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ISLAM AS THE SOURCE OF ALL WONDERS: ARAB AND ISLAMIC IDENTITY IN AL-SARAQUSŢĪ'S MAQĀMĀT AL-LUZŪMIYYA

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Abstract: As a result of the political fragmentation and disorientation that followed the dissolution of the Umayyad caliphate in al-Andalus, new forms of authority were being sought in both political and religious spheres. This article argues that in his twelfth-century Maqāmāt al-luzūmiyya, Abū al-Ṭāhir Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf ibn al-Ashtarkuwī al-Saraqusṭī responds to and reflects on this upheaval. By placing his maqāmāt in their historical and literary context, it is possible to discern a critique of Arab identity as a primary means of self-identification in Andalusi and Islamic societies. In its stead, al-Saraqusṭī highlights the importance and marvelous nature of a religious unity capable of transcending ethno-cultural differences. His tales warn that a sense of inherited Arab superiority should not take precedence over the observance of Islamic ideals, and that the glories of the Arab past should not outweigh the wonders of Islam manifest in the contemporary world.

In the centuries following the dissolution of the Umayyad caliphate of Córdoba in 1031, political upheaval became the norm in al-Andalus. The fragmented *ṭāʾifa* kingdoms that emerged from the erstwhile caliphate vied for power not only with one another, but also with Christian kingdoms in the north and new Islamic dynasties across the Strait of Gibraltar. While al-Andalus had always been home to a multiplicity of peoples, questions of ethno-cultural and religious identity gained new relevance, and were explored in new ways, as political unity became increasingly elusive. It is in this context that we ought to read the *Maqāmāt al-luzūmiyya* of Abū al-Ṭāhir Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf ibn al-Ashtarkuwī al-Saraqusṭī, an Andalusī scholar and writer who died in 1143.¹

Unlike many of his contemporaries, who turned to Arab ancestry (real or fabricated) in search of political legitimacy, I suggest that al-Saraqusṭī in his *maqāmāt* presents a powerful critique of Arab heritage as a primary means of self-identification in Andalusī and Islamic societies. Nostalgia for the Arabic poetic tradition is a recurrent theme throughout the text, but the idealization of Arab literary and cultural heritage is continually revealed to be a misguided sentiment that produces ruinous consequences. Al-Saraqusṭī thus locates Arab identity, especially as it draws on pre-Islamic poetic traditions and tribal affiliations, firmly in the past.

The critique of Arab superiority is also linked to a critique of religious division and certain trends within Islam. As a result of the political fragmentation and disorientation that followed the dissolution of the Umayyad caliphate in al-Andalus, Maribel Fierro has proposed that the eleventh and twelfth centuries constituted an “age of spiritual crisis” (“Spiritual Alienation” 255). This upheaval meant that new forms of authority were being sought in both political and religious spheres, and I argue that al-Saraqusṭī’s *maqāmāt* both reflect and weigh in on these debates. He critiques aspects of Sunni, Shiʿi, and Sufi thought without

¹ See two modern Arabic editions, by Hasan ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Warāklī and Badr Aḥmad Ḍayf, as well as Spanish and English translations, by Ignacio Ferrando Frutos and James T. Monroe. All English quotations of the *maqāmāt* in this article are taken from Monroe’s translation, rendered with an eloquence I do not attempt to match, and all Arabic quotations are from al-Warāklī’s edition, though without all of the vocalizations he includes.



appearing to reject any of them wholesale. Instead, as I will demonstrate, he supports religious principles that promote unity and individual moral responsibility, and that shy away from hypocrisy and an over-reliance on charismatic religious leaders.

