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Introduction to volume one

The Moving Finger writes and having writ
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line.

In the isolation of its individual components, the past may have the immutability credited it by Omar Khayyam, but as a collective it is plastic. Its dullest recorder must lend it some shape of his own by selection or emphasis, while for analysts the search for pattern transforms static record into a dynamism that affects the present and may foreshadow the future, 'within the terms of human nature'.

For all that it is claimed in the *Odyssey* that the 'newest song' wins most praise, its own chosen subject, 'the renown of men', is set in the past. The antiquity of their material is noted as a matter of pride by authors of the Chansons de Geste, and its marmoreal authority is a source of pride to the compiler of the *Vilhjalms Saga*, who claims that his story 'was compiled by Master Homer . . [and] found on the stone wall of Babylon the great'. This is the setting for hero legend and heroic literature in general.

With regard to Arabic, the hero cycles have been overshadowed by *The Arabian Nights*. In Cassell's *Encyclopedia of World Literature* the space devoted to this collection is slightly longer than that given to all the rest of Arabic literature put together. The European triumph of the *Nights* represents a remarkable achievement in the history of translation. The imaginative patterns of the Arabic combined the exotic and the universal in easily transplanted forms, which have prospered through their transference to different idioms. In the aftermath of this success, interest in Arabic heroic narrative was stunted. In the early nineteenth century Terrick Hamilton translated part of the cycle attached to the great pre-Islamic warrior and poet, 'Antar. When 'Antar's monotonous invincibility failed to produce sympathy or interest, it may have seemed that cycles attached to a single hero were less attractive than the constant changes of setting, mood, and incident in a collection of stories. This, in turn, has helped to obscure the importance of the narratives presented here which, because of the shared heroic background, are arguably of broader significance than *The Arabian Nights* in terms of comparative literature, and which also show clearer evidence of linked patterns of perception than can be found in disconnected stories.

If the telling of tales is accepted as a universal phenomenon, it is not surprising that their dating and development defy exact scholarship. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the

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Egyptian story of the Two Thieves can be provided with *floruit* dates but the origin of their ingredients and the paths of their transmission are largely matters of guess-work. Similarly, in Arabia we hear of Persian stories introduced by al-Naḍr b. al-Ḥārith, to distract his contemporaries from listening to the preaching of Muḥammad. Pre-Islamic heroes, such as ʻAntar, are dateable, but the dimensions of time and space in the fictional worlds into which they are transplanted are obscure, as are the processes by which their fame spread beyond their own contexts. Here it is, of course, easy to draw valid distinctions between the different phenomena of heroic narrative, Milesian tales and wonder literature, but it may be noted that an early reference by the thirteenth-century writer, Ibn Saʻīd al-Andalusī, links different strands of what is basically oral literature by coupling *The Arabian Nights* with stories of al-Baṭṭāl, one of the major heroes of the *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma.*

It can be assumed that, at least until recent times, the externals of the transmission of this literature in the Arab world showed little change. Sir Richard Burton has left a description of what was in his day a typical open-air recitation: 'Here the market-people form a ring about the reciter, a stalwart man affecting little raiment besides a broad waist-belt into which his lower chiffons are tucked, and noticeable only for his shock hair, wild eyes, broad grin and generally disreputable aspect. He usually handles a short stick; and, when drummer and piper are absent, he carries a tiny tomtom shaped like an hour-glass, upon which he taps the periods. This Scealuidhe, as the Irish call him, opens the drama with extempore prayer, proving that he and the audience are good Moslems: he speaks slowly and with emphasis, varying the diction with breaks of animation, abundant action and the most comical grimace: he advances, retires and wheels about, illustrating every point with pantomime; and his features, voice and gestures are so expressive that even Europeans who cannot understand a word of Arabic divine the meaning of his tale. The audience stands breathless and motionless surprising strangers by the ingenuousness and freshness of feeling hidden under their hard and savage exterior. The performance usually ends with the embryo actor going round for alms.'

