of Ham according to Islamic tradition.¹³ The Solomon intertext is also used to great effect through the story ʿĀqila relates about Solomon, Bilqīs and the enchanted fish (which encapsulates the central dilemmas of the *sīra*), and the Black Jinn's doomed love for ʿĀqīṣa which echoes his previous love for Bilqīs. There is also a more abstract presence of the Moses intertext through the concept of the reverse exodus, as described by Chraībi, and the general motif of divinely sanctioned control of the waters. These intertexts give us a very literal depiction of the foundation of a proto-Islamic Egypt, which sits on the surface of the text.

The Alexander intertext is only mentioned explicitly once during this subsection, when ʿĀqila tells the story of Japheth's pick, in the context of his role in building a wall to keep out the giants Gog and Magog. However, Alexander is also present in a more abstract sense that relies on plot parallels between the two narratives: Sayf's foundation of the city of Miṣr echoes Alexander's foundation of Alexandria (note that Miṣr is named after one of the Islamic heroes, just as Alexander's city is named after himself), an event which, in Alexander's story, marks his acceptance as Egyptian king following his conquest of Egypt and his visit to the oracle at Siwa. The presence of al-Khiḍr at strategic moments, besides providing divine sanction to Sayf's mission, consolidates these parallels between Sayf and Alexander, Moses and Solomon. This is especially so given the story that ʿĀqila recounts earlier about Bilqīs' enchanted fish, which are brought to life through divine intervention, a motif that is inextricably connected with al-Khiḍr.

Thus, in this subsection the various intertexts can clearly be seen working at the levels identified earlier in this chapter—the Islamic is explicit, while the

13 In other accounts Kūsh is the eldest son of Ham and brother of Kinʿān, rather than his son. He appears in both Islamic and Biblical tradition. See D. Cohen, art., 'Kūsh' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn. I have not, so far, been able to trace the legendary significance of the remaining object, the talisman of Khilijān and Kilikān.

Egyptian is more obscure, and the Alexandrian relies on textual parallel. The main effect of interactions such as these on the narrative is to highlight specific key moments in the text—in effect to contribute to their ‘climacticness’—by bringing a number of intertextual threads together at a particular point. This example of dialogic interaction of the intertexts is one of many in the *sīra* which demonstrate how the various intertexts play against each other (or with each other) in ways which help the text express a specific sense of identity. Here, the ancient Egyptian legacy is split into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ elements that are respectively absorbed and demonised, while the prophetic intertext bestows religious credentials on Sayf and furthers the sense of a creation of a new, proto-Islamic, telling of history. The Alexander intertext overarches these, enhancing the concept of Sayf as world-conquering hero. The total effect is the creation of an image of Egypt as a world power, wrought by a legendary world king.

Above and beyond this process (or rather beneath it), there is another, more complex, dynamic at work amongst the intertexts here, in which two widely diverging visions of this pivotal moment in the *sīra*’s account of Egyptian history can be seen. Ostensibly, we are told, the proto-Islamic Yemenites are founding their new city on what is effectively previously uninhabited land. We are presented with a picture of a land which was previously arid, waterless, and devoid of life—bar the odd sorcerer and magician. The narrative is seemingly telling us a story in which Sayf and his people bring life and civilisation to an Egypt in which these could not exist before, in which there are no native inhabitants to be dispossessed. This perception is bolstered in the text by references at the beginning of the section to Hagar and Ishmael, in the story of the divinely inspired provision of the oasis in which the Muslims settle and next to which they build their capital city. This is then built on by reference to Moses, who led his people to the promised land, and even to Solomon, here the builder of cities. Indeed, the text explicitly presents Sayf’s intentions as ultimately peaceful and inclusive: when challenged by Saysabān, the aggressor responsible for both the terrifying *din* and the enchantments that halt the Muslims progress north, not to mention the apparent death of Sayf’s sons, Sayf’s response is, under the circumstances, as peaceable and well-intentioned as could be. He is presented to us as civilising founder, rather than warmongering conqueror, and it is Saysabān who is presented as the aggressor.

However, when read through the prism of specifically Egyptian intertexts rather than Islamic-prophetic ones, this same episode tells a different story.¹⁴

14 This reading is one with which the Noah intertext, in terms of the one aspect of his story which remains glaringly absent from *Sīrat Sayf*, the Flood in which the unbelievers were wiped out and a new society of believers founded, has more in common. (The very absence of direct reference to this aspect of the Noah legend from the *sīra* is, indeed,

What is compelling, here, is the possibility of reading the presence of a number of other intertextual presences brought into the text by the image of Sayf, with all his Islamic-prophetic heirlooms, riding on Barq al-Burūq al-Yāqūtī and leading the Nile waters, seeing his sons apparently beheaded before his eyes, then being stopped dead in his tracks by the enchanted brass cow. The account of the Nile's diversion in *Sīrat Sayf* has, as discussed in chapter 2, been read by Chraïbi as an inverted retelling of the Exodus (a reverse exodus), and this is clearly an intertext that is at work, and one which has powerful resonances—it is the Moses intertext which underpins the concept that the Muslims are arriving at their promised land, and that gives their enterprise divine sanction and moral probity. But, if read in the light of a number of other texts, the Nile Diversion episode takes on a different light.

The image of Sayf riding at the head of the waters does, indeed, draw on images from Islamic religious legend, as noted by Chelhod, who has pointed out that this motif is mentioned in al-Ṭabarī's account of the Exodus in his *History*.¹⁵ This ties in with Chraïbi's rereading of this part of the story as a reverse Exodus. In al-Ṭabarī's account the fleeing Jews, led by Moses, arrive at the Red Sea, Moses parts the waters with his staff and leads his people across the seabed.¹⁶ Pharaoh, on horseback at the head of his army, follows them into the chasm, at which point God releases the waters and they close over his head. This episode is immediately followed by the episode of the golden calf. Leaving aside the question of whether or not the trope of Moses' control of the waters can be seen as being essentially Osirian, and ancient Egyptian,¹⁷ the motif of Pharaoh on horseback riding up the Nile has a further set of associations. In Biblical historical scholarship, the Exodus story has been linked with folkloric and traditional accounts of the expulsion of the Hyksos, the 'Shepherd Kings' whose dynasty ruled Upper Egypt from c. 1725–1575 BC. Although the relationship between the Exodus narrative and the expulsion of the Hyksos is open to debate, there has long been speculation among historians of the Bible that the Exodus story was rooted in the expulsion of the Hyksos from Lower Egypt by the Theban dynasties to the south which con-

interesting in itself, given the fundamental role Noah's curse plays in underpinning the *sīra* at a global level.)

15 Chelhod, 'La geste du roi Sayf', pp. 70–71.

16 Chraïbi, 'Le roman de *Sayf ibn dī Yazan*'.

17 Al-Ṭabarī's account, on which Chelhod relies for his discussion, is redolent with Osirian echoes. It begins with Joseph's body being buried in a casket of marble in the middle of the Nile waters. Moses, his heir, takes his body with him when he leaves for the Promised Land.

trolled Upper Egypt. (Jan Assman has also famously traced the monotheism of Moses to the short-lived monotheistic revolution of the pharaoh Akhenaten in 1360–1340 BC in his *Moses the Egyptian*.) The significance of the Hyksos pretext, for an intertextual reading of *Sīrat Sayf*, can be seen in two inscriptions which recount how Kamose, the last pharaoh of the seventeenth Theban dynasty, led an expedition force up the Nile to destroy the capital city of the Hyksos.¹⁸

In terms of narrative pattern, there are similarities between the personae of Sayf and Kamose, both depicted as unifying saviours and liberators of their people. The historical veracity of the narrative accounts of the expulsion of the Hyksos that we have in the Egyptian inscriptions has been the subject of considerable discussion. On the basis of the archaeological evidence it is not even clear if there was any ‘invasion’ or ‘expulsion’ *per se*, and the speculative relationship between these events and the Exodus narrative is an even more murky area of debate. These issues aside, the *Sīrat Sayf* text does seem to lend itself to the perception that both the Hyksos and the Exodus intertexts are present at some level here. But, it is really unclear how to pin them down, or if they can even be treated separately. In the Exodus story, Pharaoh chases Moses and his people through the Red Sea as they flee, and it is Moses (or rather Moses’ God) who has control over the waters, but in the Hyksos account the narrative point of view shifts to that of Pharaoh and the Egyptians—Pharaoh chases his enemies up the Nile, and it is he who has control of the waters. The reverse Exodus identified by Chraïbi is undoubtedly present. But, by presenting the reader with an image of Sayf riding northwards up the Nile, the text is also drawing on the image of the saviour Pharaoh, Osiris in earthly form and the rightful ruler of Egypt, riding in his ship up the Nile at the head of his fleet to liberate his lands from the invader and unite Upper and Lower Egypt. Thematically this reading is supported by the fact that the Hyksos are associated with the worship of the god Seth in the surviving literary accounts, and their defeat was at some level equated with the overthrow of Seth.¹⁹ In terms of the *sīra*’s underlying discussion of the balance of the forces of order and chaos, the intertextual transposition of this image onto the Yemeni hero Sayf is therefore subtextually appropriate at this point in the text.

18 For a translation of the accounts of Kamose’s expedition against the Hyksos, see James Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament, Third Edition With Supplement* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 233–234. Kamose’s expedition did not expel the Hyksos; this was later accomplished by Ahmose I, the founder of the eighteenth dynasty.

19 See chapter 3, p. 153 for a discussion of ‘Seth and Apopis’ and its parallels in *Sīrat Sayf*.

Reading this episode in terms of the Hyksos intertext also makes textual sense on another level: the story of the Exodus is one in which the battle has been fought and the exodus is to a new home, as is the case with the exodus from al-Madinat al-Ḥamrā' in *Sīrat Sayf*. But, in addition to the Hyksos narrative discussed above, there are a number of other, related Egyptian texts which contain some unusual motifs and narrative conventions that find correspondences in this subsection of *Sīrat Sayf*, albeit from a different narrative point of view. From a reading through the prism of this next group of pretexts Sayf is not presented as Pharaoh liberating Egypt as in the Hyksos narrative, but instead becomes the invader.

