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Indecent Clothing and Violence in the Street. A Third/Ninth-Century Arabic Papyrus
**Abstract**

This article studies an Arabic papyrus (P.Cam.Michaelides B1342) from third/ninth-century Egypt. The document records an unusual reference to a socially unacceptable deed resulting in a violent street fight between two men. The document is one of the few testimonies to commanding the right and forbidding the wrong (al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahy ʿan al-munkar) in everyday life.

**Keywords:** Arabic, forbidding the wrong, indecent clothing, papyrus, street violence, testimony, third/ninth-century Egypt

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**Résumé**

Cet article étudie un papyrus arabe (P.Cam.Michaelides B1342) d’Égypte du iiie/ixe siècle. Le document rapporte une référence inhabituelle à un acte socialement inacceptable, qui a provoqué une violente bagarre dans la rue entre deux hommes. C’est un des rares témoignages de l’injonction du bien et de la prohibition du mal (al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahy ʿan al-munkar) dans la vie quotidienne.

**Mots-clés:** arabe, prohibition du mal, habillement indécent, papyrus, violence de rue, témoignage, Égypte du iiie/ixe siècle

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The papyrus document studied in this paper contains a rare record of a violent street fight between two people. The document tells the story briefly, leaving ample room for interpretation. According to the document, the story goes as follows: a certain al-Ḥasan b. ʿAbd Allāh, the textile maker/merchant (al-ḫayyāš), passed by a neighbour of his, known as Ḥamdān, who was walking with private parts uncovered (makšūf al-ʿawra) down the street. At that moment a woman was crossing the street too and she saw him in this indecent condition. Al-Ḥasan b. ʿAbd Allāh expressed to the neighbour his disapproval of this behaviour. Ḥamdān responded violently. He leapt over al-Ḥasan, insulted him overtly and beat him viciously. This mishap took place on Saturday, the 8th of the month of Šawwāl. We know from the document that there was at least one eyewitness. Aḥmad b. ʿImrān, who was for some reason unable to write his testimony himself, testified that he witnessed all this.

In spite of the poor condition of the papyrus, the text reveals interesting information concerning two significant Islamic concerns: 1. the Islamic concern regarding the exposure of the private parts in public (kašf al-ʿawra), and 2. the moral duty of forbidding the wrong (al-nahy ʿan/inkār al-munkar), in our case with tongue (bi-l-lisān) rather than with hand (bi-l-yad) or heart (bi-l-qalb).

According to Islamic law, all Muslims, males and females, are obliged to conceal their private parts from the sight of strangers (satr al-ʿawra). The term ʿawra has various meanings, depending on the context in which it occurs. The word ʿawra occurs in the Quran in three different contexts. In Quran, XXIV, 31, the term implies the physical modesty of women (ʿawrāt al-nisāʾ). In Quran, XXIV, 58, the word refers to three times of privacy (ṭalāt ʿawrāt) in which one must ask permission before entering: 1. before the dawn prayer, 2. when you put aside your clothing at noon, and 3. after the night prayer (ṣalāt al-ʾiṣā). In Quran, XXXIII, 13, the term occurs not in
accordance with gender and social status in terms of slavery and freedom. While the ‘awra of free males covers only the part between the navel and the knees, free women are required to conceal the whole body except face and hands.4 The exposure of one’s ‘awra is carried over in Islamic penal law. Even in public discretionary punishments, e.g. tašhīr (ignominious public exposure), private parts of the condemned should remain always veiled.5

Our papyrus does not tell precisely what parts of the body or degrees of exposure (the knee, the thigh, or the genitals) are potentially implied by the expression makšūf al-ʿawra (l. 4) and whether complete nudity or merely indecent exposure is intended. Whatever the case may be, al-Ḥasan b. ‘Abd Allāh took an action against it (ankara ‘alaybi dālika) and he was insulted and beaten up in return. The action (inkār) taken by al-Hasan should be understood in this context as a self-conscious act of religious admonition in the spirit of al-nahy ʿan/inkār al-munkar (forbidding the wrong) rather than merely a spontaneous personal insult.6

