

A Mesopotamian Corpus—Between Enthusiasm and Rebuttal

Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila

The nineteenth-century Bibel und Babel controversy and the fight about Pan-Babylonism is familiar to all scholars interested in the history of Oriental studies, I believe. In the field of Arabic studies, there was a similar, although less commonly known and less influential controversy, centred on the so-called Nabatean corpus.

The Nabatean corpus was first brought to the attention of the scholarly world by the French scholar Étienne Quatremère in his 1835 paper in *Journal Asiatique* («Mémoire sur les Nabatéens»). His paper, though, received relatively little attention, and it was left to Daniel Chwolsohn in the 1850s, especially in his monographs (1856, 1859), to initiate a heated debate which was to last some decades before slowly petering out after some influential and extremely critical contributions, especially by Alfred von Gutschmid and Theodor Nöldeke.

What was this corpus and why did it cause a minor sensation in the mid-nineteenth century? The main text of the corpus is the so-called *Nabatean Agriculture* (*al-Filāḥa an-Nabaṭiyya*).¹ This text, as well as the other texts in the corpus, were supposedly translated from «Ancient Syriac» into Arabic by Ibn Waḥshiyya (d. 930) and, according to the Preface, the oldest parts of the book were some twenty thousand years old (Nab. Agr., pp. 5-9).² The texts are said to have been written by a group of scholars who belonged to the ancient inhabitants of Mesopotamia.

As cuneiform studies were still in their earliest phase in the 1850s, some scholars, like Chwolsohn, received this corpus very enthusiastically and saw in it a substantial source of information on Assyrians and Babylonians, known until then mainly from Biblical and Greek sources. Chwolsohn himself dated the «Ancient Syriac» original of the Nab. Agr. to the 16th century B.C. in his *Überreste* (1859: 65).

Chwolsohn did much important work in digging up references to this ancient culture from other sources and comparing them with the texts in the Nabatean corpus; he, for example, was the first to draw attention to the Tammūz ritual mentioned in these texts.³ Yet, Chwolsohn's

¹ In the following abbreviated as Nab. Agr. The history of the controversy surrounding the text has been reviewed by Fuat Sezgin (1971): 318-329.

² Translated in Hämeen-Anttila (forthcoming a).

³ Discussed in Hämeen-Anttila (2002).

enthusiasm got the upper hand of him and his fancy flew too high. He (1859: 80) brushed aside any linguistic problems there might have been in the translation process by simply referring to the supposed stability of Semitic languages,⁴ thus suggesting that the Arab Ibn Waḥshīyya should have been able to read the ancient text without problem.

After some positive first reactions, the scholarly world soon started to become suspicious and the more critical, mainly German, scholars showed inconsistencies in the corpus. They started to pile up counterarguments to prove that the texts could not have been written in the 16th century B.C., but must have been written considerably later. Finally, the widening of our direct knowledge of the cuneiform sources showed unequivocally that Chwolsohn was wrong: the Nabatean corpus did not provide us with an Arabic translation of any ancient Mesopotamian texts.

The detailed criticism by von Gutschmid (1861) actually put an end to the Nabatean enthusiasm, despite individual efforts by, e.g., Martin Plessner (1928-1929) to defend the text—and also to the scholarly production of Chwolsohn, which soon came to an end. The biting notes by Nöldeke (1876) helped seal the fate of the corpus for almost a century. Nöldeke went as far as to say (1876: 445): «Freilich sah ich bald, dass ein sorgfältiges Studium dieser Schriften für mich eine unverzeihliche Zeitverschwendung sein würde [...] Wenn ich hier einiges Weitere über letzteres Buch [the Nab. Agr., my addition, J. H-A] sage, so geschieht das, um Andere davon abzuhalten [sic!, my addition, J. H-A], sich mit demselben unnütze Mühe zu machen.»

Yet, it is remarkable that von Gutschmid's and Nöldeke's criticism actually touched only on the Mesopotamian hypothesis: having shown that the text could not date from the 16th century B.C., these scholars lost interest and declared it a forgery. This is despite the fact that the botanist E. H. F. Meyer had already, in his *Geschichte der Botanik* III (1856), shown the value of the work for botanical and agricultural studies, even though he admitted that the text was indeed a forgery in the sense that its author must have known Greek *Geoponica* literature and could thus not be pre-Greek. I find Nöldeke's comment on Meyer in his article of 1876 (pp. 452-453) symptomatic: «Dennoch möchte ich auch hier zur grössten Vorsicht mahnen. Ein Mann, der so keck erfindet, wird als Botaniker schwerlich bloss beobachtet haben.» Once the fictitious background was established, these scholars turned away from the text.