A small group of extant texts recount the invasion of Egypt by the Persian king Cambyses in c. 525 BC. Cambyses II was the eldest son of Cyrus II, the founder of the Achaemenid Empire. Born around 560 BC, he appears to have acceded the throne on the death of his father in around 530 BC. His expedition to Egypt began soon after this. After initially laying siege to, and conquering, Heliopolis (on the site of modern-day Cairo) and Memphis, he turned his attention to Ethiopia but was forced to turn back when he ran out of supplies south of Thebes. An expeditionary force was also sent against the oasis of Siwa, and took Kharga but famously perished in a sandstorm before reaching Siwa. There are very few early accounts of Cambyses' invasion of Egypt available to us today, but we do have three texts, all of which can be seen to share specific motifs, themes and patterns which are also present in *Sīrat Sayf*. The significance of these shared elements is indicated by that fact that it is through these that some of the otherwise more bizarre and narratively inexplicable aspects of the Nile Diversion episode in *Sīrat Sayf* begin to make sense, namely the strange episode in which Sayf is forced to witness the slaughter of his sons, and the equally odd brass cow.

There are convincing reasons to argue that the presence of these particular motifs at this point in *Sīrat Sayf* is significant, and that reading these as reflecting the intertextual presence of Egyptian material is valid. Furthermore, the presence of this set of associations is one that has implications that relate to how intertexts function in *Sīrat Sayf* and the worldview it expresses, but also to its genre identity and the way in which the various different recensions of *Sīrat Sayf* relate to one another. The Hyksos and Cambyses narratives belong to a group of texts which rely on a specific form, or, more accurately, a related set of forms which was of particular importance in Egyptian Literature from the Middle Kingdom up until Graeco-Roman times: the *Königsnovelle*, the *Chaosbeschreibung*, and the Prophetic *Königsnovelle*. The *Königsnovelle* is "an important form in Egyptian literature dating back to the Middle Kingdom: a story built around a legendary king who struggles to preserve Egypt and

native rule against external enemies, often assimilated to ‘Easterners’ or the Hyksos”. The *Chaosbeschreibung* is “not a genre in its own right, but a mode of presentation, or, as it has been usefully called recently, a ‘discourse’, one that focuses on the hardships that befall Egypt when native rule is lost, and which also has a ‘messianic’ component that envisions the restoration of Egypt”. The Prophetic *Königsnovelle* are texts, or fragments of texts, from the Graeco-Roman period “that combine the discourse of *Chaosbeschreibung* with the traditional elements of the *Königsnovelle*”,²⁰ that is they combine the *Königsnovelle*’s depiction of idealised, legendary kings who preserve their royal standing and achieve important historic events through making judicious use of their helpers and advisors with the *Chaosbeschreibung* literature of ‘anti-kingship’ which showed the social and cosmic chaos that resulted from the lack of a king, or from the imposition of rule by an evil foreign king, which is restored by the rule of a rightful king.²¹ The king is thus a metaphor for the country as a whole in these texts. This variant of *Sīrat Sayf* does not conform strictly to the pattern of the extant Prophetic *Königsnovelle* pretexts (although the pattern can actually recognisably be seen in the text, and the elements are all present, they are arranged slightly differently) but, as should be clear from the brief description above, there is an undoubted resonance between these three related narrative forms and the *sīra*, not least because they are fundamentally concerned with a discussion of the order-chaos theme. In his description of the Prophetic *Königsnovelle*, Dillery comments that “underpinning this story, and often providing it with crucial terms and images, is the central myth and ritual of Egyptian religion: the conflict of Osiris and Seth, the murder and mutilation of Osiris, and the reconstitution of Osiris by Isis. Assmann has called the transformation of this ‘re-remembering’ of Osiris ‘perhaps the most impressive response to the experience of foreign rule’”.²² This is the same mythology that can unquestionably be seen underpinning *Sīrat Sayf*’s reworking of Egyptian history. Furthermore, there is a characteristic

20 Dillery, ‘Cambyses and the Egyptian Chaosbeschreibung Tradition’, p. 390. See also Antonio Loprieno, ‘The “King’s Novel”’ in Antonio Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Forms* (Leiden, New York, Köln: E.J. Brill, 1996), pp. 277–295; and Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt*, pp. 159–194. Dillery also treats the Prophetic *Königsnovelle* in his ‘The First Egyptian Narrative History: Manetho and Greek Historiography’, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 127 (1999), pp. 93–116. The classic work on the *Königsnovelle* is Alfred Hermann, *Die ägyptische Königsnovellei*, *Leipziger ägyptologische Studien*, 10 (Glückstadt: Augustin, 1938). Frankfurter gives a succinct introduction to all three genres in *Religion in Roman Egypt*, pp. 241–248.

21 Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, pp. 241–242.

22 John Dillery, ‘Cambyses and the Egyptian Chaosbeschreibung Tradition’, p. 391.

tension in these ancient Egyptian texts between the image of Pharaoh as unifying saviour and invader which has been related back to ideas surrounding the legitimacy of the divine pharaoh. For someone to be pharaoh, they must have divine approval, but if the gods favour an invader over the current incumbent, then he must, clearly, be the divinely appointed king: the act of taking possession of the throne conveys legitimacy. This tension between hero-king as conqueror and Osiris-like bringer of civilisation and unity, and between invasion and liberation, is exactly the tension that we find at work in this subsection of *Sīrat Sayf*, and it is expressed not only through references to the Hysksos/Cambyses subtext, but in the apparently conflicting identification of Sayf with Moses (founder figure) and Alexander (conquering world-hero) at this point. It cannot be coincidental that, just as the references to the 'Moses' intertext found in *Sīrat Sayf* can also be seen to reflect an ancient Egyptian legacy, the *Psuedo-Callisthenes* 'Alexander' pretext has, as discussed in the previous chapter, also been identified with the Prophetic *Königsnovelle*. In fact, it is generally accepted that the *Psuedo-Callisthenes* Alexander Romance was explicitly modelled along the lines of the Prophetic *Königsnovelle* as a way of legitimising the Ptolemaic dynasty of the time, and it is grounded in the paternal connection of Alexander to Nectanebus, named for Nekhthorheb, the final pharaoh before the Persian conquests²³ who became a legendary king during the Ptolemaic period.²⁴ The story of Alexander's origins and birth has

23 Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, p. 16.

24 "Both Amenhopis and Nectanebos are central heroes of numerous Egyptian works of the Ptolemaic period. Amenhopis is the king before whom the god Khnum appears in his oracular guise of Potter in the Oracle of the Potter. Nectanebos is portrayed in one story receiving a prophetic dream from Isis, and in the *Alexander-Romance* he uses a priestly divination procedure to discover the Egyptian gods' intention to hand the country over to Persia for a period. The same text actually reveals Nectanebos to be the sire of Alexander the Great, rendering the Macedonian conqueror a legitimate king in the very dynasty of Nectanebos. In such diverse ways scribes returned time and time again to the same legendary kings, models of royal power and order, to ground the institutions, circumstances, hopes, and values of the present" (Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, p. 242). On the relationship between one specific episode of the Coptic 'Alexander' legend, Alexander's escape from chaos in Gedrosia, and the ancient Egyptian background, see Selden, 'Guardians of Chaos', pp. 142–145. He finds a similar dialogue between ancient Egyptian, Hellenistic and Palestinian readings of the text to that found in *Sīrat Sayf* here, albeit through a very different reading, in which "what the Alexander Romance ultimately epitomizes is Egypt's multiplex relationship to Empire . . . the narration is no longer mimetic of geopolitical difference, but in the very process of its composition the Coptic Romance actively engages the worlding of the Byzantine world. The local here accordingly (re)con-

been connected to an earlier Egyptian one, 'The Dream of Nektanebos',²⁵ and it is this aspect of the Alexander Romance that provides some of the most striking intertextual parallels between *Sayf* and 'Alexander'. A key element of the Prophetic *Königsnovelle* can be seen in the pattern of predictions (to Pharaoh of the fall of Egypt to foreign powers only to be retaken by Pharaoh's son or heir) found in *Pseudo-Callisthenes*: Nectanebus learns that Egypt is destined to fall under Persian rule for a period of time, but that his son will become a great king. Later, Alexander visits Siwa where he receives a dream visitation from the god Serapis who promises to help him in his conquests and prophesies his eternal fame. He then visits Alexandria where he is told of a prophecy that the old king will return, reinvigorated and youthful, recognises a statue of his father Nectanebus and ascends the throne amid general rejoicing. As in the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* 'Alexander', *Sīrat Sayf* contains the element of the death of the old king, Dhū Yazan, followed by a period of chaos under foreign rule of a usurper queen. Sayf does not receive divine visitation in a dream, but he is told of prophecies of his future conquests made repeatedly in the text. He returns to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' where he is recognised, and ascends the throne amid general rejoicing.

More importantly perhaps, on the basis of the three versions of *Sīrat Sayf* that I have knowledge of, it seems that the conceptual framework of the Prophetic *Königsnovelle* may well connect the very different accounts of the central climactic 'Nile Diversion' subsection in the different variants of *Sīrat Sayf*. A more general description of the Prophetic *Königsnovelle*, in which the salvation of Egypt from the threat of foreign rule is only one aspect, is provided by Koenen, as follows:

In the fixed form of this historiographical genre, an important historical event is described as the result of an action taken by the king. A dream, a message, or some other event prompts the king to discuss the matter first in an assembly of advisors, princes, or even workers; he then issues orders for the execution of his plans. These lead to a wide variety of historical actions. Warfare is undertaken; temples, sanctuaries, or wells are built or renewed; a statue of a god is transported; sacrifices are established,

stitutes the global, thereby rendering the historicizing dialectic of the Romance pregnant with the future" (pp. 144–145).

25 See Ludwig Koenen, 'The Dream of Nektanebos', *The Bulletin of The American Society of Papyrologists*, 22: 1–4 (1985), pp. 171–194. He discusses the relationship between 'The Dream' and *Pseudo-Callisthenes* briefly, provides the story in full, accompanied by an English summary, and explores its relationship to other Egyptian Prophetic *Königsnovelle*.

rituals performed, and provisions issued for workers; or prophecies about the unhappy future of Egypt and its final restoration under a new ruler are made and written down in the presence of the king; or a politically important wedding is arranged and celebrated or a high-ranking person healed from sickness. Thus the narrative topics of the stories vary considerably; all of them, however, illustrate the function of the king as the only initiator of historical deeds, and moreover, his close interactions with the gods.²⁶

This pattern finds clear parallels in the Nile Diversion section of *Sayf*: the subsection begins when the Muslims run out of water, Sayf consults with his advisors who remind him of the ancient prophecies that he will divert the Nile, he receives a divine visitation (from a stranger whose face gives off a radiant glow and tells him that his mission has divine sanction), and he takes action, action which results in the diversion of the Nile and establishment of Egypt. Although the details of how the Diversion of the Nile is achieved vary widely in the printed text, the Ambrosiana MS and MS BM 4274 Or., they seem to be tied together by this general structure.