Edward Lane introduced English readers not only to the performers but to the heroic cycles themselves. In his *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* he wrote: 'The Egyptians are not destitute of better diversions . . .: reciters of romances frequent the principal kahwehs (or coffee-shops) of Cairo and other towns, particularly on the evenings of religious festivals, and afford attractive and rational entertainments.' Amongst the entertainers, Lane listed the 'Shoʻera' (poets), who recited the 'Seeret Aboo-Zeyd' (the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*), the 'Mohadditeen' (story-tellers), who confined themselves to the 'Seeret Ez-Zahir' (Baibars), and the 'Anatireh', who specialised in the *Sīrat ʻAntar*. Of these latter he wrote: 'All of them, I am told, occasionally relate stories from a romance called "Seeret el-Mugahideen" ("The History of the Warriors"), or, more commonly, "Seeret Delhemeh"' (*Dhāt al-Himma*). 'A few years since, they frequently recited from the romance of "Saif Zu-l-Yezen"'(*Saif b. Dhī'l-Yazan*). To these cycles, the present study adds the histories of al-Zīr, Fīrūz Shāh, ʻAlī al-Zaibaq, Ḥamzat al-Pahlawān, and Saif al-Tījān.

From the time of the Homeridae, the 'singers of embroidered words', such reciters, together with their techniques of performance as well as of composition or adaptation,

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have been familiar to students of literature. In his introduction the translator of *The Lay of Alha* notes: 'These Alha Ganewalas, as they are called, make it their profession to recite the Alh-khand, handed down to them from generation to generation by their predecessors . . . It now presents the singular appearance of a poem composed in the twelfth century, yet containing such English words as "pistol", "bomb" and "Sappers and Miners".' As for narrative ingredients, we read in Tschizewskij's account of Russian literature: 'So kreuzen sich im Igor-Lied die verschiedenartigsten Elemente der altrussischen Literatur: von der "militärischen Novelle" bis zur Bibel. Und daneben greift das Igor-Lied der Stilistik des späteren ukrainischen Volkslieds vor.' *The Ozidi Saga* from Africa is introduced as having no fixed text: 'All that each teller of the story has is the plot, a grand design to which, like a master builder, he proceeds to give body and full expression.'

A different process is quoted with regard to a number of Irish tales, including the *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, whose composition is best explained by the theory that they were written down at an early stage, then developed in various versions through oral tradition, and finally produced in a form that was a compound of the variants.

With regard to the Arabic cycles, Lane noted the spontaneity of the reciters. He wrote of the *Sīrat Baibars* that 'much of the entertainment derived from recitations of this work depends upon the talents of the Mohaddit, who often greatly improves the stories by his action, and by witty introductions of his own invention.' Modern reciters still use something of their own invention to produce oral versions of the Hilālī tales, but even in Lane's day these were found in 'ten or more small quarto volumes', although 'the Sha'er always commits his subject to memory, and recites without book'. Lane's 'Antar reciters 'read it from the book: they chant the poetry; but the prose they read, in the popular manner'. The same technique is described in Yūnus Sa'īd's *Fulklūr Baghdād*.

As has been demonstrated in Mahdī's edition of *The Arabian Nights*, the written texts show a tendency to expansion. Hamilton, discussing his version of the *Sīrat 'Antar*, noted that an even longer account was said to exist, and, in fact, his four English volumes cover less than a third of this extended text. The lengthening process, however, although paralleled elsewhere in popular literature, is neither universal nor irreversible. Sir Walter Scott pointed out that in his day 'the stall copies' of the romances of 'Roswal and Lilian' and of 'Sir Eger, Sir Grime, and Sir Greysteil' were 'very much abbreviated', as is the modern Hilālī version set out by Lucienne Saada. It is not surprising, then, to find that the text of Saif al-Tījān used here appears to represent a reciter's prompt copy, while that of Baibars is swollen by an obvious conflation.[1]

With regard to the material dealt with here, expansion has triumphed over contraction. Forty volumes, covering the principal cycles, are analysed in the present study, and a rough calculation based on an estimate of over half a million words for the four volumes of the *Sīrat Saif b. Dhī Yazan* suggests a total for these of well over over four million.