In the *Maqāmāt al-luzūmiyya*, virtue and worth stem from personal choice and practice, and the ability to distinguish between appearances and reality, rather than from ancestry, fate, or predestination. Likewise, the tales serve as a warning that a sense of inherited Arab ethnic and cultural superiority should not take precedence over the observance of Islamic ideals, and that the glories of the Arab past should not outweigh the wonders of Islam manifest in the world. Ultimately, then, the *Maqāmāt al-luzūmiyya* value united religious identity above more divisive and culturally-specific ethnic ones, and thus to some extent suggest a separation of religious and ethno-cultural identities. Interestingly, the purpose of this separation does not seem to have been to facilitate interfaith relations, as modern scholarship so often highlights in the medieval Iberian context, but instead to unify what must have seemed like an increasingly fragmented Islam from within.

The title of the *Maqāmāt al-luzūmiyya* refers to the unnecessarily strict and difficult rhyme scheme al-Saraqṣṭī imposed on himself in an attempt to demonstrate his literary and linguistic superiority and his mastery of the form. The same can be argued of his attention to the content of his tales, though they share a number of similarities with earlier collections. The *maqāma* literary form emerged in the Middle East in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, first composed by the famed writer al-Hamadhānī.² By the early twelfth century, al-Ḥarīrī, working from Basra, further popularized what came to be the classical form of the *maqāma*

² Al-Hamadhānī also engaged in the question of ethno-cultural identities. As the narrator in his *maqāmāt* travels throughout the Middle East, he consistently encounters a trickster character, who proclaims his Alexandrian origins while also suggesting that ethnic identities are not necessarily fixed categories. He recites, “Verily, God has servants who have adopted a manifold existence, in the evening they are Arabs, in the morning Nabateans,” and in a later *maqāma* inverts this statement, saying, “My genealogy is in the hands of Time, if it is hard upon it, it will change. In the evening a Nabatean am I, in the morning an Arab” (Al-Hamadhānī 81, 153).

written in *saja*,³ or rhymed prose, and generally presented in collections of fifty individual tales occurring across a wide variety of locales. Each *maqāmā* is related to the others in a given collection in that they are narrated by the same character, who in each tale encounters a fellow trickster/anti-hero, whom he does not always recognize immediately. The tone of these *maqāmāt* is often picaresque, with the testimony of the narrator rendered highly suspect, and the ultimate intention or message of the tales open to interpretation.³ The narrator and the trickster in the *maqāmāt* frequently con one another, and occasionally join forces to swindle and cheat third parties as well.⁴ Because of their lack of a clear chronology, however, collections of *maqāmāt* can be difficult to analyze as coherent works. Nonetheless, the individual *maqāmāt* in al-Saraqūṣṭī's collection display a number of thematic connections.

Al-Saraqūṣṭī takes advantage of the highly ambiguous and at times deliberately misleading nature of the form to call various assumptions about Arab and Muslim identity into question. He also uses the diversity of settings characteristic of the *maqāmāt* to emphasize the importance of religious unity as opposed to clinging to more divisive ethno-cultural identities. The two main characters that appear in each tale of the *Maqāmāt al-luzūmiyya* are the narrator, al-Sā'ib, and the trickster, Abū Ḥabīb al-Sadūsī. Beginning in the first *maqāmā*, each is described on multiple occasions as descended from various Arab tribes (al-Saraqūṣṭī 117). Though al-Saraqūṣṭī himself was Andalusī, he followed the precedent set by al-Hamadhānī in situating his tales in a wide variety of locales. Only a handful of his *maqāmāt* take place in or refer to al-Andalus, indicating that his work was aimed at the Islamic world more broadly (46). Various other characters also make reference to their Arab cultural heritage, and boast of their specific tribal affiliations.

However lauded, this noble heritage does not prevent al-Sā'ib and Abū Ḥabīb from behaving dishonorably throughout their travels. In one

³ For connections between the *maqāmāt* and the Spanish picaresque, see Ramírez-Nieves, *Repenting Roguery*, and Young, *Rogues and Genres*.