Given these general correspondences, the tantalising prospect that the Prophetic *Königsnovelle* might have survived in some guise to find expression in a nineteenth-century popular history of the foundation of Egypt is worth exploring in more detail.²⁷ It might be a stretch to crowbar *Sīrat Sayf* into the Prophetic *Königsnovelle* discourse *per se*, but the closer one looks at *Sīrat Sayf*, the more traces of its presence can be seen. When intertextual parallels between *Sīrat Sayf* and a number of specific Prophetic *Königsnovelle* pretexts are explored, a number of very interesting textual resonances emerge from the shadows.

The earliest of the three Cambyses accounts is that given by Herodotus in his fifth-century BC work *The Histories*, much of which is based in oral histories recounted to him by informants;²⁸ the second is *The Coptic Story*

26 Koenen, 'The Dream of Nektanebos', pp. 172–173.

27 As Frankfurter says in his study of the continuation of Ancient Egyptian religious ideas into popular religious practice at the local, collective level during the Graeco-Roman and Christian periods in Egypt "one must get beyond the notion that religions actually die, taking seriously the anthropology of small communities in dynamic relationship with ever-changing great traditions" (Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, p. 7).

28 See Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book 3: 1–17. The translation cited below is Herodotus, *The Histories*, tr. Aubrey de Sélincourt, intr. and rev. John Marincola, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1996); but see also *The History*, tr. David Grene (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1987); *The Histories*, tr. Robin Waterfield, ed. Carolyn Dewald,

of *Cambyses' Invasion of Egypt*, an account of Cambyses' invasion written in Coptic and dating to some time between c. 200 BC and c. 640 AD;²⁹ the third is the account of Cambyses invasion in *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu*, which dates from the late first/seventh century (i.e. immediately following the Arab conquests) but is only available to us in two eleventh/seventeenth- and early twelfth/eighteenth-century recensions.³⁰ The exact relationship between

Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 2008); Herodotus of Halicarnassus, *The Histories: An Account of Great and Marvellous Deeds through the 1920 Translation of A.D. Godley*, tr. A.D. Godley (n.p. Pax Liborum 2010).

- 29 There are wildly different datings given to this text, but it is agreed that it predates the Arab conquests. Jansen dates it to some time after 200 BC on the basis that it mentions the 'king of the Gauls', with whom the Egyptians had no contact until they acquired possessions in Asia Minor in the third century BC (see Jansen, *The Coptic Story of Cambyses' Invasion of Egypt*, pp. 16–18), but seems to think that it dates from some time around then. In Jansen's opinion, the work was of oral origin, had been written down in Demotic by a Hellenised Egyptian and later re-worked by an Aramaic speaking Egyptian Jew in the papyrus which has come down to us (it "lacks every trace of Christian influence"). He believes that this version of the story was also heavily influenced by Herodotus at some stage and proposes that the text is an individually composed and created work designed to heighten Egyptian national pride at a time of threat from foreign invasion. On the other hand, Leslie MacCoull dates it to the early first/seventh century, on the basis that the text uses the Syriac for 'Cambyses'. MacCoull's opinion is that the text was written by a Syriac monastic settler in Egypt in around 630–640 AD, and that it draws from Herodotus, oral tradition, the Bible and the memory of the Persian occupation of 617–627. In accordance with Jansen, MacCoull's view is that this account was written to stir Egyptians up in the face of external threat (see Leslie MacCoull, *Coptic Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1993), pp. 185–188).
- 30 John of Nikiu was the Coptic bishop of Nikiu, and was appointed Administrator General of the monasteries in 696 AD, which means he was a near-contemporary witness to the Arab conquest of Egypt (his *Chronicle* substantially predates the earliest extant 'Arab' accounts). The work is a history which begins with Adam and continues up to the years immediately following the Arab conquests, focussing primarily on Egypt and the Mediterranean Christian world. Originally written in Greek (and possibly some Coptic), it was translated into Arabic, and then into Ethiopic in 1602 AD. The Arabic version is lost, and there are only two Ethiopic manuscripts known to us—according to Zotenberg and Charles, these are closely related, but not exact copies. An edition based on these two Ethiopic manuscripts, with French translation, has been published by Zotenberg, and there is also an English translation of the Zotenberg text by R.H. Charles. For more information on the text and its history, see H. Zotenberg, *Chronique de Jean, Évêque de Nikiou: Texte Éthiopien* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale. 1883); R.H. Charles, *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu, Translated from Zotenberg's Ethiopic Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1916).

these three different accounts is not clear, but it is generally agreed that the later two probably draw on Herodotus, definitely rely on popular stories and history, and that they were written as popular historical narrative intended to heighten national sentiment.³¹

In Herodotus' account, in apparent conformance to the literary convention of 'naturalisation' of the 'hero' through his paternal or maternal lineage that can be seen in, for example, *Pseudo-Callisthenes'* recasting of history to provide Alexander with an Egyptian father, the Egyptians are reported to have believed Cambyses to be the son of Cyrus and Nitetis, daughter of the Egyptian pharaoh Apries. Apries had met an unfortunate end at the hands of Amasis, who had led an uprising against him and taken the throne. Here Cambyses is not simply cast as an 'invader'; the lines are somewhat blurred so that his persona has overtones of the liberating hero. (This may reflect a general development in 'anti-kingship' stories such as 'Cambyses' by the end of the Ptolemaic period, or simply the fact that Herodotus' authorial agenda was different to that of the other, later, authors who were more nationalistic in their narration.³²) The relevant section of Herodotus' account of the invasion of Cambyses reads as follows:

The Persians crossed the desert [eastwards, across the desert into Egypt], took up a position near the Egyptian army, and prepared for an engagement. Before the battle the Greek and Carian mercenaries who were serving with the Egyptians contrived the following against Phanes [a Greek mercenary who had defected to the Persian side and led their army safely through the desert] in their anger at his bringing a foreign army against Egypt: they seized his sons, whom he had left behind, and brought them to the camp, where they made sure their father could see them; then, placing a bowl in the open ground between the two armies, they led the boys up to it one by one, and cut their throat over it. Not one was spared, and when the last was dead, they poured wine and water on to the blood

31 For a comparative discussion of the three, see Alan B. Lloyd, 'Cambyses in Late Tradition' in Christopher Eyre, Anthony Leahy and Lisa Montagno Leahy (eds), *The Unbroken Reed: Studies in the Culture and Heritage of Ancient Egypt in Honour of A.F. Shore* (London: The Egypt Exploration Society, 1994), pp. 195–204. For a discussion of the relationship between *The Coptic Story of Cambyses' Invasion of Egypt* and *The Chronicle of John of Nikiu*, see Eugene Cruz-Uribe, 'Notes on the Coptic Cambyses Romance', *Enchoria* 14 (1986), pp. 51–56.

32 See Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, pp. 243–244, and Lloyd, 'Cambyses in Late Tradition', p. 195, and pp. 200–202 for the nationalistic elements in the later recensions as reflecting a wider process of 'christianisation' in Egypt at the time.

in the bowl, and every man in the mercenary force drank. That done, the fight began; and after a hard struggle and heavy casualties on both sides, the Egyptians were routed.³³

This motif of the murder of the enemy's sons is repeated later once the Persian army has marched on Memphis and defeated Psammenitus, the son of Amasis, who succeeded him as Pharaoh when he died during the early stages of Cambyses' invasion. However, this time, rather than being presented in the context of conflicting mercenaries, it is the sons (and daughters) of the Egyptian nobles who suffer at the hands of the now victorious Cambyses:

Ten days passed [after the Persian victory], and Cambyses, wishing to see what stuff the Egyptian king Psammenitus was made of—he had been but six months on the throne—forced him, with other Egyptians to witness from a seat in the city outskirts a spectacle deliberately devised to humiliate him. First he had his daughter dressed like a slave and sent out with a pitcher to fetch water, accompanied by other young girls similarly dressed and chosen from noble families. The girls cried bitterly as they passed the place where their fathers sat watching them, and the fathers, in their turn—all but Psammenitus himself—wept and lamented no less bitterly at the sight of such an insult to their children. Psammenitus, however, after a single glance of recognition, bent to the ground in silence. The girls with their pitchers passed on, and then came the king's son with two thousand others of the same age, their mouths bridled and a rope round their necks, on their way to execution . . . Psammenitus watched them pass, and knew that his son was going to his death; but, though the other Egyptians who were sitting near him continued to weep and to show every sign of distress, he did just what he had done before at the sight of his daughter.³⁴

Psammenitus does not, in fact, weep until he later sees an old man reduced to begging from the Persian soldiers. When questioned, his response is that 'my own suffering was too great for tears, but I could not but weep for the trouble of

33 For the discussion of whether Cambyses was Nitetis' husband or son, see Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book 3: 1–3. He himself discounts this being historical fact, and says that Nitetis was Cambyses' concubine, whom Amasis sent to him rather than his own daughter when Cyrus demanded one of his sisters. For the account of the invasion quoted here, see Book 3: 11.

34 Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book 3: 14.

a friend, who has fallen from great wealth and good fortune and been reduced to beggary on the threshold of old age.' Cambyses is so moved that he gives orders that Psammenitus' son be spared, however the messenger arrives too late to save the young man, who was the first to be killed.

We only have an incomplete version of *The Coptic Story of Cambyses Invasion*, chronologically the next of these three texts, and it breaks off just before the actual invasion of Egypt, but it is noteworthy that in this text, which begins with Cambyses sending a threatening letter to the Egyptians, the Egyptians respond in kind, warning him that should he invade: 'First we shall surely . . . your entrails, your children we shall slay in your presence, your tyrants we shall cast to the ground, and your gods who go with you we shall burn up with fire, and as for yourself, we shall have no [hesitation] about cooking your flesh'.³⁵ Jansen certainly sees a link between the mention of this topos here and its presence in chapter 51 of the later *Chronicle of John of Nikiu*,³⁶ in which it is expanded. In an interesting shift in characterisation, in this account Cambyses has no Egyptian birthright and we are directly told that he is a 'bad man' who "rejected the wisdom of his father and the worship of the Lord God",³⁷ that "his disposition resembled that of a barbarian, and in the evil counsel of his desire he hated mankind",³⁸ this perhaps explaining why he lays waste to swathes of Syria and Palestine on his way to Egypt, and burns the holy city of Jerusalem:

Now there was in Egypt a warrior named Fusid who practised righteousness and hated iniquity. When there was war between the Persians and Egyptians, he had gone and fought in Syria and Assyria and he had taken four sons of Cambyses prisoner as well as his wives, in all forty souls. (27) And he bound them and burnt their houses and took all that they had captive and brought them to the city of Memphis and he imprisoned them in the palace of the king. (28) And when a second war arose between the Assyrians and Egyptians, the Assyrians proved the stronger and

35 Jansen, *The Coptic Story of Cambyses' Invasion of Egypt*, p. 64. The ellipsis in the translation indicates a lacuna in the original text.

