



Medieval Arab Tales: The Kitāb al- Ḥikāyāt al- ‘Ajība wa-l-Akhhbār al-Gharība

Cambra LMA*

Department of Philology, University of Almeria, Spain

*Corresponding author: Cambra LMA, Department of Philology, University of Almeria, Spain;
E-mail: lmarvide (at) ual (dot) es

Abstract

The Kitāb al- Ḥikāyāt al- ‘Ajība wa-l-Akhhbār al-Gharība (Book of Amazing Stories and Rare News) is an anonymous work written in Arabic that collects forty-two stories which are similar to those found included in compendia of popular Arab literature of the Middle Ages, such as *The Thousand and One Nights*. This article is an introduction to its study, and it includes the editions and the translations made on this interesting book as well as its narrative structure and content, according to the manuscript Istanbul Ayasofya Müzesi no.3397, edited by Hans Wehr and Alexander von Bulmerincq in 1956.

Keywords: Kitāb al- Ḥikāyāt al- ‘Ajība wa-l-Akhhbār al-Gharība; Oriental short story; Arabic literature; Medieval tales; Arab tales

Introduction

The *Kitāb al- Ḥikāyāt al- ‘Ajība wa-l-Akhhbār al-Gharība* (Book of Amazing Stories and Rare News) is an Arabic anonymous work, as is usual in this type of compilation books. It collects forty-two stories, which are similar to those found included in compendia of popular Arab literature of the Middle Ages such as *The Thousand and One Nights*. This collection of forty-two stories remains in a single Arabic codex, the MS Istanbul Ayasofya Müzesi no. 3397 (XIII-XIV century), discovered by Hellmut Ritter in 1933 [1], and edited by Hans Wehr and Alexander von Bulmerincq in Damascus [2] and in Wiesbaden [3], in 1956; and later it was re-edited, in Cologne [4], in 1997, and in 2012 [5].

Only eighteen of the forty-two stories are preserved, and they include a total of twenty-six tales full of fantasy, adventure and imagination, which appear to constitute the first volume of the book. As I have already mentioned, some of the stories or legends enclosed in the pages of this work are an almost equal copy of *The Thousand and One Nights*’s stories or, at least, very similar to them, for example: The barber’s six brothers (story #3), Jullanār the Sailor (story #6), Abū Muḥammad the Lazy (story #11), Jubayr Ibn ‘Umayr and Budūr (story #8), etc.

The handwriting of the manuscript suggests that the copy was made around the 14th century, but its content indicates that the stories were compiled and, in some cases, composed around the

10th century in Syria or Egypt. The codex dates from approximately the beginning of the 14th century, and is therefore of the same date as the oldest known manuscript of *The Thousand and One Nights* used by Adolf Galland for his work in the early 18th century [6], and which was the basis for the critical edition of Muhsin Mahdi [7].

The origin of the tale as a genre is found in the Eastern peoples, mainly India and Persia. The Arabs transmitted and enriched it with their contributions, and thus it was known in Europe. This collection of stories is framed within this framework. The ancient Oriental narrative of legends, tales, fables and apologues is very present in almost all Medieval and Renaissance Christian works. Many their books were versioned in European languages, and they left important traces in later both writings and authors: *Calila e Dimna*, *Sendebār*, *El Conde Lucanor* of Don Juan Manuel; and *Decameron* of Giovanni Boccaccio, among others, are very illustrative examples.

The Kitāb al- Ḥikāyāt al- ‘Ajība wa-l-Akhhbār al-Gharība

The title and the subject of the forty-two stories narrated in this interesting book are the following:

1. Story of King of Bahrayn
2. Story of Ṭalḥa and Ṭuḥfa

Received date: 31 December 2020; **Accepted date:** 05 January 2021; **Published date:** 08 January 2021

Citation: Cambra LMA (2021). Medieval Arab Tales: The Kitāb al- Ḥikāyāt al- ‘Ajība wa-l-Akhhbār al-Gharība. SunText Rev Arts Social Sci 2(1): 113.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51737/2766-4600.2021.013>

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3. Story of the six peoples
4. Story of the four searches
5. Story of the forty girls
6. Story of Jullanār the Sailor
7. Story of ‘Arūs al-‘Arā’is
8. Story of Budūr and ‘Umayr
9. Story of ‘Uṣfūr Abī Dīsa
10. Story of Al-Sūl and Al-Shumūl
11. Story of the sloth and the monkey
12. Story of Miqdād and Al-Mayyāsa
13. Story of Sa‘īd Ibn Hātim Al-Bāhīlī
14. Story of Al-ṣakhr and Al-Khansā’
15. Story of the eulogy of the Prophet
16. Story of Muḥammad Al-Mawjūd and Hārūn Al-Rashīd
17. Story of Al-Ashraf and Al-Anjab
18. Story of the enchanted mountain
19. Story of Al-Mawhūb and Al-Maḥliyya
20. Story of Salmā and Al-Walīd
21. Story of the Barmaki thief
22. Story of Jamīla Al-Badawiyya
23. Story of Sa‘d and Ḥassān
24. Story of Fawz and Al-‘Abbās
25. Story of the singer Ḥazwa
26. Story of Aḥmad Al-Shārib
27. Story of Ardashīr Ibn Māhān
28. Story of the golden dove
29. Story of Aḥmad Al-‘Anbarī
30. Story of the ebony horse
31. Story of Al-‘Aqūlī
32. Story of Badr and the vizier
33. Story of Shams Al-Quṣūr
34. Story of Salmān
35. Story of the bamboo island
36. Story of the island of emeralds
37. Story of the stunned king
38. Story of King Shizarān
39. Story of Bayāḍ and Riyāḍ
40. Story of Tāhir Ibn Khāqān
41. Story of Abū-l-Faraj Al-Iṣfahānī
42. Story of the girl who swallowed the blade

In the first folio of the Istanbul manuscript the forty-two stories are cited, although, as I have already said, only eighteen have been preserved, and the story no.15 named the *Tale of Prophet’s eulogy* is missing.

There are translations to German (story #5) [8,9]; English (full) [10]; French (story #7) [11]; (stories #5, #9, #14, and #18) [12]; and Spanish (story #3) [13].

Conclusion

The *Kitāb al- Ḥikāyāt al-‘Ajība wa-l-Akḥbār al-Gharība* (Book of Amazing Stories and Rare News), an interesting collection of tales copied about the 14th century, is framed into the process of origin and transmission of Oriental short stories to Europe, and so its study is very important for history of literature, since it helps to increase knowledge of this genre.

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