⁴ For a thorough overview of the development of the *maqāmāt*, see Hämeen-Anttila.



maqāma, a group of Berbers in Tangier shows the pair a great deal of hospitality, which they nonetheless disdain. While proclaiming their own Arab lineage, they mock the language of the Berbers, describing it as “unintelligible” and “jabbering.” The narrator depicts them as a “swarm of ants or locusts,” and disparages their offerings of food and drink (419-20).⁵ Although the Berbers are fellow Muslims, al-Sā’ib and Abū Ḥabīb choose to focus on their differences as inferiorities. The kindness of the Berbers is poorly repaid by the pair, who make off with their hosts’ valuables during the night. The ideal of Arab hospitality is thus better embodied by the Berbers, alien though their customs may seem.

The North African setting of this *maqāma* is significant in several respects. It is one of only four *maqāmāt* in the collection that take place in or make reference to al-Andalus. Furthermore, as James Monroe and Ignacio Ferrando Frutos have noted, this tale must be read in the context of the Almoravid presence in al-Andalus. Anti-Berber sentiment was high, due in part to the role of Berbers in the turmoil that accompanied the dissolution of the Umayyad caliphate in the first half of the eleventh century, and the imposition of the rule of the new North African Almoravid dynasty in the latter half. Al-Saraqūṣṭī acknowledges anti-Berber stereotypes and turns them on their head, portraying Berbers in this case as more honorable and trustworthy than Arabs. Moreover, he indicates that such divisions between Berbers and Arabs are unproductive, and may even be dangerous. After noting that he could “survey the portals of the Frankish lands” from the coast of Tangier, al-Sā’ib says that the animal-like speech and customs of the Berbers cause him to become “satisfied with the clatter of bells” (418).⁶ This is likely a reference to church bells. Coming from an author whose home city of Zaragoza was conquered by Christians in 1118, this can be read as a warning against privileging an ethno-cultural identity over a religious one, and preferring Christian neighbors to Muslim ones.

The tendency to divide groups culturally and ethnically between Arabs and non-Arabs is also critiqued in the *maqāmāt* through the repeated use of

⁵ “يراطن القوم رطانة...وبعثت من كثرتهم الذر أو الجراد” (al-Warākli 386-87).

⁶ “أشرفت منها على أبواب افرنجة...وقنعت...بصلصلة الجرس” (al-Warākli 385).

the imagery of the *nab'* and the *gharab* trees. The two appear, most often paired, in various *maqāmāt* in the collection in such a way that they can be read as symbolizing Arabs and non-Arabs. The function of the *nab'* tree and the meaning of the word *gharab* lend themselves to this analysis. The *nab'* tree was known to produce wood for bows and arrows (122 n. 12). Throughout the *Maqāmāt al-luzūmiyya*, pre-Islamic Arabs are described as celebrated warriors, and arrow imagery is associated both with Arabs and with fate. The root of the Arabic word *gharab*, meanwhile, denotes strangeness, foreignness, and separation.

The second *maqāma* in the collection makes this connection explicit, when Abū Ḥabīb complains that time “has compared the *nab'* to the *gharab*, and the foreigner to the Arab” (al-Saraqustī 122).⁷ In a later *maqāma*, Abū Ḥabīb comments to a Bedouin that “all of us constitute the single nation of the Arabs; we all distinguish the *nab'* from the *gharab*, we all vie with others for glory in our accomplishments, and we all carefully preserve the record of our genealogies” (215-16).⁸ The use of the first-person plural emphasizes that the desire to distinguish between Arabs and non-Arabs was a common one, which drew together Arabs from different tribal backgrounds who found themselves scattered throughout the *dār al-Islām*. This ethno-cultural division is also directly related to a lesser concern for religious forms of identity when Abū Ḥabīb continues his speech, saying, “Furthermore, we all possess heroic aspirations and a proud pre-Islamic (*jāhiliyya*) past that neither Islam itself, nor belief in the latter have been able to displace, nor have the days and the ages succeeded in erasing it” (216).⁹