36 According to Jansen "the Cambyses story contains a short threat about killing Cambyses' children before his eyes. In the Chronicle we have a very extended account of how this was carried out. It is natural to assume that this theme has been elaborated out of the brief statement in the Cambyses story" (Jansen, *The Coptic Story of Cambyses' Invasion of Egypt*, p. 29). Jansen does not mention the presence of this theme in Herodotus.

37 Charles, *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu*, Book 51: 17.

38 Charles, *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu*, Book 51: 22.

gained the mastery over the Egyptians and took the palace which is in the city of Thebes. (29) And the Assyrian soldiers shot arrows, and, as they shot, an arrow smote the warrior Fusid on the right side. But the Egyptian soldiers carried off the warrior Fusid from the Assyrians, before he died. And he lived but an hour more and after this died and left a memory to those that came after. (30) But the Egyptians were moved with fear because they had lost such a warrior as Fusid. And for this reason they fled for refuge into the city Sais, because it was a strong city and its fortifications stronger than those of the others. (31) And Cambyses attacked this city a second time and carried it by storm and destroyed it. And he captured all the other cities of lower Egypt towards the north to the sea coast and plundered them of all their possessions and destroyed their cities and neighbourhoods and burnt their houses with fire and left neither man nor beast living. (32) And he cut down their trees and destroyed their plantations and made the land of Egypt a desert. And returning in the direction of Rif he warred against the city of Memphis, and he conquered the king who was in it. (33) And the city of Busir also, which lies below Memphis, he destroyed and annihilated and took its possessions as a booty, and burnt it with fire and made it a desert. (34) And the sons of the kings which survived fled for refuge to another city, the nearest at hand, (even) into its citadel and closed the gates of the fortress. (35) And the Assyrians besieged this citadel and carried it by storm by night and destroyed the city of Memphis the great. (36) And one of the kings of Egypt, named Muzab, had sent in secret to his son, named Elkad, bidding him to bring all his wealth and that of all his officers and of the forty wives of Cambyses, that is, Nebuchadnezzar, even those which had been brought by Fusid the captain. (37) And they opened the gates of the fortress by night, and they took and led them forth into the desert by another way which the people knew not. And the four sons of Cambyses the inhabitants of the city of Memphis led back, and they made them ascend to the summit of the fortress and cut them in pieces and cast them to the base of the fortress where Cambyses was. (38) And when the soldiers of Cambyses saw this evil thing which the inhabitants of the city of Memphis had done, they were filled with wrath and warred against the city without mercy. (39) And they set up engines against it and destroyed the palaces of the kings, and they slew without mercy the children of the kings Muzab and Sufir and all the chiefs of the army which were found in the city . . .³⁹

39 Charles, *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu*, Book 51: 26–39.

In presenting these particular intertextual references, I have deliberately not incorporated any material from *futūḥ* works, Arabic history and historiography, or Coptic and Greek histories written substantially after the Arab conquests, the point being to establish a specifically 'Egyptian' presence for these motifs that can be seen to antedate the conquests rather than to follow these accounts through time. What is of interest here is how the account of Sayf's diversion of the Nile chimes with a very specific set of pretexts. The motif of the murder of the sons in conjunction with siege and conquest is, as far as I can determine, an unusual narrative convention in medieval Arabic historiography and popular literature.⁴⁰ Its occurrence at this particular point, when read in the light of the Cambyses intertext, makes meaningful the otherwise bizarre episode in *Sīrat Sayf* in which Sayf is forced to a halt by magical powers (at the southern border of the city, nonetheless) to witness the apparent beheading of his four sons in turn:

40 It may be relevant that the only similar example I have come across is in al-Ṭabarī's account of Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan's expedition against the Abyssinians, Al-Ṭabarī's account of Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan is primarily from Ibn Ishaq, but interjected into this is a second account, on the authority of Hishām ibn Muḥammad. In both accounts, although the expedition is instigated by Sayf's petition to the Persian ruler Chosroe, and Sayf does participate, it is led not by Sayf himself but by one of Chosroe's military commanders, a man named Wahriz. In Hishām ibn Muḥammad's account, the invading army of Persians and Yemenis agree to a temporary truce which is threatened when Wahriz's son rides into the Abyssinian encampment and is killed. Wahriz disowns his disobedient son ("Wahriz said to the messenger, 'Tell [them] that he was not my son, but only the son of a whore [*zāniyah*]; if he had been my son, he would have patiently waited and not broken the truce between us until it had come to an end' ") and has his corpse thrown on the ground, where it cannot be seen (Bosworth, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume v*, p. 246). What is even more interesting is that in this second account, it is Dhū Yazan who initially visits Chosroe to ask for his help in defeating the Abyssinians, rather than Sayf. Rather than agreeing to mount an expedition Chosroe stalls, and persuades Dhū Yazan to stay with his retinue while he decides. Dhū Yazan dies before Chosroe makes his mind up, and it is left to his son Sayf (once he has discovered his paternal identity, which in this version he is unaware of until he reaches manhood) to persuade the Persian ruler to mount an expedition (see Bosworth, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume v*, pp. 242–250). It may be mere coincidence, and Sayf does not figure as a character in the actual expedition (the war is between Wahriz and Masrīq), but in this second account we have a splitting of the Sayf role into the dead father and the living son who carries on, and wins, the conflict with the enemy. This chimes with the plot of both *Sīrat Sayf* and the Osirian subtext identified in chapter 2.

King Sayf's anguish and blindness [in the darkness and the din] increased, to the point that he could almost no longer tell which way was up or down.⁴¹ He had lost his senses, and existed as if absent [from this world]. Every hour seemed to last a thousand years, and each hour was filled with even more thunder and clamour, lightning and shrieks, but [Sayf and his army] pressed on, somehow, until they reached the southern boundary of the city of Miṣr. Then, the clamour intensified and King Sayf suddenly saw someone approaching. The stranger said to him, 'Here, this is your son Damar', and slaughtered him, then struck King Sayf with his [decapitated] head. Next, the stranger brought out Miṣr and did the same, and afterwards Būlāq, and then Naṣr. Sayf believed that everything he saw was real, and that this had really happened, and after seeing it came to a halt near a mountain called Birkat al-Siḥra or Buṭn al-Baqara ('The Belly of the Cow'), and when he stopped the flowing waters were held back behind him.⁴²

In mentioning this unusual beheading of the hero's sons, in association with the army's approach to the southern boundaries of the city, the more general Egyptian/Moses associations brought in by the image of the invader/Pharaoh/king riding (or sailing) up the Nile at the head of his troops is linked in more explicitly with these specifically Egyptian narratives relating to kingship and invasion. Thus, the reverse exodus identified by Chraïbi is a more complex and multi-dimensional intertextual reference than it initially seems.

Reading this particular intertextual presence into this subsection of *Sīrat Sayf* is supported by the occurrence of one further significant motif in the Nile Diversion episode: that of the enchanted brass cow which is placed in Sayf's path by Sabsabān and beyond which Sayf cannot pass. The identification of the cow with the golden calf of the Moses legend by Chraïbi is suggestive indeed. However, when read in terms of its narrative function in conjunction with the context of ancient Egyptian pretexts in general, and the Cambyses pretext in particular, it becomes a vehicle for much more complex associations. Religious veneration of cows and spontaneous production of cattle imagery played a very significant role in the religious culture of pre-Christian Egypt, and especially in the later period.⁴³ For example, as well as featuring Sobek, the crocodile god, the Book of the Faiyum has sections dedicated to the heavenly cow: the

41 Lit. 'whether he was on earth or in the skies'.

42 *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 3, p. 245.

43 For more on ancient Egyptian cattle worship, see Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*.

sky was often represented as the heavenly cow, with the solar barque beneath her front feet, and the falcon-headed sun god, Pharaoh, standing beneath her udders. In addition to the widespread worship of the heavenly cow, and the three major bull cults of Apis, Mnevis and Buchis (who were all heralds/oracles/partial incarnations of the gods), there were many other localised cattle cults in both the Delta and the Upper Nile. In later Egyptian religious beliefs, the Apis bull also gained particular prominence and was regarded as both a manifestation of the Pharaoh and, after its death, the embodiment of the god Osiris, Pharaoh being another manifestation of the god in human form.

But, most significantly for the discussion of the foundation of Egypt taking place in this episode of *Sīrat Sayf*, this identification of the Apis bull with Egyptian kingship is reflected in accounts of Cambyses invasion, particularly the Coptic version, which is strongly permeated with mention of the Apis bull. Throughout the text Apis is closely identified with both Egypt and its pharaoh (who, for example, writes to Cambyses introducing himself thus: "By the might of Pharaoh and by the honour of Egypt and our Lord Apis, the honour of the crown and the strength of the warriors . . ."44). Cambyses sends out envoys to Egyptian towns who purport to be from Pharaoh and summon the people to an 'Apis festival' in an attempt to trick Pharaoh into thinking his people are rising up against him.⁴⁵ In Herodotus' account of Cambyses invasion, the bull does not play such a significant role in the early stages, but we are told that one of Cambyses' biggest atrocities after his conquest of Egypt was his mortal wounding of the Apis bull. That he struck the bull in the thigh is an act highly reminiscent of Seth's act of aggression against the procreative abilities of both Osiris and Horus.⁴⁶ The destruction of sacred animals, who are often butchered and eaten, is a standard feature of the *Chaosbeschreibung* and it is tempting to see a link with the threats made in some of these pretexts to 'roast' the sons, and drink their blood. To the Ancient Egyptians, the burning of corpses was a desecration because it destroys the body; it is not clear if the eating of the sacred animal is an extension of this idea of desecration, or a different concept. This aspect of the *Chaosbeschreibung* might also be at work in other episodes in *Sīrat Sayf*, for example in the desecration of sacred animals by slaughtering, then cooking and eating them, which occurs in both the story of Sayf and Shāma's wedding night abduction and Damar's adventures in

44 Jansens, *The Coptic Story of Cambyses' Invasion of Egypt*, p. 64.

45 Jansens, *The Coptic Story of Cambyses' Invasion of Egypt*, p. 67. Luckily, the Egyptians are too wily to be deceived by this ruse.

