Dorpmüller Sabine (ed.),
Fictionalizing the Past: Historical Characters in Arabic Popular Epic. Workshop held at the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo, 28th-29th of November 2007 in Honor of Remke Kruk.

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One of the major fields of interest of the Dutch scholar Remke Kruk has been Arabic popular literature. In particular, Kruk has extensively dealt with the *Sīrat al-Amīra Ḏāt al-Himma* and the role of the female figures in the various epic cycles, especially that of the heroine Ḏāt al-Himma (see S. Dorpmüller, "Contributions of Remke Kruk in the field of Arabic popular epic", p. xi-xiii).(1) Dedicating a volume of essays on Arabic popular epic to her was therefore the best way to celebrate a course of research of great interest, which we hope is not yet completed.

The "Introduction" by S. Dorpmüller, entitled "History and Fiction in Arabic Popular Epic" (p. 1-8), sets out a series of research questions which initially inspired the workshop held at the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo, and then the contributions to the volume. Starting from the statement that "today, it is common knowledge that Arabic heroic literature, which had its heyday in Mamluk times, is neither pure historical fact nor pure fiction" (p. 1), Dorpumüller discusses a number of key issues which involve the wide-ranging relationship of the audience to the epic, the historicity of the characters at the expense of a not always real and realistic historical dimension in which they move and act, and the so-called historical perspective that can be seen from the heroic cycle.

The volume seeks to answer three main questions – "How are historical characters and events fictionalized in order to create the story?", "What narrative structures do popular epic and historiography share?" and "How does the representation of characters and events relate to the socio-political context of heroic narratives?" (p. 3) – by addressing the general issue of fictionalizing the past from different perspectives. On the one hand, the bulk of the contributions cover the narrative structures of popular epic in relation to official historiography, the use of written sources in the composition of epic, and the experience of epics as popular history (p. 3). On the other, a few other contributions draw attention to the transmission and performance of the Arabic popular epic which is still alive in some regions. Each chapter deals with a different epic cycle, including *Sīrat ʿAntar ibn Šaddād*, *Sīrat al-Malik al-Ẓāhir Baybars*, *Sīrat al-Amīra Ḏāt al-Himma*, *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, *Sīrat Sayf ibn Ḏī Yazan* and the rather unknown *Sīrat al-Ḥākim bi-Amrillāh*. The volume also contains two articles dedicated respectively to *Sīrat al-Iskandar* and *Thousand and One Nights*.

The opening article, "'Antar Hangs his *Muʿallaqa*: History, Fiction, and Textual Conservatism in *Sīrat ʿAntar ibn Shaddād*" by Peter Heath (p. 9-24), lays the theoretical basis of the discussion. It examines one aspect of the relation between history and fiction in *Sīrat ʿAntar ibn Šaddād* which concerns the "absorption of historical detail to delineate some of the tensions that come into play when the storyteller decides to include such material" (p. 11). More specifically, Heath focuses on how ʿAntar hung his long *qaṣīda* (*muʿallaqa* "suspended ode") onto the walls of the Kaʿba in Mecca. The goal is to show the extent to which narratives internally relate history to fiction and historical details depicted in scholarly historiographical texts are intervowen in epic in order "to create a dimension of factuality". Following Heath, the *Sīrat ʿAntar ibn Šaddād* makes the event of ʿAntar hanging his *muʿallaqa* an occasion for battle, "but a battle of poetic talent as well as a contest of arms". This event is transformed into three levels of struggle, "each related to one aspect of his major plot impetus of creating and resolving disputes over ʿAntar's social acceptability" (p. 15). The conclusion of the analysis is that the dichotomy of history versus fiction as an analytical approach may be too narrow and that a more useful approach would be the dichotomy of previous textual existence (such as *Ayyām al-ʿArab* and *muʿallaqa*) and the reworking by individual composers. A second conclusion that emerges concerns "the less degree verbal variation than the level of plot unifomity" (p. 22). This aspect of the conservativeness of the written tradition is very important, since, according to Heath, it makes it close to the written tradition of the elite Arab historiography.

The article by Thomas Herzog, "What they Saw with their Own Eyes...: Fictionalization and 'Narrativization' of History in Arab Popular Epics and Learned Historiography" (p. 25-44) continues the analysis on the same wavelength. It examines, on the one hand, the category of fiction and "its adequacy in a pre-modern Arab context"; on the other "the narrative strategies that historiographical texts and popular epics share while 'writing History'" (p. 25). It

(1) See in particular Remke Kruk, "Warrior women in Arabic popular romance: Qannasa bintMuzahim and other valiant ladies," *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 24/3 (1993), p. 213-30; 25/1, (1994), p. 16-33.

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may be interesting to note that in order to support the discussion Herzog uses as a yardstick the *Buḫalā'* by Ǧāḥiẓ, one of the learned mediaeval authors that "were forced to venture into the no-man's land located between the factual and the non-factual" (p. 29). Understanding this author and accusations of being a "liar" addressed to him lets Herzog place epic within the broad-spectrum Arabic literary discourse. In this sense Herzog argues that it is better to use the term "narrativization of the past" instead of "fictionalizing the past" (p. 31). In the second part of the article Herzog demonstrates the use of five narrative strategies by historiographical texts and epic (in particular the *Sīrat Baybars*) by means of examples and comparisons. Specifically, the narrative strategies are 1) scenic dramatization, 2) personalization of history, 3) moulding of plots into existing, quasi mythological, patterns, 4) the hero-pattern, 5) the pattern of sacred history.