Significantly, the pairing of the terms *nab'* and *gharab* also appears in multiple refutations of Andalusī *shu'ūbiyya* texts. Before making its way to Iberia, the *shu'ūbiyya* genre had emerged in Persia, the product of non-Arab writers who argued that the privileging of Arab identity among Muslims was unjustified. In the first half of the eleventh century, an Andalusī named

⁷ (al-Warākli 26). “الزمان...فاضَلَّ النَّبْعَ بِالْغَرْبِ، والعجم بالعرب”

⁸ (al-Warākli 149). “ونحن معشر العرب، فميز النَّبْعَ مِنَ الْغَرْبِ، ونفاخر بالأحساب، ونحافظ على الأنساب”

⁹ (al-Warākli 149). “همم أبية، وجاهلية عبية، لم يردّها الاسلام والایمان، ولا محتها الأيام والأزمان”



Ibn García (Gharsīyya) wrote one such *shu'ūbiyya* text, defending the proud Roman and Persian heritage of non-Arab Muslims in al-Andalus.¹⁰ Over the course of the next century, however, his claims were roundly rejected by multiple other writers who sought to reaffirm Arab ethnic and cultural superiority. One such refutation responds that non-Arabs ought to “hand over the whole of the prize to the Arabs, and grant superiority to the *nab'* over the *gharab*” (Monroe, *Shu'ūbiyya* 60).¹¹ A second, anonymous refutation admonishes Ibn García to “recognize that courage belongs to the Arabs and that the *nab'* tree is not of the same kind as the *gharab*” (65).¹²

The appearance of the imagery of the *nab'* and the *gharab* trees in multiple Andalusī texts from the eleventh and twelfth centuries allows us to draw two conclusions. First, multiple writers used these images in very similar ways, as clear symbols for Arabs and non-Arabs. Second, the discourse surrounding this kind of ethno-cultural division was contentious and pervasive in al-Andalus at the time. I suggest that al-Saraqūṣṭī presents the distinction between Arabs and non-Arabs as an artificial one that overlooked what should have been more important aspects of religious unity, and implies that the successful construction of a common identity for Arabs from different tribes living in different places in fact impeded the realization of a broader Muslim identity.

¹⁰ On which see Larsson, *Ibn García's Shu'ūbiyya Letter*.

¹¹ “وتجعل الخصل كله للعرب، والفضل للنج على الغرب” (Abū Yaḥyā ibn Ma'sāda, *Nawādir*, ed. Hārūn 290). The word *khaṣl*/خَصْل, translated by Monroe as “prize,” is specifically connected with wagers placed on arrow-shooting matches, and thus underlines the association of the *nab'* with arrows and Arabs (Lane, *Lexicon* p. 751).

¹² “فتعلم أن البأس للعرب، وأن النج ليس من الغرب” (*Nawādir*, ed. Hārūn 296). From another refutation: “When the Arabs loosened your bonds from the defilement of uncircumcision...did you not rise against them with their own saber, strive to outdo them in their own speech, shoot at them with their own arrows from a bow made with a piece of their own *nab'* wood?” (Monroe, *Shu'ūbiyya* 76); in the original Arabic: “أحين فكت [العرب] أسرك من أقذورة القلف...ناهضتها بحسامها، وجاهضتها بكلامها، ورميتهما” (Abū al-Ṭayyib 'Abd al-Mun'im ibn Mann Allāh al-Qarawī, *Nawādir*, ed. Hārūn 311). Another refutation by Dhū al-Wizāratayn Abū 'Abd Allāh ibn Abī al-Khiṣāl al-Ghāfiqī was titled “The lightning-bright bedazzling, and the reproach of the apostate, in refutation of Ibn García the goddess, insofar as the latter claims superiority for the non-Arabs at the expense of the Arabs, and strikes the *nab'* with the *gharab*” (Monroe, *Shu'ūbiyya* 93); in the original Arabic: “خطف [البارق] وقذف المارق في الرد على ابن غرسية الفاسق في تفضيله العجم على العرب وقرعه النج بالغرب” (al-Balawī 350).