It may then reasonably be asked why so extensive a corpus of narrative should have had so imperceptible an impact on the world of literature were it to contain anything of

[1] Of the other cycles covered in this work, Chauvin adds references to an 1866 Beirut edition of the Qiṣṣat Fīrūz Shāh, noted by Ahlwardt, and to Galland's discovery of a twelve-volume version of 'Alī al-Zaibaq, as well as to Perron's translation of Saif al-Tījān.

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real interest or value. There are a number of explanations. In its own environment, since al-Naḍr b. al-Ḥārith was killed on the orders of Muḥammad, it was tainted by Quranic and Prophetic disapproval. As is illustrated in Cassian's dialogues, new religions tend to reject old stories. Thus Cassian's novice, quoted by Helen Waddell, regrets that: 'At mass, in the very act of contrition, the old stories flaunt before my mind, the shameless loves, and the sight of the old heroes going into battle.' More generally, puritanical feeling may ally itself to pragmatism. Thus the Malay *Taj al-Salatin* advises parents not to allow their children to read the *Hikayat Indraputra*: 'do not let them read worthless stories, for the contents of these stories are for the most part deceit which leads to harm and it is not proper to copy them.'

In the West, with changing tastes and literary sophistication, even familiar heroes have not always been able to rely on a sympathetic audience. Margaret of Navarre wrote in her *Heptameron*: 'La dame, regardant ce gros livre de la Table ronde, dit au valet de chambre qui en avait la garde: "Je m'ébahis comme les jeunes gens perdent le temps à lire tant de folies"'. A sarcastic reviewer of the 1860 edition of this same cycle wrote in *Blackwoods Magazine*: 'the interest, such as it is, never flags; incident crowds on incident; the successful champion disposes of one antagonist just in time to be ready for another – the discomfited knight is either despatched forthwith to make room for some new aspirant, and is healed of his wound with marvellous rapidity by some convenient hermit, and fights as well, or better, than ever. The plot and machinery are of the simplest kind.' Leon Gautier showed the limitations of his taste, and of his reading, by writing: 'Rien n' à été écrit . . de plus long ni de plus ennuyeux que *Le Siège de Barbastre* et *Garin de Monglane*', while to Henri Basset the standard of the Arab equivalents of such works was that of 'a mediocre cinematograph film'.

Amongst the Arabs an additional complication was produced by social stratification and its associated problem of language. The reciters were not grammarians nor were the compilers members of an academic élite. The language of the manuscripts and the printed editions may not be entirely colloquial, but neither does it keep closely to grammatical rules. Because of this, in spite of the long tradition of story-telling, even to modern scholarship the tenth-century genre of the *Maqāmāt* has tended to be considered as marking the introduction of fiction into Arabic literature, by which is meant the accepted canon of works written in the high form of grammatically and stylistically acceptable language. The modern Egyptian writer and critic, Taha Ḥusain, who deserves credit for pointing to the importance of popular narrative, follows conventional taste by claiming that, after its heyday during the Umayyad caliphate and under the early 'Abbāsīds, it lapsed into vulgarity. More recently, Pantke, who discovered an Arab version of a Persian hero tale, in itself of considerable academic significance, reported that its Arab editor preferred not to claim credit for a potentially demeaning production.

In recent times the science of folklore has done much to disarm criticism of this type, by sanctifying the simplicity of those of its own themes that occur in popular narrative. Such interest, however, can present a Procrustean bed of ready-made critical theory to which students of new material may be tempted to accommodate it.

In his study of *Myth in Africa* the novelist and critic Isidore Okpewho has produced a