46 Immediately after his victory over Psammenitus, in similar vein Cambyses desecrates the mummy of the dead pharaoh Amasis.

the City of the Chickens; it certainly makes sense of these otherwise baffling episodes. But, one can see a kind of re-enactment in the slaughter of the bull of the earlier killing of the kings' sons in the Cambyses account, which also has clear undertones of Osirian mythology, and the episode lends itself to reading Cambyses' attack on the bull (which later dies) as a symbolic representation of his attack on Egypt, or rather of his claim to the status of Pharaoh. It seems clear that in depicting Sayf as the only person able to overcome the talismanic power of the enchanted brass cow, by reciting his lineage, the *sīra* is presenting us with a complex image that conveys both rightful inheritance to the throne of Egypt, and, through intertextual links to the Cambyses narrative discourse, an apparently conflicting image of a symbolic act of conquest. I would also argue that the fact that *Sīrat Sayf* presents us with these two unusual motifs—the slaughter of the hero's sons at a point when his army has been brought to a halt at the city of Miṣr, and the brass cow that must be defeated—in the same order as in the Cambyses narrative can only be significant.

When this episode is explored in terms of an Egyptian intertext, therefore, what we are actually being presented with at this point in the *sīra* in the description of Sayf, the Yemeni, Muslim conqueror with all his Islamic prophetic talismans, amidst all the din and clamour of the battlefield (which is still present although the battle, or siege, itself has been written out of history), witnessing the decapitation of his sons at the hands of an unnamed adversary, and being stopped in his tracks by the enchanted brass cow, which only he can defeat, is a metaphorical depiction of the actuality of the Arab conquest of Egypt which draws on specific images and narrative conventions from earlier narratives. Through these references the story manages to allow the conflicting voices of conqueror and conquered to co-exist, so that the story, which ostensibly is an account of the peaceful foundation of a new proto-Islamic Egypt in virgin territory, is simultaneously a story of conquest and trauma. How we read the story depends on how we read the intertext: if we don't *know* the intertext, or if we only know one culturally-specific set of references, then our understanding of the story is at least coloured, if not potentially completely different. Chraïbi's reading of this episode as a reverse Exodus through the Islamic Moses intertext works, but this alternative reading also works and, significantly, when it comes to the reverse Exodus and the Hyksos pretexts especially, both tell essentially the same story, but from different points of view.⁴⁷

47 There are a number of reversals at work in this section: not only is the exodus a reverse exodus, but there are a number of reversals of gender: Nūt is male rather than female, the children of the Egyptian sorcerers Nūt and Saysabān are daughters rather than sons, the brass cow is a cow rather than a bull.

This 'Egyptian' reading also lends a further dimension to the Diversion subsection as a whole. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, during the course of this subsection the reader is presented with four vivid and very specific images of Egyptian intertextual significance: first, that of the magician Nūt and his star-domed city being invaded and conquered; second, that of Sayf's son's being killed before his eyes; third his encounter with the brass cow; and fourth, that of the magician Saysabān building the Nilometer as a protective talisman for the Muslim Egyptians. There is here a kind of symbolised progression in the way the *sīra* retells history which echoes that found by Richard van Leeuwen in his discussion of the 'City of Brass' story in the *Thousand and One Nights: Space, Travel and Transformation*.⁴⁸ In the first instance, we are presented with an image that depicts the Arab invasion and conquest of Egypt, in which Sayf lays siege to Madīnat Nūt, the native population resist and are conquered. In the second, the simulated murder of Sayf's sons amid the tumult and clamour of Saysaban's magic, we see a perhaps more immediate image of the wars of conquest, the battlefield and siege itself. This is followed, in the third, by the surrender of the Egyptians paralleled in the surrender of Saysabān and Sayf's 'conquest' of the brass cow; while the fourth image portrays the defeated Egyptian Saysabān as a fully assimilated and valued member of the new proto-Islamic Egyptian society, acting for the good of the collective unit. By the Roman period in Egypt, priests, who had traditionally wielded considerable control over royal authority and political discourse, and continued to play a significant role into the fourth and fifth centuries AD, had come to be identified as magicians, and it is tempting to read the characterisation of Nūt and Saysabān (especially in the light of the tendency for Sayf's advisors, such as Akhmīm al-Ṭālib and 'Āqila, to be sorcerers and magicians) as reflecting Egyptian conceptualisation of power structures of influence.⁴⁹ Whether one

48 Richard van Leeuwen, *The Thousand and One Nights: Space, Travel and Transformation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), chapter 4. To my knowledge, this aspect of Arabic popular literature has not really been explored further, but it may be a dynamic at work at a widespread level. It is worth noting, though, that 'The City of Brass' is generally regarded as being a late addition to the *Thousand and One Nights* corpus, and that it is, like the Egyptian variant of *Sirat Sayf* under discussion here, a text that is commonly regarded as containing a lot of 'Berber' elements and characteristics.

49 On the role of the priesthood in Egypt during the Roman period, see Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, pp. 198–237. The last records of priestly processions seem to date from the third century, but their social prestige seems to have continued into the fourth and even fifth centuries. As organised religion dwindled and their political and economic power weakened, local priests came to hold localised or personal authority. Their authority relied on their ability to provide the spells that would cure snake bites, ensure

agrees with this or not, the progression from Nūt, the demonised Egyptian outsider, to Saysabān, the integrated insider, are like snapshots that depict the various stages of the actual historical processes of invasion, war and assimilation taking place. What might seem to be fanciful entertainment is, at its core, dealing with harsh truths.

In terms of the thematic coherence of the intertextual network informing *Sīrat Sayf*, perhaps the most significant thing to note here is that the *sīra* seems to be giving us a retelling of history which conforms to a discourse that has been identified as fundamentally ancient Egyptian. This discourse, and the specific Cambyses and Hyksos intertexts at work in this central episode of the Nile Diversion, express the tensions of conquest and invasion, but also link in very neatly with the overall Osirian intertext of the themes of the 'reunion' of Upper and Lower Egypt and the foundation of a united dynasty and golden age discussed in chapter 3. Thus, when this climactic episode is read in terms of the connotations of the Egyptian intertext, we have an invasion that is not just an invasion, but also a foundation history. The intertextual subtext accords perfectly with the textual subtext, and also with the (more apparent and apparently conflicting) Islamic and Alexander intertexts with their respective connotations of exodus to a new homeland and conquest, which, at some level it helps to reconcile. As we will now see, the resonances of this interplay also have wider implications for the concepts of kingship, conflict and identity as explored in *Sīrat Sayf*.

Insiders and Outsiders: Noah's Curse, Bilqīs and Ḥabash

The function of intertexts, and specific motifs or images as providing room for different, sometimes opposing, voices in the text, in which it is possible to see a multi-faceted and complex sense of identity being expressed, can also be seen at work in a larger, global sense, in the Egyptian–Ḥabashī conflict. To demonstrate this, one only has to consider two intertextual presences discussed in chapter 2, Noah's curse and the role of Bilqīs. Both of these

fertility and provide curses, which transformed over time into the perception of them as possessing magical powers rather than control of the divine through their knowledge of the sacred texts. This, combined with a Graeco-Roman fascination with Egypt as the land of magic and magicians and the growth of Christianity (which scorned the ancient ways as 'animal worship'), led to the characterisation of priests as magicians, even though the actual culture they preserved lived on in writings in Hellenistic form as the urban priestly class were the literate transmitters of culture, well into the sixth century.

intertextual presences, as discussed in previous chapters, play an important part in providing plot framework and conveying theme, but they also have implications for the issues of identity reflected in the text which, I would argue, have connotations for how we perceive the *sīra* as a whole.

Turning first to Noah's curse: the basic framework of *Sīrat Sayf* rests on the theme of Ḥabashī-Yemeni territorial conflict. The story begins when Dhū Yazan's advisor, Yathrib, reveals the prediction that one of the king's line will implement Noah's curse—that Ham's descendents, the Ḥabashīs will be subjugated to the descendents of Sham, the Yemenis. It is this prediction, which sparks off all the action of the *sīra* when the Ḥabashī king, Sayf Ar'ad, is warned of it by one of his advisors, who prompts him to send Qamariyya to murder Dhū Yazan in an attempt to avert fate. Unfortunately, the very measures intended to prevent the implementation of the curse (inevitably) end up actually facilitating it.

The story of Noah's curse is told repeatedly in the first 30 pages of *Sīrat Sayf*. Once it has been established, the struggle between our hero Sayf and the forces who wish to prevent him from achieving his destiny provides the framework for all of the action, and it is repeatedly referred to as events progress. In addition to providing plot, the use of Noah's curse to underpin the plot also allows the *sīra* to abide by the genre convention that conflict is fundamentally fratricidal: that is, that the warring groups can trace themselves back to a common ancestry. Generally, where the convention has been studied in other *sīras*, this mutual ancestry is gradually uncovered during the course of events, and the final discovery of brotherhood may be read as symbolic of the final integration of victor and vanquished into one social unit. *Sīrat Sayf* varies from this, in that this mutual ancestry is introduced right at the beginning, rather than being gradually uncovered, and is used to different effect. It nuances the fratricidal aspect of the Ḥabashī-Yemeni conflict by defining it as racial, reflecting the historical reality in which the *sīra* is grounded, whilst placing the Yemenis in the moral, or religious, right through their descent from Shem. It allows the conflict to reach beyond the tribal to a cultural and global level by presenting all humanity as what is effectively a single tribal unit. As mentioned in a previous chapter, the emphasis placed on Noah's curse at the beginning of the story melds the essentially exclusionary concept of racial conflict with the universal, inclusionary concept of Sayf's world conquest in the name of Islam by providing a subtext on which both can rest. It is a device by means of which Sayf is able to transcend what has been described by Bridget Connelly as the essentially xenophobic reality of the *sīra* genre.⁵⁰

50 Vidal Luengo's reading of *Sīrat Baybars* comes to some similar conclusions about the *sīra* as a vehicle for a negotiating and discussing assimilation and the possibility of peaceful resolution to conflict (Vidal Luengo, 'Conflict Resolution in *Sīrat Baybars*').

All of this is undoubtedly the case: clearly, there is some kind of discussion going on about the actual history of conflict between Egypt and its southern neighbour, and Noah's curse is a device which allows Sayf to transcend to the universal. But, if one takes the view that the meanings being carried through the intertexts express more than one voice, that of the victor, a number of otherwise slightly odd things begin to make more sense. First, Sayf himself, always presented as a Yemeni hero, as his father's son, is actually only half Yemeni. His mother, Qamariyya, is African and arguably Ḥabashī—either way, she is one of the descendants of Ham and she is, as discussed in chapter 1, a real outsider in *sīra* terms.⁵¹ In terms of folkloric epic conventions, in which lineage is an essential aspect of character, this is a little puzzling. And yet, it makes complete sense that the founding father of Egypt is actually half Yemeni and half Ḥabashī if you read Qamariyya, and, in the same vein, Sayf Ar'ad, as representing, to some extent, the demonised aspects of Egyptian society and culture, the outsiders within rather than simply outsiders.⁵²

51 Tal Tamari has recently commented on the similar dynamic at work in the parentage of Sayf's sons. As she points out, Damar's mother is an Ethiopian (Shāma, the daughter of King Afrāḥ) and Misr's mother is from Indonesia. However, she comes to a very different conclusion about the significance of this: 'Pour certains Anciens beaucoup plus que pour les Modernes, le phénotype n'était-il qu'un trait superficiel?' (Tamari, 'Les oeuvres orientales', p. 234).