Alongside claims to an Arab tribal identity that by the twelfth century in al-Andalus and North Africa was often more imagined than real, characters in the *maqāmāt* make repeated recourse to the tropes and devices of the Arabic literary tradition. Importantly, they generally employ elaborate poetic description to beguile and trick one another for monetary gain. This highlights a recurrent theme of the collection, which plays with the comparative truth values of prose and poetry. As Monroe notes, whereas in the Qur'an prose is the vehicle of truth, and poetry of untruth, in the *maqāmāt* the opposite is the case, such that it is "an inversion of noble genres; in this case, of holy scripture." Nonetheless, Monroe maintains that "since the truth conveyed in the poetry of the *maqāma* is cynical in nature . . . it is clear that it is a false truth, as a result of which, the Qur'an is ultimately validated, and we find ourselves once again being taught by negative example" (Introduction 9). Along these lines, it is significant that Arabic poetry in the *Maqāmāt al-luzūmiyya* is often associated with pre-Islamic literary tradition. The longest *maqāma* in the collection is an extended discussion of the characteristics of various poets, including many from the pre-Islamic period (al-Saraqusṭī 307-30). Even poets writing after the prophet Muhammad are mentioned in the context of how they fit into this ancient tradition. Emphasizing poetry in its pre-Islamic context highlights it as part of a specifically Arab cultural heritage, and poetry is continually shown to be misleading throughout the *maqāmāt*.

A favored trope from pre-Islamic poetry involves opening a panegyric *qasīda* with an elegy mourning an abandoned campsite. This device appears multiple times in al-Saraqusṭī. In the two most significant examples, this mourning is also intimately connected with a sense of nostalgia for a lost past extending far beyond that of the campsite. In one *maqāma*, a Bedouin youth mopes around an abandoned campfire, reciting, "If only times now past could be brought to life again" (al-Saraqusṭī 125-26).¹³ He circles and venerates the campsite as if it were the Ka'ba, in a blasphemous imitation of hajj rituals. Al-Saraqusṭī thus portrays a pre-

¹³ "لو أن دهرًا مضى يعاد" (al-Warākli 34).



Islamic poetic trope being held in such high esteem that it undermines religious devotion.

Interestingly, the Bedouin youth in this *maqāma* also makes mention of a place called Zarūd, now “empty of its inhabitants” (126).¹⁴ Though this could refer to a mountain in the Hijaz, it seems more likely that it references a village near Qayrawan—because in another *maqāma*, al-Sā’ib, who mocks the Bedouin youth for his unwarranted melancholy, finds himself similarly weeping over the ruins of Qayrawan after it was sacked by the Banu Hilal, an Arab tribe, in 1057. He describes how he “halted before those ruins and tracings, and felt nostalgia for those vestiges and tattoo-like markings” (al-Saraqusṭī 302).¹⁵ The trickster Abū Ḥabīb finds him absorbed in such ruminations, and acknowledges that “these ruins are marvels indeed,” but cautions his companion, “Mourn not for what has befallen you, but kindle instead the shining spark of prudence amid these ruined habitations” (304-5).¹⁶

The effort to redirect grief over a lost past towards a more realistic present and future is key. As Alexander Elinson has argued, “the ruins over which the narrator gazes are the vividly remembered ruins of the city of Qayrawan, as well as the crumbling edifice of the classical Arabic poetic tradition itself” (72). This *maqāma* thus suggests that using the pre-Islamic poetic trope of mourning an abandoned campsite to mark the destruction of Qayrawan indulges in nostalgia for a lost literary tradition that was abstract, intangible, and part of a specific Arab cultural heritage. It lingers and attempts to draw the present into a romanticized past, without suggesting any concrete concern for the future or for rebuilding the ruined city, which was the result of political and military conflicts between Muslims. I suggest, therefore, that we read the *maqāma* as an attempt to redirect such longing to a unified Islam, rather than to a specific pre-Islamic ethno-cultural heritage, such as the one drawn on by the destructive, and Arab, Banu Hilal.