Let us now discuss the form and legal function of the document. The document was apparently written upon the request of al-Ḥasan b. ‘Abd Allāh to serve as a valid legal proof,7 although it lacks important legal information and formulae. In the first place, a full identification of the wrongdoer is not given; only the first name is provided. Secondly, there is no reference to the place of residence of the two fighting people, nor the location of the accident is specified. Thirdly, the document is dated only by the day and month without mentioning the respective year which is very unusual in legal documents in particular and in papyri in general with the exception of private and business letters.8 What is more, the document was written on the back of a used piece of papyrus that was cut from a larger sheet. This all strongly suggests that our papyrus is a preliminary draft or a copy of the original document. In addition to being a copy or a draft, it is well possible that our document is a separate document of testimony; a document that was primarily written to record the names of the witnesses and what they had witnessed to. It has been suggested that autograph witness testimonies and signatures are only attested on Arabic papyri from the end of the second-the beginning of

the context of physical modesty, but rather to designate the vulnerability of the houses during the war (inna buyūtanā ʿawratun wa-mā biya bi-ʿawratin, “Indeed our houses are exposed, while they were not exposed”). In legal contexts, ‘awra has two different meanings: 1. it signifies the private parts of the body that must be concealed from others, 2. it designates things that people wish to keep out of public reach. See Alshech, 2004, p. 309 and note 56; Lange, 2008, p. 234. In the canonical bādīt collections, entire chapters are devoted to the inviolability (burna) of the human body specifying the degrees of exposure of the ‘awra. See Lange, 2008, p. 162 and the references cited in note 160. For more general discussion about the inviolability of the human body in Islamic law, see Johansen, 1996, pp. 75–76.

7. For more extensive discussion about the validity of the written legal documents in Islamic law, see Schacht, 1964, pp. 82, 192–195 and part. 193; Wakin, 1972, pp. 66–67. See also Sijpesteijn, “Making the Private Public”, pp. 84–85; P.Genizah, p. 29.
8. See Younes, 2013b, p. 18.
the third/eighth-ninth centuries onwards; before that, witnesses only gave oral testimony. Written testimonies were at first recorded in separate documents of testimony, after that they were written at the bottom of the legal deeds themselves.

A separate document of testimony has the following structure after the basmala:

1. opening formula confirming the presence of the witnesses named in the document ('sáhida al-šuhūd al-musammawna fī hādā al-kitāb anna, “the witnesses named in this document testified that”);
2. report in objective style (third-person) and in past tense summarizing the legal transaction between the parties;
3. date;
4. list of witnesses.

Our document starts with the šabāda formula and follows precisely the aforementioned structure, suggesting that it truly falls into this category.

**Edition**

P.Cam.Michaelides B1342⁵² 30 cm × 18 cm 3rd/9th century

Provenance: unknown

Dark-brown badly damaged papyrus. The papyrus was cut from a larger sheet. The bottom is missing; only 12 lines survived. The papyrus fibres are frayed on the top and at the right hand side, but only a few letters have been lost at the beginning of each line. There is a large tear at the top left corner making difficulties in reading the last two words in line 3. Other smaller worm holes and lacunae are spread all over the papyrus causing few damages to the text. The text is written in black ink with a fine thin pen in a practiced hand parallel to the fibres. The verso contains traces of seven lines from an official letter written in black ink at the right angle to the fibres. Diacritical dots occur frequently but randomly. There are many ink spots that could be mistaken for diacritics. Of the characteristics of the script, ṣīn is sometimes written with an oblique stoke above it (l. 7 al-Ḥasan; l. 12 Sahl) or as a straight line with three dots written over the line to represent the teeth (l. 8 wa-asmaʿabu). Ṣīn is occasionally written with three

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¹⁰. See Khan, “An Early Arabic Legal Papyrus”, pp. 227–237 and part. 234 with note 15. See also the commentary to line 2.