All these critics were, in a certain sense, right. The texts were not what they claimed to be. Yet this is not the whole picture. As I have endeavoured to show in a series of articles, the Nabatean corpus is, on the contrary, an extremely valuable source for Late Antiquity in Iraq. Anyone

⁴ «[...] lässt sich dieser Umstand einfach durch die Stabilität der semitischen Sprachen überhaupt leicht erklären.»

who reads these texts with a critical eye will soon note that they contain much material that has to be genuine in the sense that it is not fictitious but describes the existing rituals, beliefs and magic of the population of Iraq, either in the centuries before the Islamic conquest or soon after it—the exact dating of the material is remarkably problematic.⁵

The process by which this material was set aside for nearly a century may be instructive to study as it shows how the scholarly world may become polarized between unbridled enthusiasm and total rebuttal, which is precisely what also happened a few decades later in the Bibel und Babel controversy. A valuable corpus was set aside because it was introduced in a wrong way. Once its weak points were laid bare, the proverbial baby was thrown out with the bathwater. In the case of the Nabatean corpus, the texts also fell victim to what Thomas Bauer has aptly called *Frühzeitversessenheit* in another context;⁶ when the relative lateness of the corpus was proven, scholars lost their interest in it.

Moreover, nineteenth-century historiographical purism may have been in action here. The Nabatean corpus became, in a sense, a bastard with no known parent, or, in other words, a work without a proper author: even today it is difficult to say much about the author(s) of the Syriac original and it is equally problematic to assess how conscientious Ibn Waḥshiyya may have been as a translator, and how much new material he may have added to his translation.⁷ Also to be mentioned is the indignation which the text met once it was shown to be a «forgery», i.e., something else than it purported to be. Or, to modify Nöldeke's words, «a man, who so impudently makes things up, cannot have presented any material of any value at all.»

It seems to me that the nineteenth-century positivist attitude towards *Wissenschaft* left little room for anonymous and vaguely dated texts; what cannot be exactly dated and pinpointed to a certain time and place, evades positivist research. Not knowing whether the text was written in the sixth or the ninth century, in some Aramaic dialect or in Arabic, was too much for the scholars, who consequently condemned Ibn Waḥshiyya to almost a century of oblivion.

Yet it should have been obvious that the text was valuable, despite any problems of authenticity there may be: we know that the Arabic translation does stem from the tenth century—the text is mentioned in tenth-century literature,⁸ and it was soon widely distributed, providing

⁵ The text is discussed in Hämeen-Anttila (forthcoming b). It seems that the lost Syriac original dates from the sixth century or soon thereafter.

⁶ Bauer (2003): 3: «Die Maqāme ist zwar eine der wichtigsten Gattungen der arabischen Literatur [...], doch aufgrund ihrer späten Entstehung ebenfalls ein Opfer der Frühzeitversessenheit des orientalistischen Blicks.»

⁷ These questions are studied in Hämeen-Anttila (forthcoming b).

⁸ E.g., in Ibn an-Nadīm's *Fihrist*, pp. 207, 304, 378, 385, 433, 439-440. The biographical information on Ibn Waḥshiyya is resumed in Hämeen-Anttila (forthcoming b).

much material for the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* of (pseudo)-al-Majrīṭī.⁹ It extended its influence to Moses Maimonides in his *The Guide for the Perplexed* and also influenced later agronomic tradition in Arabic, especially Ibn al-ʿAwwām's *Kitāb al-Filāḥa* (and through that channel Mediaeval Spanish texts as well).¹⁰ It should also have been evident that the paganism described in the text was not a product of the imagination but did, in fact, fit rather well with what we know from other sources. Thus, the importance of the text should have been recognized, whatever its exact provenance or date, and whosoever its real author(s).

The use of the corpus, as well as Arabic sources for the study of Late Antiquity in general, also seems somewhat hampered by some rarely acknowledged axioms concerning Arabic and Islamic culture and its relation with the earlier cultures of the area, in our case Iraq.

The two main axioms which have obstructed Arabic sources from being taken seriously by scholars of earlier Near Eastern cultures seem to be the following. The main obstacle is the formerly widely held, although fortunately by now receding belief that Islam developed into its completion on the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, any similarities between Islamic doctrine, or literature, and the Ancient Mesopotamia should be attributed either to accidental similarity or, in a few cases, to a Common Semitic origin, as the influence of Mesopotamia or Hellenistic Syria in pre-Islamic Mecca was obviously limited.

Virtually all scholars in the field of early Islamic history have by now given up this model. Today we know that Islam came from the Peninsula in an embryonic state and developed in the Syro-Palestinian area and especially in Iraq to become the complex religious phenomenon it was in the ʿAbbāsīd period (750-1258).