¹⁴ “أقفر من أهله زرود” (al-Warākli 34).

¹⁵ “فعبثت على تلك الأطلال والرسوم، وتفتت إلى تلك الآثار والوسوم” (al-Warākli 256).

¹⁶ “إن هذه للعجائب...ولا تبك ما قد فات واقدح بزاهر” (al-Warākli 258).

In yet another *maqāma*, the idea of ancestry as a standard by which to judge worth is exposed to more blatant ridicule, when the narrator al-Sā'ib is convinced to purchase what he is told is a purebred Arab steed descended from a long line of famous pre-Islamic horses. As it turns out, the horse is in fact a rather sorry creature, whose wrinkled and hairless hide and missing molars have been concealed by the trickster through the skillful application of henna and turmeric. The narrator has been fooled because of his willingness to have faith in abstract verbal descriptions of a magnificent horse, rooted in pre-Islamic poetic precedent, rather than following the physical evidence before his very eyes—to believe in the legend of the past rather than the reality of the present (al-Saraqustī 355-62). Here again, poetry proves to be the language of falsehood, and is used quite often in the *maqāmāt* as a means of parting characters from their money, as we shall see again.

Though multiple *maqāmāt* focus specifically on Arab identity, al-Saraqustī's ethno-cultural critique is not limited to the pride of the Arabs. One *maqāma* opens with the narrator mourning the lost Egyptian past as he stands before the pyramids. A man speaking to a crowd nearby—Abū Ḥabīb, of course—notes rather pointedly that “the Pyramids are a *memento mori* . . . erected for you by Time, as admonishing examples that the ages have rendered proverbial . . . Man deems what is distant to be marvelous, out of curiosity and expectation, yet despises what is near” (243).¹⁷ Al-Saraqustī thus uses the pyramids as an example of the ways that non-Arab civilizations such as the Egyptians tended to locate their identity in pre-Islamic monuments and accomplishments. The *maqāma* reinforces for the audience that dwelling on the glory of past civilizations, whether Arab or Egyptian, as if they ought to remain part of the present, is ultimately fruitless.

Persians too are a target of this critique. In another *maqāma*, Abū Ḥabīb poses as a Persian man and gives a lengthy speech on the greatness of the Persian past and cultural heritage. He claims that, “we Persians possess

¹⁷ “ولا تروُنْ أنَّها [الاهرام] معام تذكاء...قد نصبتْها الأيام مثلاً وضربتْها الأزمان أمثالاً...يستغرب البعيد تطلعاً وتشفواً، ويستهن القريب” (al-Warākli 183).



towns and large cities, just as you Arabs possess the *muḥājirūn* and the *anṣār*,” referring to supporters of the prophet Muhammad from Mecca and Medina, respectively. He continues,

To us belong the scholars and men of learning, just as the men of noble origin and forbearance belong to you. Islam came to us, and we received it hospitably . . . We are its foundation and support, while it inclines or stands erect according to our will . . . No one can vie with us in superiority, in marksmanship, or in archery. (al-Saraqṣṭī 191-92)¹⁸

Interestingly, then, he asserts a Persian cultural preeminence in the same terms used to discuss Arab heritage. Likewise, both Arab and Persian claims of superiority are revealed to stem from the same misguided pride. Abū Ḥabīb suggests that Islam owes its success to the Persians, rather than acknowledging that the Persians (and, by extension, the Arabs and the Egyptians) owe their success to Islam.

