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## The Muslim Mystic Who Fasted in His Cradle — What Does a 19<sup>th</sup> Century MS Tell of a 13<sup>th</sup> Century Saint?

In the following paper I shall discuss the problem of interpreting literary sources, using one specific example, namely that of a Muslim saint of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, as depicted in a 19<sup>th</sup> century manuscript. I shall examine the problem on three different levels: 1) the form, 2) the contents, and 3) the context. First, let us have a look at the MS in question and its subject.

### The MS and its subject

In the Library of Florence, there is an Arabic manuscript dated *Ramaḍān* 1250 (January 1835) and registered in the library catalogue in 1869–70. The MS is titled *Manāqib Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī*, or “The glorious deeds of Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī” (Manuscritti s. a.; Catalogo s. a.; Brockelmann 1949: 124; Brockelmann 1938: 153). The contents describe the legendary life of an Egyptian Sufi saint. The text also includes allusions to other religious characters from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, listed in chronological order. But the most space is dedicated to Ibrāhīm, whose miracles are depicted in a vivid manner starting from his early childhood.

Who was this man? From other sources we know that Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī lived between 653–696 / 1255–1296 and came from the little farming village of Dasūq in the Egyptian Delta. Some 200 years after his death he had become the national saint of Egypt, together with his contemporary Aḥmad al-Badawī (d. 675 / 1276). The tombs of both of these men are pilgrimage centers, and the Sufi orders established by them still function today — also outside Egypt. Very little is known of the life of this 13<sup>th</sup> century holy man. Al-Dasūqī's family background is traced to a Sufi origin by claiming that both of his parents had a linking to the main Sufi orders of the time, mainly the Rifā'iyya and the Shādhiliyya. He was educated first in a nearby vil-

lage and later at al-Azhar in Cairo whence he returned to his home village to teach. Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī lived during the Mameluk period, and there are stories about him taking part in the battles against the Crusaders and the Mongols.

The MS of Florence was thus written some six hundred years after the death of Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī. When describing the life of Ibrāhīm, the author starts with a miracle, told by Ibrāhīm himself: "I fasted in my cradle when I was one day old." This is by no means the only miracle described but I will use it as an example to illustrate problems involved with the study of documents.

### 1) The form

Let us now examine the MS more closely. What do we learn from its form and appearance? Can we learn something about the author? The name of the author is not mentioned anywhere in the MS, but we can draw some conclusions on the basis of the handwriting and the language used. It was definitely written by an Egyptian, most likely in Egypt, since on the back page there are calculations, irrelevant to the contents, made using Egyptian pounds. The somewhat clumsy handwriting, the obvious colloquialisms plus the many mistakes, both in spelling and grammar, lead us to think that the author was not a trained scholar (see e.g. MS 1: f. 17, 28). One might be tempted to think that the stories are based on oral tradition, which have transferred nearly unaltered from generation to generation — which is not unusual in the Arabic culture in which the roots of oral tradition lie deep. However, in this case we can find a literary source. The MS contains some exact quotations from an earlier work, namely the *Ṭabaqāt* of al-Sharnūbī (d. 994 / 1586), a Sufi genealogy. Either the author of the Florence MS used the *Ṭabaqāt* in a literary form or knew it by heart only — but at least we know that he must have been well versed in the existing tradition concerning al-Dasūqī.

Interestingly enough, the name of the author of the MS is given in the catalogue of the Florentine National Library as Muḥammad al-Bulqīnī. From where the cataloguist received this information, is obscure. Neither do we know whether al-Bulqīnī was the actual author or only the copyist of the text. But we can follow an interesting link: a man with the same name, Muḥammad al-Bulqīnī, was also responsible for the recording of the *Ṭabaqāt* of al-Sharnūbī. He is said to have been the student of al-Sharnūbī. This can be interpreted in two ways. Either Muḥammad al-Bulqīnī was a real student of al-Sharnūbī and thus his contemporary, in which case he must have still been alive

after al-Sharnūbī's death (994 / 1586) in order to have been able to record the *Ṭabaqāt* of his teacher. In this case he is the author of the text and it would be likely that he died fairly soon after his teacher, around the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