52 For a reading of the story of the Curse of Ham, which comes to some strikingly similar conclusions about the significance of this story as a device through which ideas of 'insiderdom' and 'outsiderdom' are expressed, but this time in terms of the establishment of the Biblical Judaeo-Christian narratives of identity, see Boer and Abraham's brief article 'Noah's Nakedness'. They posit a very similar narrative process at work to that which can be found here in *Sīrat Sayf*, in which the curse on Ham's son, Canaan, working in combination with the concept of the exodus, serves to 'other' the insider, creating a conceptual genealogical splitting which allows the rewriting of history: "... if we consider much of the recent work on the origins of [Biblical] Israel, then it becomes more and more clear that Israel arose out of a Canaanite context; or, rather, that Israel was part of a much larger Canaanite history. The evidence of early Israelite religion, culture and material practice indicates that it emerged from within Canaan and did not arrive, ethnically distinct, from afar. At a later time, when most of these texts were composed, drawing fragments from earlier oral and written traditions, it became much more important to retro-fit a distinct people into a 'history' that was all too often written from scratch. Rather than Israel being but one Canaanite group among many, Israel—in this complete retelling—becomes a people distinct from Canaan in every sense, ethnically, culturally, religiously, politically. And what better way to generate such an image of distinctness than by a narrative (the Exodus) that has them coming from outside? It is, in fact, an extraordinarily political myth" (pp. 463–464). They go on to say that 'the effort to expel the Other from within actually marks in its very contradiction the inescapable role of that Other in the identity sought by the means of expulsion' (p. 465).

In addition, it does potentially explain another of the things that otherwise seem confusing about *Sirat Sayf*: why it is that of the three main enemies that Sayf faces—his mother, the Ḥabashī King, and the infidel sorcerers—the text is at pains to absolve him of responsibility for the executions of the first two, again metaphorically papering over the uncomfortable historical reality. Both are killed by other characters in the text, without his permission, and, in the case of the latter especially, he is furious. He berates his son Damar at length, on the grounds that Sayf Arʿad was a noble and valiant warrior, and would have made a valuable friend and ally. According to the theory of self-correction, material in popular narratives that does not carry meaning is excised from the telling over time. What we have, therefore, is a text in which the boundaries between insider and outsider, brothers, friends and enemies are effectively blurred and dependent on the way that we read the intertexts. The subsection recounting the diversion of the Nile recasts the conquest as colonisation of previously virgin territory. However, rather than presenting a univocal vision of history and events, the narrative recasts the uncomfortable reality of invasion and conquest without actually rewriting it: the actual, traumatic and cataclysmic, story of invasion remains hidden beneath the surface, only accessible to those who know the Egyptian stories. In the same way, it is possible to read the Ḥabashī–Yemeni power struggle as reflecting an expression of the trauma of conquest and the subsequent process of assimilation which has been projected outwards onto its southern neighbour. The true enemies *are* undoubtedly the pagan, infidel magicians whose executions end the story, and Ḥabash *is* conquered, but it seems undeniable that what the story is giving us is not just a xenophobic, expansionist account of the foundation of an empire, but also an inward-looking, dialogic, multi-vocal expression of the trauma of the conquest and ‘Arabisation’ of Egypt.

This raises the question of another set of intertexts not discussed in this study, namely Ethiopian Christian and Egyptian Coptic narratives and traditions. These lie beyond the scope of this study, but, it seems clear that in addition to the dimensions that have been addressed here—the use of the conquest of Ḥabash to give expression to the trauma of the Islamic conquests in such a way that it is distanced, and rendered less traumatic—there is some kind of discussion taking place of the actual friction between these two cultural entities. It is evident that *Sirat Sayf* references the Solomon intertext in a very specific way, through the figure of Bilqīs, the Queen of Sheba, who is consistently presented in the context of her marriage to Solomon. The stories recounted about her all figure her as Solomon’s wife, and Sayf’s quest to Solomon’s treasury, in which she has left her wedding clothes and crown for him as heroic

heirlooms, looms large in the narrative and provides the framework for the entire second section. The Islamic Solomon intertext serves partly as a device through which to discuss Sayf's fitness to rule, his Solomonic qualities, but there is a tension in the identification of Sayf as a descendent of Solomon and Bilqīs both. It is the Queen of Sheba, after all, from whom Sayf inherits his heroic heirlooms, so it might be argued that he is her heir rather than Solomon's. It can surely be no coincidence that the *Kəbrä Nəgäst*, the Ethiopian national epic, relates the story of the descent of the Ethiopian kings from the son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.⁵³ In this, the Queen of Sheba conceives a son during her visit to Solomon and later sends him as an adolescent to learn from his father. He returns to Ethiopia with the ark of the covenant, in what has, coincidentally, recently been described as a 'reverse exodus'.⁵⁴ This is another story of the foundation of a divinely sanctioned dynasty bringing the light of true faith into the world which, like *Sīrat Sayf*, seems to have reached recognisable form as a national epic some time between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries (although it is thought to have been in circulation possibly as early as the first century AD in some form, and there were certainly Coptic versions of related stories in circulation in the seventh century). The Queen is another figure who, like Alexander the Great and Sayf, seems to be a conduit through which the assimilation of external culture is expressed. This ties in neatly with the focus on the figure of Bilqīs in Middle Eastern, and specifically Yemeni and Egyptian, popular histories and literature, in which figures such as Bilqīs and Zenobia, are, as here in *Sīrat Sayf*, vehicles through which issues of social order and chaos, and fitness to rule, are discussed.

This conceptualisation of Sayf as being somehow both 'Arab' and 'Ḥabashī', when viewed as the progeny of a Yemeni, Muslim father and a Ḥabashī mother,

53 There has been very little work undertaken on the *Kəbrä Nəgäst* in Western academia. For an introduction to the *Kəbrä Nəgäst* which provides an overview of the history and significance of this epic, see Wendy Laura Belcher, 'African Rewritings of the Jewish and Islamic Solomonic Tradition: The Triumph of the Queen of Sheba in the Ethiopian Fourteenth-Century Text *Kəbrä Nəgäst*' in Roberta Serman Sabbath (ed.), *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur'an as Literature and Culture*, Biblical Interpretation Series, 98 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 441–459. Although I find her characterisation of the depiction of the Queen in the Qur'an and Islamic sources as 'foolish, humiliated, and powerless' (p. 448) a bit reductive, her discussion of the characterisation of the Queen in the *Kəbrä Nəgäst* is valuable.

54 By Belcher, in 'African Rewritings', pp. 453–454.

is paralleled by the characterisation of Alexander in ‘Alexander’ stories. Alexander’s paternal identity, as has been remarked by Doufekar-Aerts, changes depending upon who is telling the story: to some, he is Egyptian, to others Persian.⁵⁵ Sayf, through his connection with Bilqīs throughout the Wedding Quest section in which he is the heir to whom Bilqīs leaves her talismanic treasures, might very well be seen as being identified with the Ethiopian Bilqīs’ son Menelik at some level. This identification within the text with being the son of Bilqīs (and, by implication, Solomon) chimes with the other identifications with sons of prophets which has been remarked on earlier in this volume, and which can be seen in the various talismans Sayf requires to divert the Nile in the course of the climactic episode discussed in this chapter. All of these are inherited from the sons of prophets, rather than from the prophets themselves.

The story of Menelik’s mother, Solomon’s wife, begins, according to Ethiopian legend, with her being offered to the dragon (as at the beginning of the ‘Night of the Drop’ and the ‘Mari Girgis’ stories discussed in chapter 3). She was saved, and went on to marry Solomon. As Canova points out in his brief discussion of ‘The Dragon-Slayer’ story type (AT 300) in South Arabian Bānī Ḥilāl stories, “the motif of the fight with the king-dragon and its murder represents the myth of Ethiopia’s foundation”.⁵⁶ This is relevant to my reading of *Sīrat Sayf* here in that, in terms of a ‘Habashī’ order-chaos intertext, the Ethiopian Bilqīs intertext resonates consistently with the thematic progression from the ancient Egyptian ‘Contendings’ theme that dominates the first section of the *sīra*, to the marital conflict theme of its second part. At a global level

55 See Doufekar-Aerts, ‘Alexander Made History, Whereas Historians Made Alexander’. Doufekar-Aerts remarks that it is strange that an ancient Greek King should become the hero of an Arabic epic, and also raises the issue of Alexander’s changing parentage. She explicitly rejects the notion that Alexander was incorporated into the lineage of the Persian kings due to ‘Persian-nationalist sentiments’ and takes the view that Alexander is Persianised simply because the Persian kings were better-known to their audience than ‘the much more obscure Macedonian dynasty’ (pp. 99–100). I would argue that, as with Sayf’s identity, Alexander’s paternal identity is actually crucial in that it reflects the cultural appropriation of the world-hero and the rewriting of history that can be seen at work in *Sīrat Sayf*; and that, given this, it is definitively a result of nationalist sentiment (inasmuch as it is appropriate to apply this term to a premodern text): his ‘Persianisation’ seems to me to be absolutely the same process at work as can be seen in the rewriting of Egyptian history in *Sīrat Sayf* (and, in the claims to Sayf as founding father of North-African dynasties in Kanem, and the ‘domesticisation’ of Cambyses in the Herodotus account in which his mother is the daughter of the displaced Egyptian pharaoh).

56 Giovanni Canova, ‘Hilali Narratives from Southern Arabia’, *Oriente Moderno* 22(83): 2 (2003), pp. 361–375, at p. 367.

it seems to provide a neat fit that interacts with the other intertexts that have been addressed here. It is also worth noting that one of the artifacts needed by Sayf to divert the Nile, the talisman of Kūsh ibn Kin‘ān, is associated with the name of a figure who is commonly linked with the paternity of the Ḥabasha, a term which refers to the historical realm which covered the geographic area of both Ethiopia and Egypt.