Thus, when there are extra-Qurʾānic similarities between Islam and Judaism, Christianity or the earlier religious traditions in the Near East, we should turn our attention towards Syria and Iraq.¹¹ Of course, the strongest links are between Islam on the one hand, and Judaism and

⁹ Translated by Ritter & Plessner (1962).

¹⁰ The reception of the text exhibits an interesting bifurcation. Agronomical works selected passages of agronomical interest and excluded almost all mention of religion or magic, whereas esoteric texts were interested precisely in these. Thus, there are extremely few passages of the Nab. Agr., common to both *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* and Ibn al-ʿAwwām's *Kitāb al-Filāḥa*, despite the fact that both owe a considerable part of their text to Ibn Waḥshiyya.

¹¹ As an example of this, we might take the otherwise valuable study of David Halperin (1976) on the so-called Ibn Ṣayyād traditions. The author is able to show that links do exist between Jewish Merkavah mysticism and these traditions, but he goes wrong in situating these links on the Peninsula on the basis of the Islamic tradition, whereas one should have sought them from Iraq, where they are easy to demonstrate. The stories were fully developed in Iraq in the 8th century and retrojected back to the beginning of the seventh, and their source was on the Peninsula.

Christianity on the other, but one also finds in Islam, especially on the level of popular religion, material derivable from late Hellenistic paganism, itself heavily influenced by the earlier Syro-Mesopotamian tradition. Thus, Islamic magic, esoteric doctrines, extremist Shiism and other marginal phenomena should be carefully sifted for grains of ancient Near Eastern or Hellenistic influence.

The other major obstacle is closely connected with the preceding one. Many scholars take it for granted that Islam was an intolerant religion and must have rooted out all sorts of paganism which, consequently, must have disappeared early on or, at least, must have become extremely esoteric and thus cannot have left many traces in written sources. Thus, one may find opinions easily tossed around in, e.g., the field of the history of the Mandaic religion (e.g., Rudolph 1960-61, II: 28, note 5), taking it for granted that Mandaeans had to go underground the very moment Muslims invaded Iraq.

In fact, nothing could be less true. In its later phases, Islam has sometimes¹² shown intolerance towards other religions, but in the early period, which concerns us here, the invading Arabs were not much interested in the local people, as long as taxes were promptly paid and no uprisings were made against the new rulers.

Thus, there was no compelling reason to dismiss the Nabatean corpus without a critical study, a dismissal that has been going on now for a long time. The texts may contain passages added by the translator in the tenth century¹³ or fictitious elements made up by the author(s) of the «Ancient Syriac» original.¹⁴ This, however, should not lead us back to the idea of a wholesale forgery, as the genuine elements in the corpus clearly prove that it does have a strong foothold in Late Antiquity.

The Nabatean corpus is an important source for Late Antiquity and the *Weiterleben* of Mesopotamian cultural heritage, and it is almost inconceivable how its importance can have been ignored for a century after the groundbreaking, though overenthusiastic and partly misguided, contributions by Chwolsohn in the 19th century.¹⁵

¹² And sometimes not. The openly polytheistic Hindu religion encountered few problems in India, although in the eyes of the *Sharʿa* it should not have had any chances at all.

¹³ Besides those which he openly added under his own name and which contain interesting references to the deteriorating state of late paganism in the early tenth century.

¹⁴ To this latter category belongs the philosophizing tendency in the text. The author(s) wished to present the pagan religion as a more philosophic system than was probably ever the case on a popular level.

¹⁵ I leave here aside the question of the work by Toufic Fahd whose uncritical acceptance of the text's authenticity seems to have caused a counter-reaction among many Arabists: as the arguments of Fahd are, to say the least, shaky, his enthusiasm for

What relevance does this story have for Near Eastern studies in general? I believe that when considering possibly controversial issues, one should be very careful not to cause any counter-reactions, such as Chwolsohn's enthusiasm did. There is a sort of resistance to changing ideological positions and this should be taken into account. It is not enough that a scholar himself is enthusiastic; on the contrary, this may sometimes even be detrimental to his cause, which often involves much rewriting of history. Revolutionary theories should always be presented extremely cautiously in order not to cause unnecessary counter-reactions. A similar case could be made for the arguments put forth by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook in their *Hagarism* (1977), a book which has suffered a lot because of the exaggerated and overenthusiastic viewpoints of the authors, which have made some scholars blind to the merits of the study.

It also perhaps means that we have to take very seriously the fact that much of the research on Late Antique Iraq will have to be based on anonymous or pseudonymous sources; cases of cultural influence which are nicely documentable through written and dated texts, or by archaeological means, remain, after all, a minority. More often, I think, ancient Mesopotamian or Late Antique influences surface after perhaps centuries and thousands of miles of undocumentable passage.¹⁶ This means that for each and every trace of influence other possible explanations will arise which may be favoured by the scholarly world if one proceeds with too much enthusiasm for one's own hypothesis. The more revolutionary the theory is believed to be, the more hesitant one should be in presenting it.