But since we know of no earlier versions of the *Ṭabaqāt* which would be edited by al-Bulqīnī, we must examine the other possibility, namely that al-Bulqīnī was a student in a spiritual sense and a copyist of a much later period. In that case, he must have been alive around the time when the MS of Florence was dated (1250 / 1835). This latter view is supported by Marcia K. Hermansen, who has used the lithograph edition of the *Ṭabaqāt* from 1863 and dates the contents of the text *and* al-Bulqīnī to the late 1800's, which seems more likely (Hermansen 1991: 326). Therefore we can assume that the author of the MS is the same al-Bulqīnī who wrote the *Ṭabaqāt* of al-Sharnūbī. This still does not reveal anything of al-Bulqīnī's person. We can presume that al-Bulqīnī either was a devotee of Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī or was asked to compose the work by some of his devotees.

## 2) The contents

Something about the contents has already been said, since they cannot always be treated separately from the form. But let us look more closely at the specific story we have chosen, namely that of Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī fasting in his cradle, told both in the MS of Florence and in its earlier model, the *Ṭabaqāt* of al-Sharnūbī. What does fasting in the cradle imply? In another context, it might prove that the child born is to become an ascetic, but in the Islamic context, this naturally refers to the fasting during the month of *Ramaḍān*, when one refuses both food and drink during daylight. In order for the fast to start, one has to witness the appearance of the new moon, and this has to be attested by the religious authorities.

There prevails a common opinion that Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī was born on the last of *Sha'bān*, that is, the night before *Ramaḍān*, even if the year is very much disputed. The story of the fasting was not invented by the author of the Florence MS but was first told in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Aḥmad Jalāl al-Dīn al-Karakī (> 1506). Al-Karakī was the head (*khalīfa*) of the Burhāmiyya order ascribed to al-Dasūqī, and therefore had all the interest to invest the saint with noble qualities. Al-Karakī wrote about the birth of Ibrāhīm: everybody was waiting for the appearance of the new moon, and among the persons involved was Ibn Hārūn, who was a local holy man and who is given a central

role in the story. Al-Karakī describes the events of that night (Khalaf Allāh 1969a: 34–35; see also 17, 37):

When he was born during the night following the 30<sup>th</sup> of *Shabān*, in 653, there was doubt about the moon of *Ramaḍān*. So Ibn Hārūn said: “See if the little one is suckling today.” His mother said that since the prayer-call [of *fajr*] he had refused her breast and had not suckled. --- Ibn Hārūn sent someone to tell her: “Do not worry, for when the sun sets, he will drink.” And he then ordered the people to [start] fasting.

In another version told also by al-Karakī (Khalaf Allāh 1969: 37), Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī tells about the event himself:

When I, the poor pauper ( *faqīr* ) --- was born from my mother, that was the year when I brought the glad tidings of fasting, for the moon was not to be seen. That was the first of my miracles from God.

It is an important point that at his birth the moon was not to be seen, and therefore the birth of al-Dasūqī and his refusal to suckle became the signal of the fast. Later authors stressed that there was no theological heresy involved. They interpret the story in the sense that the child’s fasting only proved the birth of a remarkable man — it was not enough to prove the beginning of *Ramaḍān*, since theologically, one has to witness the new moon (Khalaf Allāh 1969a: 17; Khalidi 1965). Here we have thus stepped onto the realm of theological debate, reflecting the conflict about justifying veneration of saints in general.

For an Islamic saint, to be born on the eve of *Ramaḍān* is an appropriate time indeed — especially since a miracle concerning the beginning of the fast is connected with him. Such a story was a proof of the child’s orthodox belief and of his meticulously correct religious observances from the very beginning of his life. The miracle proves that from his birth Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī had proper knowledge of the limitations of the holy law (*sharīʿa*). The purpose of this story is to assure his followers that anything he taught is trustworthy since he has a direct and firm connection with the source of the *sharīʿa*. During the centuries to follow, the story was mentioned in all the works describing the life and miracles of al-Dasūqī — even when no other supernatural act was mentioned. Later, other stories were produced to prove that Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī was conscious and aware of his fasting as a baby (on the theological reasoning concerning a child fasting, see Khalaf Allāh 1969b: 37).