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summary of 'oral narrative theory'. In this he lists 'three major traditions of scholarship, namely: ethnological, cognitionist, and taxonomist', under which headings he discusses Evolutionism, Psychoanalysis, Diffusionism, Functionalism, Symbolism, Formalism and Structuralism. *A Symposium on American Folk Legend* noted 'the standard European trichotomic division of folk or prose narrative into myth, folktale and legend', but elsewhere in the same book it was pointed out that 'what is legend in one time and place may be myth in another time and place and a Märchen in yet another time and place.' Even apparently simple problems of terminology can produce difficulties. If within European tradition 'Heldenepos' is to be distinguished from 'Spielmannsepos' and 'Hofepos' from 'Fürstenepos' and 'volkstümlichen Epos', 'bylines héroïques' from 'bylines romanesques', and 'militärischen Novelle' from 'Volkslied' or 'Kange Kreschesh' – the songs of the frontiersmen – then presumably the same distinctions can be found in Arabic. Here in a recent study of *Oral Epics in India* Blackburn and Flueckiger write: 'Although no scholar has given a precise definition of "epic", the literature reveals a fairly strong consensus on its three primary features: epic is narrative, it is poetic, and it is heroic.' In Arabic, however, it must be asked whether the difference between passages of rhymed and rhythmical prose in the cycles differ sufficiently from the 'poetic' element to which Blackburn and Flueckiger refer to warrant a change either of name or of definition. Those who prefer to substitute 'saga' for 'epic' must confront Jolles: 'the saga is based on a reality, the tie of blood'. Legend, to Jolles, is 'a response to man's desire for ideals of conduct', and although the Arabic may deal with C. S. Lewis's 'impossibles and preternaturals', it can scarcely be said to have the numinous quality that he assigns to myth.

There is no shortage of definitions, to help or hinder, including the twenty-one of folklore itself given in Funk and Wagnall's *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend.* In his *Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp produces his thirty-one functions, together with seven 'spheres of action'. Elsewhere, we are given myth, romance, high mimesis, low mimesis and irony, or Jolles's Einfache Formen, within which can be set Genette's 'histoire', 'récit' and 'narration'.

These are battlefields littered with the detritus of ideas, almost all of which retain some validity, but which have proved vulnerable to erudition, sarcasm, or simple denunciation – 'Als Folklorist aber müss ich erklären dass ich sein Werk von A bis Z kategorisch ablehne.' It was Anderson who laughed at the disciples of Müller, 'der Sonnen-, Mond- oder Gewitter-mythologen', for believing that 'die Menscheit habe im Laufe der Jahrtausende nichts Besseres zu tun gewusst, als die Geschichten von Tages- and Jahreslauf der Sonne, von den Mondphasen, der Finsternissen u.s.w. immer von neuen wiederzukauen'. In the same vein, Hartland, referring to a hero's 300-pound sceptre, writes: 'I have cited fully the substance of this ballad as given by M. Dragomanov because that scholar is inclined to trace the influence of Buddhism in this last touch . . . Perhaps European students may yet be persuaded to hold that the paladin Roland was a Bodisat.'

As will be seen, the Arabic cycles contain some of the commonest motifs of folklore. In part, they can be seen as legends. There are characters who appear related, at least distantly, to gods or demi-gods and who may be found acting out episodes that elsewhere appear as myths. Supporters of Jung, Lévi-Strauss or the totemistic mana of

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Durkheim will all be able to find evidence that can be used to bolster their views on these matters whose importance to an understanding of human development it is difficult to overstate.

Here, however, Wayland Hand's generalisation that 'for the systematizer, folk-legends seem endless', is misleading, as what is more remarkable is the sheer quantity of repetition or duplication to be found in the type of material that the Arabic shares with other cultures. At it most prosaic, explanations based on theories of borrowing would still produce astonishing evidence of worldwide contacts between early peoples, while more exotic lines of research can concentrate on fundamental factors governing human consciousness.

As Sherlock Holmes pointed out, it is a capital mistake to theorise without evidence. For the Arabic hero cycles to play their proper part in the disentanglement of such problems, it is imperative that they be introduced to a wider audience. From an academic standpoint, there is a long list of preliminary difficulties. Each cycle provides its own problems of provenance and of composition. At times differences between layers of construction seem obvious, but there is a limit to the reliance that can be placed on the distortions of the printed texts. No final versions can ever be conjured out of centuries of oral improvisation, but an analysis of all available manuscripts would at least supply material for a classification of variants, to which linguistic and historical analysis could provide additional evidence of background. Until this has been done, we can only see darkly through the glass of academic speculation. As was noted in the Preface, no attempt has been made here to collate variants, and it is only in the short *Sīrat al-Zīr* that an alternative version has been added to illustrate the type of change that can be found. Elsewhere, a single printed copy of each text has been used.