Bibliography

- Bauer, Thomas (2003). «Die Leiden eines ägyptischen Müllers: Die Mühlen-Maqāme des Ibrāhīm al-Mi'mār (st. 749/1348).» In: Anke Ilona Blöbaum & Jochem Kahl & Simon D. Schweitzer (eds.), *Ägypten-Mönster. Kulturwissenschaftliche Studien zu Ägypten, dem Vorderen Orient und verwandten Gebieten*. (Festschrift Erhart Graefe). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2003, pp. 1-16.
- Chwolsohn, Daniel (1856). *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus*. I-II. St. Petersburg: Buchdruckerei der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Chwolsohn, Daniel (1859). *Über die Überreste der altbabylonischen Literatur in arabischen Übersetzungen*. Académie impériale des sciences de St. Pétersbourg. Mémoires des savants étrangers, VIII, 2, repr. Amsterdam: Oriental Press 1968.
- Crone, Patricia & Michael Cook (1977), *Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

the text has been seen as misplaced. Most of the articles by Fahd have been conveniently collected in the third volume of his edition of the Nab. Agr.

¹⁶ These ambiguous channels of transition should receive much of our attention and perhaps new methodological approaches need to be developed to deal with them.

- Gutschmid, Alfred von (1861). «Die Nabatäische Landwirthschaft und ihre Geschwister.» *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 15: 1-110.
- Halperin, David J. (1976). «The Ibn Ṣayyād Traditions and the Legend of al-Dajjāl.» *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 96: 213-225.
- Hämeen-Anttila, Jaakko (1999). «Ibn Waḥshiyya and magic.» *Anaquel de Estudios Arabes* 10/1999 [recte 2000]: 39-48.
- Hämeen-Anttila, Jaakko (2002). «Continuity of pagan religious traditions in tenth-century Iraq.» In: Antonio Panaino & Giovanni Pettinato (eds.), *Melammu Symposia III* (Proceedings of the Third International Melammu Conference, Chicago, October 2000). Milano, pp. 89-108.
- Hämeen-Anttila, Jaakko (forthcoming a). «Mesopotamian National Identity in Early Arabic Sources.» *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*.
- Hämeen-Anttila, Jaakko (forthcoming b). «The Nabatean Agriculture: Authenticity, Textual History and Analysis.» *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften*.
- Ibn al-ʿAwwām, *Kitāb al-Filāḥa* = Josef Antonio Banqueri, *Libro de agricultura*. I-II. Madrid: La Imprenta real 1802, repr. Ministerio de agricultura 1988. With a new preface by García Sánchez and J. Esteban Hernández Bermejo.
- Ibn an-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*. Ed. Ibrāhīm Ramaḍān. Bayrūt: Dār al-Maʿrifa 1415/1994.
- Ibn Waḥshiyya, *al-Filāḥa an-Nabaṭiyya* = Toufic Fahd (éd.), *L'agriculture nabatéenne. Traduction en arabe attribuée à Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Kasḍānī connu sous le nom d'IBN WAḤṢIYYA (IV/X^e siècle)*. I-III. Damas: Institut Français de Damas 1993-1998.
- Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Transl. M. Friedländer. Second revised edition. Routledge and Kegan Paul 1904, reprint New York: Dover Publications s.a.
- (pseudo-)al-Majrīṭī, *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*. [Das Ziel des Weisens]. Hrsg. Hellmut Ritter. Studien der Bibliothek Warburg XII. Leipzig & Berlin: Teubner 1933.
- Nöldeke, Theodor (1876). «Noch Einiges über die "nabatäische Landwirtschaft".» *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 29: 445-455.
- Plessner, Martin (1928-1929). «Der Inhalt der Nabatäischen Landwirtschaft. Ein Versuch, Ibn Waḥšija zu rehabilitieren.» *Zeitschrift für Semitistik* 6: 27-56.
- Quatremère, Étienne (1835). «Mémoire sur les Nabatéens.» *Journal Asiatique* 15: 5-55, 97-137, 209-271.
- Ritter, Hellmut & Martin Plessner (1962). «Picatrix». *Das Ziel des Weisens von Pseudo-Maḡrīṭī*. Studies of the Warburg Institute 27. London: The Warburg Institute & University of London.
- Rudolph, Kurt (1960-61). *Die Mandäer*. I-II. Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments. Neue Folge, 56. Heft. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Sezgin, Fuat (1971). *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*. IV. Leiden: Brill.