The contribution of Remke Kruk, "Umayyads and Abbasids: Divided Loyalties as Depicted in *Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma*" (p. 45-62), is equally interesting since she considers *sīra* literature (especially *Sīrat al-Amīra Ḏāt al-Himma*) a valuable source for understanding the way in which historical developments were perceived on a popular level. To this end, Kruk looks "at the episodes of the power transfer from the Umayyads to the Abbasids, to the views expressed on the Spanish Umayyads, and the sucession conflict between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn after the death of Hārūn, a situation that led too to divided loyalties among Dhāt al-Himma's Kilābīs" (p. 47). The analysis is very detailed and precise on the *sīra* (in its different versions of Cairo and Beirut), in comparison with the official historiographical version by al-Ṭabarī.

Unlike the others, the contribution of Claudia Ott, "Finally We Know... Why, How, and Where Caliph al-Ḥākim Disappeared! *Sīrat al-Ḥākim bi-Amrillāh* and its Berlin Manuscript" (p. 63-72), presents, rather than argues, new materials. The *Sīrat al-Ḥākim bi-Amrillāh* is still waiting to be studied in detail, though there is an ongoing doctoral project by Antje Lenora at the University of Halle. This article provides a first overview of one of the few complete copies, the Berlin Manuscript We. II 486-505 in 20 volumes.

In the contribution "The *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*: New Remarks on its Performance in Upper and Lower Egypt" (p. 73-93), Khaled Abouel-Lail shifts the focus on to the still living oral tradition of the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* and its performance in Upper and Lower Egypt. The caveats concerning the difference between amateur (*rāwī*) and professional narrators (*šuʿarā'*) are important, as are the performance differences between the Upper and Lower Egypt.

The contribution of Faustina C.W. Doufikar-Aerts, "Alexander Made History, Whereas Historians Made Alexander: Reconstructing the '*sīra*fication' of an Ancient King" (p. 95-105), returns to issues more closely linked to the relationship between fiction and history. In particular, it examines the process of *sīra*fication and "how it can be explained that an ancient Greek king, a foreign ruler, was fit to act in an Arabic *sīra*, composed some millennium and a half after date" (p. 97). In order to address this question Doufikar-Aerts analyses the interaction between historical and fictional data and aspects of identity and reception of the hero and his pendant.

In "Sayf b. Dhī Yazan: History and Saga" (p. 107-123), Giovanni Canova focuses on the figure of Sayf b. Ḏī Yazan, a Himyarite prince who freed Yemen from Abyssinian rule in the sixth century AD with the aid of the Persians and who later became the hero of one of the so-called Mamluk *siyar*, the *Sīrat fāris al-Yaman al-malik Sayf*. The article is devoted to the analysis of the historical personality of Sayf as it appears in the works of the historians Ibn Hišām, al-Ṭabarī, or al-Masʿūdī, and in Yemeni legendary accounts such as Wahb ibn Munabbih's *Kitāb al-Tīǧān* or the *qaṣīda ḥimyariyya* of Našwān b. Saʿīd al-Ḥimyarī. More specifically, Canova examines three main events which occurred in pre-Islamic and post-Islamic times that constitute the core of different Yemeni cycles. The conclusion is that "Sayf's story, as narrated in Arabic historical sources, might have been the very core of a South Arabian saga, possessing all the basic ingredients of a veritable epic" (p. 119).

The last contribution, "Conversion as a (Meta-) Historical Concept in the Epic Stories of the *Thousand and One Nights*" by Richard van Leeuwen (p. 125-137), returns to some issues discussed in the first part of the volume (in particular related to theoretical aspects of historicity in fictional narratives). It discusses the motif of conversion "as an element related to visions of historicity" (p. 127) in the so-called epic romances ʿUmar al-Nuʿmān and his sons and ʿAǧīb and Ġarīb included in the *Thousand and One Nights*. Regarding the techniques to incorporate the experience of reality in narrative texts, Van Leeuwen opts for the term "referentiality"(2) by referring, on the theoretical level, to the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and his distinction between epic and novelistic genres. As regards the scrutiny of the texts, van

(2) On this concept see Richard van Leuween, "Translation and Referentiality: The European Translations of the *Thousand and One Nights*", in *Orientalismo, Exotismo y Traducción*, ed. by Gonzalo F. Parrilla and Manuel C. Feria García, Cuenca, Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla, 2000, p. 191–207.

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Leeuwen assumes that a connection between the framing story and the epic romances "could be too rash" although there are points of contact (p. 36). The conclusions intertwine various issues concerning conversion and transformation (the most interesting: "for Muslim readers the act of conversion would represent and element of referentiality, linking the narrative to 'true' events, but not at the same time implying a form of mimesis as a replica of reality") which will certainly open new research perspectives in the field of Arabic narratology.

The index closes the volume (p. 139-149).

As can be seen from the presentation of the various contributions, this volume does not reach a univocal conclusion on the questions posed at the start. The peculiarities of (trans)formation and circulation of each *sīra*, and so its diverse relationships to history/historical chronicles/reports of the historians, as well as a variety of methodologies applied, draw different frameworks which leave great scope for further investigations on the subject.

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