As an additional difficulty, whatever the processes of development may have been, there is a clear difference in background between desert cycles, such as those of 'Antar, and the predominantly urban narrative of 'Alī al-Zaibaq, as well as between the romance of Saif al-Tījān and the tribal saga of the Banū Hilāl. The degree of assimilation varies to the extent that it may not be clear whether the common denominators are of greater importance than the differences.

Such questions are complicated by diffusion. Chauvin noted that in Muslim India 'ce n'est pas 'Antar, mais Ḥamza, qui est le héros national'. Ḥamza here is the Prophet's uncle, killed at the battle of Badr, whose story belongs to the myth-history centred on 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and other heroes of early Islam. From India his legend passed through Malaya to reach Java, by which time, as is noted in the Comparative Index, it had become confused, in character and detail, with the entirely different *Sīrat Ḥamza* covered in this study.

If the difficulties are so clear, it may be wondered whether any general study should be attempted until they have been resolved, and what approach it could follow. In the Foreword to the eighth volume of *The Ocean of Story*, the translation of the *Kathā Sarit Sāgara*, W. R. Halliday wrote: 'a story may be regarded as a kind of composite pattern of coloured bricks. Individual bricks considered by themselves are almost worthless for our particular purpose of tracing the history of the design.' While this may have been

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relevant to Halliday's 'design', it must be suggested that in the Arabic cycles the individual bricks, representing narrative elements, are at least as important in their own right as are artefacts found in the different strata of an archaeological site. It is from them that the narrative is built up and, for the purpose of analysis, it is into them that it must first be broken down.

This process can be made to serve two purposes. As will be seen in the Narrative Index, the number of these ingredients is not very great, and their identification can help to clarify internal narrative patterns. A second advantage, however, is that it is here that there are to be found the most obvious links with other literatures. In the Comparative Index an attempt is made to investigate these and to supply parallels. Although a listing of examples is merely a preliminary to research, and can lead to no firm conclusions on its own, the examples themselves indicate the potential importance of such research to the study of comparative literature in general, as well as to its specific application to Arabic. In particular, as will be suggested later, it suggests the need for a 'quantum theory' of literary criticism rather than a formulaic account.

In this context, however, such analysis has its drawbacks. A concentration on individual ingredients may spoil the taste of the mixture itself. Within the texts, the Perils of Pauline style of narrative, with its constant climaxes and last-moment escapes, may often weary the reader with its repetitiveness and its obviousness, but colour and vitality remain. As was noted in the Preface, it is in an attempt to convey some notion of this that fuller versions of the epitomes of the cycles are added in Volume Three.

Beyond this, however, there is a more fundamental problem that goes beyond a specifically literary investigation. We have here an art form that is the product of a society which, through its various phases of assimilation and fragmentation, represents at least on some levels a cultural continuum. Its cycles are derived from or superimposed on a past of myth, legend or distorted fact, and adapted to suit the needs of their present. Whether or not it can be suggested, as was claimed by R. A. Nicholson, that a given literary form shapes the minds of its audience, it is clear that the works of popular story-tellers must at least be a reflection of or in harmony with those minds. The *Weltanschauung* of the Arabic cycles reflects that of a huge, but largely inarticulate, audience throughout the Arab world over centuries of change and development – an approximation to the 'primal' audience of Bloomfield and Dunn's *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies*. It can be suggested that, within the context of its own civilisation, the views of this audience were largely unremarked, if not unknown, while to the West until recently they have been almost entirely unexplored. Thus, if the cycles show any patterns – I. A. Richards's 'recurrent likenesses of behaviour' – or other forms of significant repetition, then the more widely diffused they are, the greater their significance can be argued to be. Again according to Richards, they would be serving, within their own limits, to give shape to 'the fabric of our meanings, which is the world'.