Given the significance of the Queen of Sheba in terms of Ethiopian culture and literature, as well as Yemeni tradition, not to mention the nature of the heirlooms involved, it does not seem far-fetched to read into this intertext the existence of a broader level of dialogue on social and cultural frictions and assimilation which works at a more regional level, encompassing Southern Arabia, Ḥabash and Egypt.⁵⁷ Although these three geographic areas have long been separate political entities, they have a venerable history of trade and cultural links. What is more, the fluctuating borders of Ḥabash have incorporated large swathes of South Arabia and Egypt at various times. This territorial conflict is discussed in *Sīrat Sayf* in terms of the territorial conflict over Madīnat al-Ḥamrā’, and between the Ḥabashīs and the Yemenis, but also through intertexts such as the ancient Egyptian stories of the expulsion of the Hyksos. If this level of dialogue is indeed present (as would seem very likely), not only might it further contradict assumptions that the *sīra* as a literary form is fundamentally univocal and xenophobic, but it would also suggest that we should be wary of seeing strict divisions between ‘Arab’ and ‘African’ when discussing the medieval Islamic world of Egypt, and that we should likewise be cautious of the current tendency in Islamic studies to view the cultural and religious history of the Arabian Peninsula solely through the lens of the Judeo-Christian and ancient Near Eastern traditions. Looking west to Africa is also important.

I hope that during the course of this study it has become clear that a primary function of this variant of *Sīrat Sayf* is its discussion of social and cultural tensions, effected through the subtextual, intertextual dialogue that runs through the narrative as a coherent thread. Because the various intertexts which occur in *Sīrat Sayf* are fused in a culturally specific way, some concluding points about the socio-cultural identity expressed in *Sīrat Sayf* are in order. The first point is that the worldview that Sayf encapsulates is an essentially dualistic one, expressed through gender specific imagery whereby order and chaos are

57 On Bilqīs in Southern Arabian legendary history, see Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*; Belcher, ‘African Rewritings’; and Elias, ‘Prophecy, Power and Propriety’. Toy briefly discusses the geographical spread of her story and the possibility of the existence of a South Arabian/Ethiopian oikotype in his ‘The Queen of Sheba’, pp. 211–212.

symbolised by the male and female and conflict is depicted in sexual terms. This is a characteristically Egyptian worldview that is not found, for example, in ancient Mesopotamian ideas of kingship (which is especially interesting because Mesopotamia is the birthplace of Anahit, the ancient goddess who can be found in the Persian 'Alexander'). Ancient Egyptian narrative conventions and tropes can also be seen deep in the thematic subtext, where they act as the narrative bedrock upon which the *sīra* is built. Thus, although *Sīrat Sayf* appears superficially to be the story of the establishment of an Arab/Islamic order, it is just as much the story of the assimilation of this order into ancient socio-cultural beliefs.

The second point relates to genre. As mentioned in the Introduction, there is an ongoing discussion in scholarship about how to classify the various *sīras*, one which is complicated by the varying views of what constitutes an epic in different academic disciplines. Previous academic writing within the field of *sīra* studies and Arabic premodern popular literature have often described *Sīrat Sayf* as a 'romance', however the variant addressed here can clearly be defined as a popular epic, on the basis that epic material is perceived to arrive at an assertion of identity through the discussion and exploration of "group identity, core values of the society in question, models of heroic conduct and human endeavour, [and] symbolic structures of history and mythology".⁵⁸ In addition, the significant role that intertexts can be seen to play in *Sīrat Sayf* has implications for genre identity that go beyond the borders of the *sīra* genre: in his recent discussion of ancient epic, Richard Martin has remarked that "The audiences for both [the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*] surely obtained additional meanings from the way in which these poems drew on material with an oblique connection to their more obvious 'heroic' themes . . . Such a lateral, relational approach might even lead us at this point to formulate a further definition of [epic as] genre: a set of allowable intertexts (oral or written), embracing all those compositions that communicate through consistent mutual allusivity."⁵⁹ Although he is commenting here on the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the two canonical, literary, epics of the West, he suggests that this functional reliance of the epic on intertexts occurs at a cross-cultural, global level.

By associating the Yemeni Muslims' arrival in Egypt and the foundation of an Islamic empire with the golden age of Egyptian pre-history and the essentially universal and culturally embedded mythology of Osiris, *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* expresses a popular vision of the history of Egypt in which historical

58 See Honko, 'Epic and Identity', p. 21.

59 Martin, 'Epic as Genre', p. 14. This is partly, as he points out on p. 17, a result of the fact that the epic is a form which often incorporates folktales, legends and myths in its telling.

reality has been re-written to incorporate the changing social structure and culture of medieval Egypt. On the basis of the intertexts discussed here, it seems undeniable that this particular text is one of a larger tradition of *Sīrat Sayf* narratives which arose as an expression of the social trauma of the amalgamation of 'Arab' Egyptian cultures in the centuries after the Arab Conquests, i.e. that it explores the tensions between the indigenous Egyptian population and their imported ruling classes of the medieval period—first the Fatimids, then the Mamluks. This would be fully in accordance with the concept that “folklore tends to cluster around times of anxiety, be it in the individual life-cycle or the calendrical cycle of the entire community”,⁶⁰ and also reflects ideas of folklore and popular literature as being forums for dialogic debate about beliefs and worldviews, “the meeting place of two warring voices, expressing opposed opinions on the existence of a reported phenomenon”.⁶¹

Harry Norris has stated that “Heroic tales of the exploits of Sayf, also named Abu Murra and Ma'dikarib, were current as early as the beginning of the eighth century amongst Yemenite story tellers and men of letters.”⁶² On the basis of character (and place) names, historical events, and medieval texts, he dates the 'current' Egyptian *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* to between 1400 and 1600 AD, some eight hundred years after the Arab invasion of Egypt, and asserts that its nature is essentially Mamluk. The lack of written evidence, however, of an earlier Egyptian *Sīrat Sayf* clearly does not mean that it did not previously exist in a recognisable oral or written form. Likewise, its reliance on medieval names and its 'Mamluke' 'atmosphere of fairyland' do not in any way prove that it was 'created' in its final form during this period. Its preoccupation with magic, kingship and religion has as much to do with the legacy of Egyptian myth, legend and folklore as it does with medieval Muslim Egyptian culture. It goes without saying that although assimilation may have been a relatively swift process in the upper echelons and bureaucracy of society, cultural

60 Dundes, 'Structuralism and Folklore', p. 194.

61 Lindahl, 'Psychic Ambiguity at the Legend Core', p. 1. Both of these conclusions are mirrored in Peter Heath's comments on the use of 'history' in *Sīrat Antar*, about which he says: 'Each event portrays a particular level of straightforward binary opposition, i.e. conflict and resolution of conflict . . . The cultural themes involved are less simplistic. The *Sīra* interweaves into its narration a multifaceted web of historical and cultural evocations of unresolved conflicts and divisions, whether social, racial, tribal, generational, or even—indirectly—religious. Viewed as a whole, the result appears more thematically intricate and sophisticated than it might appear at first sight' (Heath, 'Antar Hangs His Mu'allāqa', pp. 16–17). It would seem that there is a distinct possibility that this use of dualism as an apparently simplistic narrative device to facilitate a complex, multi-vocal historico-cultural discussion, may hold true across the *sīra* genre.

62 Norris, 'Sayf b. Dhī Yazan', p. 126.

integration and assimilation at a more general level is a long, slow, drawn-out process which takes place over centuries rather than decades. Given this, a linkage between the ancient Egyptian Osiris, Alexander and the Muslim, Yemeni king Sayf invests the *sīra* with authority and heroic credibility from the point of view of both Egyptian and Arab cultures as they come together, and it fuses their mythologies by assimilation.

There are, however, further dimensions to the dialogue taking place in *Sīrat Sayf*, which can be seen to express social tensions and conflict between the various internal social groups: for example the peoples of Upper and Lower Egypt, not to mention those between the external socio-cultural groups of Egypt and Ḥabash, as they interact.⁶³ The central concerns of the *sīra* genre are, as mentioned in the introduction, the anxieties and hopes of the social unit and that unit's struggle to maintain its integrity. In accordance with ideas about the epic genre as an expression of national sentiment (as an extension of its preoccupation with the social unit), *Sīrat Sayf* expresses this tension between the 'self' and the 'other' in a way that both discusses and addresses the tensions and aspirations of all parties concerned. In this context, it is tempting to see further correspondences of a wider significance to the worldview expressed in *Sīrat Sayf* in the triadic relationships that inform character, specifically in the ways that these key relationships explore issues of race and colour: the white, Arab Sayf's fraternal conflict with the black, Ḥabashī Sayf Ar'ad and his parental conflict with his black, African mother Qamariyya are mirrored in the triadic relationships of the various pretexts which put Shem, the ancestor of 'the whites' up against Ham the ancestor of 'the blacks'; Osiris, the god of the (white) lands of Egypt against Seth the god of the (black) lands beyond; and Alexander, Greek and/or Egyptian king against Darab, the Persian ruler.⁶⁴

63 The aspect of internal socio-cultural conflict in *Sīrat Sayf* would appear to be more prominent in the British Museum ms studied by Klar, in which Sayf wages war against Assiut and Aswan, the leaders of a group of Palestinians who have migrated to and settled in Southern Egypt. See Klar, 'A Study of Ms BM 4274 Or.', pp. 17–19.

64 Although Sayf is of mixed race, the text consistently presents him as 'his father's son', that is as a (white) Yemeni Arab. The significance of his paternal lineage is stressed throughout, it is reciting this that gives him access to the various treasures and heirlooms, and it is a powerful weapon against magical foes (see, for example, the discussion of the Diversion of the Nile below). Sayf's physical similarity to his father is also stressed throughout. Thus, for example, when Sayf is recognised by Qamariyya (by the necklace he wears) and she tells her advisors of his return, they assure her that they will recognise him immediately by the mole on his cheek and by his physical resemblance to his father, their former master. Upon being introduced to him, they recognise him immediately. See *Sīrat Sayf*, vol. 1, pp. 203–4.

It is largely through this interplay between text and intertext that the subtext is able to give expression to the more realistic aspects of conflict in a *sīra* which ostensibly deals almost exclusively in the fantastic. These intertexts bridge the gap between the real and the imaginary. They allow the *sīra* to address the reality of tensions between Egypt and its southern neighbour, and to express a sense of the deep-rooted Egyptian concept of itself as a unity versus the outside world. Simultaneously, they acknowledge and address the tensions that exist within Egyptian society. In the process they give voice to a popular history that obliquely encompasses the ancient Egyptian past, the division of the Middle East between the Byzantine and Sassanian empires prior to the Arab conquests, and the medieval, Islamic, Arab Egypt which followed them.