¹¹. For examples of separate documents of testimony on papyri; cf. Rāġib, “Trois Documents datés du Louvre”, no. 1, dated 251/865–866, provenance al-Fayyûm; P.Marchands I 1, dated 250/864, provenance al-Fayyûm. See also CPR XXVI 3, dated 316/928, provenance not mentioned; 4, dated 341/952, provenance Ušmûn; 5, 5th/11th century, provenance not mentioned; 10, dated 451/1059, provenance al-Fayyûm.

¹². I would like to thank the syndics of Cambridge University Library for providing me with the digital image of this papyrus and for the permission to publish the text.

¹³. See below the commentary to line 8.
dots above it. The dots are normally aligned horizontally (l. 10 Ṣawwāl). Ḍād is oval in shape with no tooth (l. 8 bi-ḍurūb). Medial kāf is written as a short vertical stroke with no rightward shaft at the top (l. 2, 11 al-kitāb; l. 4 makšūf; l. 6 fa-ankara).

A short description of the papyrus, the script and the content is given in the catalogue of the Arabic papyri in the Michaelides collection, Cambridge University Library.¹⁵

Text

١. ٨٤
٢. ٨٤
٣. ٨٤
٤. ٨٤
٥. ٨٤
٦. ٨٤
٧. ٨٤
٨. ٨٤
٩. ٨٤
١٠. ٨٤
١١. ٨٤
١٢. ٨٤

Diacritical dots

Translation

1. In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.
2. The witnesses named in this document testified that al-Ḥasan
3. b. ʿAbd Allāh, the textile maker/trader, passed by a neighbour known to him,

¹⁴. See P.World, p. 84.
4. whereas he was crossing, with private parts exposed, down
5. the street. And a woman passed by while he was in this
6. condition. Al-Ḥasan b. ‘Abd Allāh rebuked him
7. for this. Then, this Ḥamdān leapt over al-Ḥasan
8. and insulted him and... of beating
9. from... And this took place on Saturday when seven nights
10. passed from Šawwāl.
11. Aḥmad b. ʿImrān testified to all what is in this document
12. [so and so b.] Sahl wrote his testimony at his command and in his presence.

traces

Commentary

L. 1 The bāʾ of bi-sm is missing. Bi-sm is highlighted by linea dilantans/mašq and by being oblique. Al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm is written cursively and ligatured.¹⁶

L. 2 Lower traces of the šīn, bāʾ and dāl of šahīda are still visible below the tear at the beginning of the line. For other legal documents starting with the opening formula šahīda al-šuhūd al-musammawna fi bādā al-kitāb, see for example P.Marchands I 1.2, dated 250/864, provenance al-Fayyūm; PCair.Arab. I 50.2, 3rd/9th century, provenance prob. al-Uṣmūnayn; 52.2, dated 274/888, provenance prob. al-Uṣmūnayn; CPR XXVI 4.2, dated 341/952, provenance Uṣmūn. Variants of this formula are also attested in the papyri; cf. bādā mā šahīda ʿalayhi al-šuhūd al-musammawna fi bādā al-kitāb (CPR XXVI 3.2, dated 316/928, provenance not mentioned); šahīda al-šuhūd al-musammawna fi āḥir bādā al-kitāb (CPR XXVI 10.3, dated 451/1059, provenance al-Fayyūm). See also P.Genizah 48.2, dated 427/1036; 49.2, dated 654/1256; 50.2, dated 660/1262; 51.1–2, 7th/13th century. Fī has a short backward bending yāʾ and a leftward shaft at the top. It is written in exactly the same way in line 11.

L. 3 The profession al-ḫayyāš (the textile maker/trader) is well attested in the papyri, see Qāsim al-ḫayyāš (P.Marchands I 5.14, 3rd/9th century, provenance al-Fayyūm); Ġabr al-ḫayyāš (P.Marchands I 6.10, 3rd/9th century, provenance al-Fayyūm).¹⁷ The word could also be read as al-ḡabbās (the plasterer), see P.Marchands I, p. 20. A short stroke is attached to the šīn of al-ḫayyāš from the bottom. The lower curvature of the ġīm of ġār is missing in the lacuna, but the reading is the only fitting one.