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1
Dimensions

Time and space

For the world to be seen as a fabric of meanings, it needs to be attached to some form of reality. At a simple level, one such form can be represented as historical fact. Lucian ridiculed the extension of this idea in his *True History* where he points out that the only truth in his account is where he says that he is lying, but, for all that, fictions throughout the world have long maintained the tradition of flying factual colours. Thus *Li Romans de Bauduin de Sebourc* claims to be a 'vraie cronique prouvée par escris'. In *La Chanson du Chevalier au Cygne* 'li mot son verai', and similarly in *Le Roman des Sept Sages* 'essample son tuit veritable/N'est mie meconge ne fable'. Similarly in Arabic the heroes of the *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* are quoted as talking to the narrator; a prominent man of letters is named as the compiler of the *Sīrat 'Antar*, while the Umayyad court is given as the setting for the telling of the story of Saif al-Tījān.

Reality, however, has to be interpreted in the dimensional context of space as well as of time. For non-specialists there may be unfamiliarities in the detailed maps of these dimensions as they apply to Arabic cycles, but the basic technique of the narrators will be familiar to all students of heroic narrative. In the context of space, we are presented with concentric circles, based in the geographical heartland of the cycle, with an extension covering the limits of the world as known to the narrators and their audience. Imagination, or ignorance, then complicates the geometry by producing a wavering frontier on the edge of a world of fantasy. Similarly with time, the narratives, except in one instance, are connected to an identifiable period in the historical, or semi-historical, past, which acts as a starting point for its own frequently fantastic internal dating.

To show the workings of these processes, the individual narratives can be listed as follows:

Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma

The *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* is, in the main, a frontier epic, like *Digenes Akritas* or the cycle of Aymeri de Narbonne. The great-great-grandfather of the heroine, Dhāt al-Himma, is introduced as living in the time of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik (65–86 A.H./684–705 A.D.), who dies while her grandfather is on an expedition to Constantinople. She herself is unmarried when the first 'Abbāsid caliph, al-Saffāḥ, comes to the throne in 128 A.H., and she is still a formidable fighter at the start of the reign of al-Wāthiq (227–232 A.H./841–846 A.D.). Her son, 'Abd al-Wahhāb, who dies during al-

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Wāthiq's reign, was born during the reign of al-Mahdī (158–169 A.H./774–785 A.D.), and it was in that period that the third major hero of the cycle, al-Baṭṭāl, begins on a career that extends beyond the death of al-Wāthiq, who has himself been given, by implication, more than twenty years of rule. The major 'Abbāsid caliphs are listed in correct sequence, but this accuracy does not extend to their Byzantine counterparts. An emperor Leon (Leon IV?), whose daughter founds Malaṭya, holds the imperial throne during the reign of 'Abd al-Mālik and is still there almost a century later. His fictional successor, Manuel, is made to die during the reign of al-Amīn and he is followed by a Michael (Michael I?), after which even the names of the emperors, let alone their supposed dates, have lost all touch with reality.

In terms of geography, the cycle opens, as is customary, not at its centre but at a point within its outer circle, which in this case is represented by an unspecified district in Yemen, where the Kilābī chieftain al-Ḥārith led the life of a nomadic raider, 'taking shelter in no one place and not living between walls'. His grandson, al-Ṣaḥsāḥ, extended this nomadic base, being confirmed by the Umayyad prince Maslama as ruler of the bedouin in 'Bahrain, Syria, Iraq and the Ḥijāz'. He accompanied Maslama from Damascus to Constantinople, but it is not until after his death that the cycle reaches its geographical centre in the town of Malaṭya (Melitene), whose foundation it attributes to an eponymous Byzantine princess.

Malaṭya, noted by Yāqūt as a 'renowned and famous town on the Syrian frontier', is not far from the centre of two overlapping narrative circles whose diameters extend from Ankara to Mosul and from Constantinople to Baghdad. Within these limits, both north–south and east–west lines of communication are of importance. The action follows the Euphrates route from Baghdad to Byzantium by al-Raḥbā and al-Raqqa, the entrance to Byzantine territory by the pass of Mar'ash, the road by Malaṭya, Siwas and Ankara, and the track of a Byzantine invasion by Khilat, Bidlis, Mayyāfāriqīn, Amid, Nisibin and Mosul. Invaders are made to advance on Baghdad following the line of the Tigris by Takrit, while the hero 'Abd al-Wahhāb, going to Baghdad from Amid, crosses to the Euphrates and passes al-Raqqa, Khābūr and Anbar. Anbar is a staging post on the twenty-five-day journey from Baghdad to Damascus, as well as for the Euphrates route from al-Raqqa to Kufa and the Ḥijāz. From Sinjar the journey to Damascus is made by al-Raḥbā across the desert to Tadmur; from further north at Mosul the east–west road runs from Ra's al-'Ain by Harran to Suwaidiya and travellers to and from Egypt and Damascus either follow the Via Maris by Ascalon or sail from one of the Levant ports. There are detailed references to the surroundings of Malaṭya and of Mosul, but of place-names in Byzantine territory identified by Honigman, the text only shows Marj al-Dībāj, at 'seven days' journey from Constantinople', Marj al-Usquf and the river Qabāqib.