Appendix: Glossary of Principal Characters

Abū Tāj	An initially friendly king who gives Sayf and Shāma refuge after they have been cast out into the wilderness on Qamariyya's orders. He becomes infatuated by Shāma and she and Sayf have to flee for their lives.
Afrāḥ	A vassal king of Sayf Ar'ad, Shāma's father and Sayf's foster father. Sayf is brought up at his court after he is abandoned by Qamariyya in the desert and found by a hunter. Afrāḥ protects his foster son from Saqardīs and Saqardiyūn while he is an infant, and switches his loyalties to Sayf following Sayf and Shāma's marriage.
Akhmīm al-Ṭālib	The magician guardian of Ham's treasury, who helps Sayf in his acquisition of the Sword of Shem and Ayrūd's <i>lūḥ</i> (talisman). He is the father of al-Jīza, whom Sayf later marries. Akhmīm becomes one of Sayf's main advisors.
Āqila	The leader of the sorcerers who guard the Book of the Nile, which is kept in the city of Qaymar. She safeguards Sayf and helps obtain the Book, having foreseen that her daughter, Ṭāma, will marry him. Thereafter she becomes one of Sayf's most influential allies and advisors until the Hunt section, when her role diminishes.
Āqiṣa	The jinn daughter of al-Malik al-Abyad (the White King) and Umm Āqiṣa, the King and Queen of the Qāf mountains. She is Sayf's jinn foster sister (as her mother took the infant Sayf in and nursed him) and, although she has a somewhat stormy nature, is his closest ally in the first two sections of the <i>sīra</i> . At the end of the Wedding Quest section she marries 'Ayrūd with whom she has a son, 'Ufāsha, and two daughters, and retires to the realm of the jinn.
Āṣaf ibn Barakhyā	A long-dead advisor to the Prophet Solomon, he bequeathes his sword to Sayf as an heroic heirloom, and also advises Solomon and Bilqīs that in the future Sayf will have need of Bilqīs' wedding robes and the jinn al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad.
'Aṭamṭam	A mighty warrior to whom Sayf is sent for training in the martial arts as a youth. Although he throws Sayf out after becoming jealous of his abilities, he later becomes one of Sayf's entourage and crops up from time to time in battle scenes.
'Ayrūd	Son of the Red King of the jinn. Sayf's jinn servant, he is enslaved to a <i>lūḥ</i> (talisman) left to Sayf by Shem in Ham's treasury, along

- with the sword of Shem. He becomes a close friend and ally of Sayf. After a troubled courtship he marries 'Āqiṣa and they depart to live in the Qāf mountains, the realm of the jinn. He and 'Āqiṣa have one son, 'Ufāsha, and two daughters.
- Bahrām al-Mājūsī An evil magician who needs one of Sayf's sons in order to retrieve the seven-sided jewel of Kūsh ibn Kin'an and captures them all in turn, leading them into the stories of their own adventures. He is killed by Miṣr and is the father of Ṭāwūsa, one of Naṣr's wives.
- Barnūkh The leader of 80 fire-worshipping sorcerers who live on the Mountain of Fire and intend to sacrifice Sayf to the flames. He recognises the truth of Islam and rescues Sayf from death at the hands of his fellow magicians. Following this he becomes one of his most valued allies.
- Būlāq Sayf's fourth son, by his wife Takrūr.
- Dajwa Sayf Ar'ad's daughter, a warrior princess. She falls in love with Sayf's son Naṣr when he is captured by Sayf Ar'ad, following Naṣr's escape from 'Abīd al-Nār, and helps him escape. The couple are married after al-Khiḍr converts her to Islam.
- Damar Sayf's first son (with Shāma); short-tempered, impetuous and volatile.
- Damariyāt Naṣr and Ṭāwūsa's son, a staunch ally of the Muslim cause and powerful magician who inherits the magical skills and knowledge of his maternal grandfather, Bahrām al-Mājūsī.
- Dhū Yazan al-Jīza Sayf's father, king of the Yemeni migrants.
- Daughter of Akhmīm al-Ṭālib. Initially hostile to Sayf, she marries him, gives birth to Naṣr, and then all but disappears from the *sīra*.
- Miṣr Sayf's third son, by Muniyat al-Nufūs. He is the stable, dependable son, and inherits the throne of Egypt from his father at the end of the *sīra*.
- Muniyat al-Nufūs Sayf's second great romantic love and his favourite wife, the Queen of the City of Women. She is captured by Sayf when he steals her magic, feathered cloak that allows her to fly. She bears Sayf's third son, Miṣr. Immediately after Qamariyya's death she tricks Ṭāma into getting her feathered cloak back from Sayf and escapes home to the City of Women where she is imprisoned by her sister, Nūr al-Hudā, who has taken her throne. Sayf rescues her and reunites the inhabitants of the City of Women and City of Men. After this, she disappears from the narrative.

- Nāhid The daughter of the King of China, Sayf rescues her from imprisonment by a *mārid* (a type of ferocious jinn) early on in the *sīra*. She is Sayf's first convert and becomes his wife when she later turns up at Madīnat al-Ḥamrā'. Qamariyya tricks her into betraying Sayf (by stealing the talismanic gazelle-skin girdle that protects him) on their wedding night, leaving him vulnerable to his mother's attack. The attempt on Sayf's life is foiled by Ṭāma, who kills Nāhid with her sword.
- Naṣr Sayf's second son, by al-Jīza. He is beautiful, effete and irresistible to women. He marries Sayf Ar'ad's daughter, Dajwa, and Ṭawūsa, the daughter of Bahrām al-Mājūsī, a magician killed by Miṣr. Naṣr and Ṭawūsa have a son, Damariyāt, who inherits Bahrām's magical skills.
- Nūr al-Hudā Munyat al-Nufūs' identical twin sister, Queen of the City of Women following Munya's abduction by Sayf. She imprisons Munya when she escapes Sayf and returns home. After leading the forces of opposition to Sayf during his mission to rescue Munya, she is eventually married off to one of Sayf's allies.
- Nūt A sorcerer-king who rules a city in Egypt of his name.
- Qamariyya Sayf's mother, an African slave sent by Sayf Ar'ad to poison Dhū Yazan, she marries him instead. Following Dhū Yazan's suspicious death during her pregnancy with Sayf, she initially tries to kill him and then abandons him in the desert and takes her husband's throne for herself. She and Sayf are reunited when he becomes an adult, after which she repeatedly tries to do away with him. She is eventually killed by 'Āqiṣa for her treachery.
- al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad 'The Black Devourer'—a fearsome jinn imprisoned by Solomon in one of the columns of a palace built for Bilqīs, the Queen of Sheba. He is needed by Sayf to break up the new course of the River Nile during its diversion, for which he demands 'Āqiṣa's hand in marriage. Al-Rahaṭ al-Aswad is eventually defeated in combat by 'Ayrūd.
- Ṣabīḥa One of Sayf's wives, the daughter of a Bedouin leader, al-Ṣabāḥ.
- Sa'dūn al-Zanjī The leader of a group of bandits. He becomes Sayf's ally early on in the *sīra* after Sayf defeats him in single combat when, as dowry for Shāma's hand, he is ordered by Saqardiyūn to fetch his head. He plays a role in combat scenes throughout the rest of the *sīra*.
- Saqardīs Infidel magician who, along with his brother Saqardiyūn, is Sayf's arch enemy. The two are advisors to the Ḥabashī king, Sayf Ar'ad, and are behind every plot against Sayf.

Saqardiyūn	Infidel magician who, along with his brother Saqardīs, is Sayf's arch enemy. The two are advisors to the Ḥabashī king, Sayf Ar'ad, and are behind every plot against Sayf.
Sayf Ar'ad	King of Ḥabash.
Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan	King of the Yemenis. Hero of the <i>sīra</i> .
Shāma	Sayf's first wife, and mother of his eldest son, Damar. The daughter of King Afrāḥ, she is a warrior princess who accompanies Sayf on his first main adventure, to kill Sa'dūn al-Zanjī as dowry for her hand. She is abducted alongside Sayf on their wedding night, by Qamariyya, and is party to a series of adventures in the first section of the <i>sīra</i> . After they return to Madīnat al-Ḥamrā' and Sayf marries Munyat al-Nufūs she virtually disappears from the narrative.
Takrūr	Daughter of the King of Zanj, she marries Sayf and is the mother of Būlāq, the youngest of his sons. She and her son are abducted by al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā' and dumped in the desert, where an oasis is created in response to Takrūr's prayers for water. They are later encountered by the Muslims, on their exodus from Madīnat al-Ḥamrā', and the city of Miṣr is founded at this site.
Ṭāma	Daughter of 'Āqila, Sayf's sorceress ally. She is fiercely independent and jealous, and threatens to kill any wives that Sayf marries before her, and kills Nāhid when she betrays him. She plays a large role in the Qamariyya section, until her marriage to Sayf and Qamariyya's death, after which she virtually disappears from the story.
Ṭāwūsa	The daughter of Bahrām al-Mājūsī. Naṣr and Ṭāwūsa meet when she demands the head of one of Miṣr's relatives as her dowry, and Naṣr is captured for her. Unfortunately for her then suitor, she falls in love with Naṣr at first sight and elopes with him. Naṣr and Ṭāwūsa have a son, Damariyāṭ, who inherits Bahrām's magical skills.
al-Thurayyā al-Ḥamrā'	A wise and beautiful queen encountered by Sayf on his travels, who instantly falls in love with him. She and her ugly, evil cousin al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā' go to war over him.
al-Thurayyā al-Zarqā'	Evil and ugly cousin of al-Thurayyā al-Ḥamrā' who, like her cousin, falls in love with Sayf. She has him abducted, transformed into a crow, and hidden in a garden while she does battle with al-Thurayyā al-Ḥamrā' over him. She is defeated by Sayf's allies, who come to his rescue.

- ‘Ufāsha The son of ‘Āqīṣa and ‘Ayrūḍ. He has a removable third hand attached to his chest, which he can transform into anything he pleases. He is a cunning and powerful trickster character who engineers Sayf’s world conquests from a desire to see Islam spread throughout the world. In return for his loyalty he demands, and receives, sovereignty over the jinn. At the end of the *sīra* he marries a jinn princess, Danahsha, and retires to life in the Qāf mountains, the domain of the jinn.
- Umm al-Ḥayā’ The daughter of the *muqqadam* Sābik al-Thālath, one of Sayf’s allies, who is given to Sayf as a wife. She plays a very minor role.
- Umm ‘Āqīṣa Wife of the jinn king al-Malik al-Abyad and mother of ‘Āqīṣa. She breastfeeds the infant Sayf when she comes across him in the desert, following his exposure there by Qamariyya, and fosters him until he is weaned.
- Yathrib Prototypical wise, Muslim vizier to Dhū Yazan. He has wisdom from the ancient books and knows of the coming of Muhammad.

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