In the earlier model of the Florence MS, namely the *Ṭabaqāt* of al-Sharnūbī, the same story is told by Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī himself. He is addressed by God and told to keep the fast:

Among my miracles is that my Lord manifested himself to me on the night I was born and told me: "Tomorrow is the first day of fasting, oh Ibrāhīm." And so I fasted although I was only one night old.

Al-Sharnūbī also mentions another miracle taking place at his birth: for the honour of Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī drums were beaten on earth and in heaven (al-Bulqīnī 1889: 4). The story of the fasting in the cradle has remained in the later works; for example, a prayer book from the 1980's retells the story in the following way (al-Qaḍī 1968: 47–48):

It is told that he fasted in his cradle. There was doubt about the moon of *Ramaḍān*, and Muḥammad ibn Hārūn was asked about the correct day — whether it was already *Ramaḍān* or still the end of *Sha'bān*. Ibn Hārūn then sent a *shaykh* to inquire about the newborn baby, and the mother told that the baby did not suckle after being born and that she was worried. Upon hearing this, Ibn Hārūn told the people to keep the fast for the rest of the day, and he sent a messenger to tell the mother not to worry, for when the sun would set, the infant would suckle.

We thus see that the story of fasting in the cradle gradually became an essential part of the image of al-Dasūqī. Therefore, it is not surprising that we should find it in the last century MS of Florence.

### 3) The context

So far we have concentrated on the explicit evidence that can be concluded from the MS itself. The basic question is thus, as with all literary sources, how do we know how to listen to the source. On the basis of the MS, we can thus make speculations about the author, the dating and the possible sources or models of the work. We can see that the MS describes the same holy man as the earlier works, in much the same manner. But what about the conclusions that cannot directly be drawn from the MS? Can we tell something about the motives for (re)-writing the story, the most interesting question being: why did al-Bulqīnī compose (or re-write) the same things twice? Why was there, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a need to take up a 13<sup>th</sup> century saint? Here we cannot rely on the contents of the MS alone

but have to view it from a further perspective. The source is silent. Or is it?

First, we must note that the two works, namely the earlier work of al-Sharnūbī, and the later MS, are not identical, even if both are ascribed to al-Bulqīnī. Even if the same stories are told, they are introduced in different contexts. The *Ṭabaqāt* of al-Sharnūbī depicts Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī among three other saints, and all four are described as being rivals for power. Also an ample description of the other saints is included. The MS of Florence, on the other hand, introduces al-Dasūqī together with a list of other Egyptian saints, and, as is clear from the title *Manāqib Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī*, underlines the status of al-Dasūqī as the highest saint of all. The stress is therefore clearly on al-Dasūqī and, what is of importance, on Egypt.

Why should a re-writing of this kind take place at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Here we have to look at the historical context. In Egypt, after the rule of Muḥammad ‘Alī in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a counter-reaction to the Westernization he had been propagating. Muḥammad ‘Alī had admired the West, and there had been exchange of teachers and students between Egypt and Europe. Muḥammad ‘Alī died in 1841, but his successors were not as favourable to Western ideas as he had been. The MS of Florence is dated 1835, shortly before Muhammad Ali’s death, and can be seen as a token of the rising national awareness and of the Egyptian identity, which later found their expressions in the persons and writings of Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905) and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1839–97). In developing these ideas, the national heritage had an important role.

Seen in this context, it was only natural that the saints were also examined in a new light. It is of interest, that most of the saints listed in the MS of Florence are of Egyptian origin. Al-Dasūqī provided a neat example of a national saint, and therefore, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he was taken into use again. This was simple to do, since the continuous change of tradition was already going on. He fulfilled many needs through his qualities — which of course are described in a very conventional manner: he was born in Egypt, therefore, he was a true Egyptian, he had opposed oppression and fought for the weak and thus served as a good example in fighting against the foreign influence in Egypt. He was also an ideal Muslim and a model for the Egyptian Muslim identity. The story of him fasting in the cradle served as a part of this image. Talking about the fasting, al-Dasūqī is made to say: “That was the first of my miracles from God.” This, together with the list of miracles following, leaves the reader or the listener in expectation of new miracles. And what these

miracles were or could be, was left for the future generations to report. We thus see that the 19<sup>th</sup> century MS does not tell so much of a 13<sup>th</sup> century saint but of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideals — and that this statement is due to a 20<sup>th</sup> century re-reading of the sources.

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