The fringes of what is taken to be the Byzantine Empire lie on the circumference of the cycle's outer ring, within which are enclosed many of the lands familiar, at least in name, to its audience. It is noticeable that, although a number of eastern Islamic provinces and places are mentioned, they are treated without familiarity. Instead of serving as settings for adventures, they are merely bases that can affect the balance of power in Iraq. Thus Abū Muslim moves against the Umayyads from Merv and al-Mu'taṣim is threatened by a Dailamīte rebel who has taken 'the lands of the Turks,

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Khurasan, Samarkand, Isfahan, Rayy and Hamadhan'. Khurasan provides the ʻAbbāsids with reinforcements, but in the winter its communications are closed by snow. Georgia, is ruled by a lascivious Christian queen, but no eastern campaigns are described in the narrative.

The Arabian Peninsula is considered by the Malaṭya frontiersmen as their homeland, but it is normally sketched without detail. It has links with Abyssinia, which provides the setting for an adventure, as does Nubia, while to the east two heroes sail from Basra towards India, only to be wrecked after twenty-one days. Other references to India include a ship sailing for its 'farthest lands' and three thousand Indians serving in the caliph's army. A western voyage from Damietta to Alexandria and then, in thirty-one days to Malta, en route for Sicily and 'the ocean', comes to the usual abrupt end and the ensuing adventure involves the Umayyad caliph of Spain, together with Berbers and the Mulaththamūn. The compilers of the cycle knew of Seville, Tangier and, arguably, Toledo, while, in Christian territory, the villages in 'the territories of the Venetians' are described as being as big as cities. Greece is a land of castles and mountain passes, but most of the other non-Muslim countries are situated in a geographical Never-Never land.

Unlike a number of the other cycles, the *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* does not send out its characters on supernatural voyages. When they do travel, it might be possible to guess at the adaptation of some of the locations from travellers' tales, but it may be better simply to accept such features as the circular lake, Buḥairat al-Falak, forty days' journey from the Muslim frontier, whose entrance from 'the farthest sea' is blocked by a gate and round which are forty castles, evenly spaced. At four months' voyage from Tarsus is the Castle of the Tooth, so named because it is on a high ridge, jutting into the sea. Beyond it is the Magian Island of the Two Kings in 'the sea which has no beginning and no end', and the beautiful Naphtha Island, with its three thousand three hundred warships. These and their like may have been thought of by the reciters' audience as too remote to need precise identification but they could apparently be accepted as posing threats to Islam. In this case the frontiers of fantasy are not far removed from those of historical geography and it is to be noted that in the *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* such places lie in the west and north, confirming, if confirmation were needed, that the cycle's centre of gravity is set on the Byzantine frontier.

Sīrat Saif b. Dhī Yazan

The story of the Himyaritic Saif b. Dhī Yazan, who is traditionally credited with ending Abyssinian rule in Yemen in the second part of the fifth century, concerns itself with Abyssinian–Arab rivalry, and introduces myth-historical details of pre-Islamic Arab settlements in Egypt. In his cycle, Saif has a long career. Four generations are covered, and the final expedition, on which he embarks when he is a grandfather, lasts for thirteen years, six months and twenty-seven days.

If the *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* concentrates its attention on the north and west, the *Sīrat Saif b. Dhī Yazan* turns southwards and east from a centre that may once have been on the East African coast but has ended at the Egyptian Nile.

The cycle starts in Yemen, in its outer circle, from which Saif's father, king Dhū

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