¹⁶ For different means to highlight the basmala, see Grob, Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters on Papyrus, pp. 191–192; 2013, p. 124.
¹⁷ For more information about this profession in the papyri, see also Muğāwrī, 2000, pp. 388–389. See also Younes, 2013a, pp. 321–322.
L. 4 Only lower traces of the rā’ and the dot of the bā’ of ya’bur can be seen at the beginning of the line. The loop of the bā’ of huwa is reduced to a curved downward stroke. It is written in exactly the same way in wa-huwa in line 5. Compare it with the bā’ of bāḏā in lines 2 and 7. The scribe seems to have swapped around the kāf and šīn in the word mākṣūf, he, then, indicated his mistake by writing a new word without crossing out the incorrect word. The papyrus fibres are disturbed between the āyn and wāw of al-‘awra, giving the impression that there are not connected. ‘Alā is written without the final alif maqṣūra (Hopkins, 1984, § 55.i). It is written in exactly the same way in line 7.

L. 5 Of al-ṭarīq only the rā’, yā’ and qāf can be read at the beginning of the line. Imra’a is written with post-consonantal medial hamza according to classical Arabic rules, which is unusual in Arabic papyri.18

L. 6 Only upper traces of the two alifs, lām and the upper curvature of the hā’ of al-ḥāl are perceptible at the beginning of the line, but the reading is certain. The curvature of the dāl of dālika is reduced resembling a rā’. Dālika is written in a similar manner in line 9.19

L. 7 The scribe wrote the word ‘alayhi twice by mistake. The nūn of Ḥamdān is missing in the lacuna. The proper name Ḥamdān is well attested in the papyri, see for example P.Cair.Arab. I 43v.6, dated 306/918, provenance not mentioned; P.Cair.Arab. II 90.1, dated 274/887, provenance prob. al-Ušmūnayn; P.Cair.Arab. III 255.6, 2nd–3rd/8th–9th, provenance not mentioned. The šīn of al-Ḥasan has an oblique stroke above it. See also Sahl in line 12.20

L. 8 The šīn of wa-asma‘ahu is written as a straight line with three dots written over the line to represent the teeth.21 The word before bi-ḍurūb is unclear to me due to the lacuna. The final letter is quite clearly a rā’; compare it with the rā’ of al-makrūh and bi-ḍurūb in the same line. Preceding it seems to be written a lām/kāf, fā’/qāf and a tooth at the beginning. I was not able to provide a satisfactory reading for this word. The meaning of the sentence would be “assault of beating.”

L. 9 The beginning of this line is illegible due to the ragged fibres and lacunae; only min can be detected. The mim of yaum has a very long tail that turns upwards on the left side. The two denticles of the bā’ and tā’ of al-sabt are reduced.

L. 10 The left tip of the nūn of ḥalawna finishes near the lowest point without turning upwards on the left side resembling a rā’. For dating documents using verbal forms from ḥalā, see Grohmann, 1966, pp. 19–20. The šīn of Sawwāl is elongated horizontally.22

20. For this practice in the papyri, see P.World, pp. 86–87.
L. 11 ḤImrān is a common name in the papyri; see for example Younes, 2013, no. 21.2, ca.105–108/724–727, provenance unknown; no. 36.2, 2nd/8th century, provenance unknown. For the expression bi-ġamīʿ mā fī hāḏā al-kitāb and variants of it, see Grohmann, 1954, p. 119 and note 2.

L. 12 The formula [wa-kataba fulān ib]n Sahl šabādatahu bi-amrihi wa-maḥḍarihi is reconstructed on the basis of countless parallels. See Sijpesteijn, "Making the Private Public", p. 84. The lower part of the nūn of ibn can be noticed after the lacuna at the beginning of the line. There are traces of writing below line 12, suggesting that more lines are missing at the bottom. The missing lines would certainly contain further witnesses’ testimonies.

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