This *maqāma* is also notable because Abū Ḥabīb proceeds to regale al-Sāʿib, who has yet to recognize him, with the poetic description of a beautiful slave girl. Among her many praiseworthy qualities are her “breasts like apples that had been stamped with ambergris . . . buttocks as broad as spreading sand dunes, and flanks that swayed from side to side in the same way that hope and despair alternate with one another” (194).¹⁹ These images, characteristic of Arabic poetry, move al-Sāʿib to spend all his remaining funds to purchase the girl—only to find that she is not a slave at all, but the free daughter of the trickster Abū Ḥabīb, and cannot be bought. Al-Sāʿib is again cheated out of his money as a result of his faith in beautiful but unsubstantiated words. The *maqāma* thus exemplifies an important message of the collection as a whole, cautioning against the seductions of both poetic description and the idealization of the glory of past civilizations, especially above that of Islam.

¹⁸ “لنا المدائن والامصار، كما منكم المهاجرون والانصار، ومنا العلماء والحكماء، كما منكم الأصلاء والحلماء، أئانا الاسلام فقريناه القبول...” (al-Warākli 120-21). “فنحن ملاكه وقوامه، وبنا صغاه وقوامه...فما لنا في الناس مفاضل، ولا مرام ولا مناضل

¹⁹ “فإذا نهد كالتفاح، قد خُتِمَ بالعنبر النفاح...وكفل رداح، كما انداح من الرمل منداح، وعطف مياس كما تعارض الرجاء والياس” (al-Warākli 122).

As we have seen, al-Saraqṣṭī's *maqāmāt* critique the imposition of divisions between Arabs and non-Arabs on the basis of ethno-cultural identities. Many of the same elements just discussed are also present in his *maqāma* of the 'anqā', a legendary bird often associated with the phoenix.²⁰ The *maqāma* of the 'anqā' differs from the *maqāmāt* already examined in two important ways that merit a more extended discussion. First, it does not focus on refuting the wonders of the pre-Islamic past but instead opens a discussion on the misleading wonders to be found in distant lands. Second, it asserts a model of Muslim identity counter to that of the Arab identity elaborated and critiqued in other *maqāmāt*, ultimately proposing that the unreachable marvels of distant times and places pale in comparison to the wonders of Islam.

In this *maqāma*, the fictional narrator, al-Sā'ib, recounts an episode from his time in China. There he befriends a youth whose learning he greatly admires, but who is nonetheless completely taken in by the trickster, who regales an assembled crowd with the tale of his supposed travels in the Maghrib and his encounter with an ascetic (*zāhid*) and a large bird ('anqā').²¹ Abū Ḥabīb tells the Chinese crowd that while he and his companions were traveling in the Maghrib, they came upon a stretch of land that suddenly began carrying them in the opposite direction, heading towards the sea. As it turned out, they had managed to walk onto an enormous sea creature, a turtle whose back appeared to be an expanse of sand. Once the turtle reached its destination, Abū Ḥabīb said that the land beneath him and his companions sank into the sea, leaving them helpless in the water and forced to swim to an island of a more stationary variety.

There they beheld a giant bird, the 'anqā', bathing itself in the sea and hunting for fish, which awed and terrified the travelers. Shortly afterward they encountered an unkempt ascetic, who explained the nature of the

²⁰ Though 'anqā' has often been translated as "phoenix" in English, Pedro Buendía argues persuasively that the 'anqā' in Arabic literature generally did not share the primary characteristics associated with the phoenix in the Greco-Latin tradition ("Acerca del Ave Fénix"). For another interpretation of the 'anqā' in this *maqāma*, see Hamilton, "The Speech of Strangers."

²¹ The 'anqā' also appears briefly in another *maqāma* in the collection (483).



turtle that transported them unwittingly from land out to sea. “How many a man has perished because of this turtle,” the ascetic informed them, “Praise be to Him who ordained your deliverance” (374-75).²² Abū Ḥabīb and his companions were allowed to climb onto the back of the ‘*anqā*’, which returned them whence they came, reversing the work of the giant turtle. It is at this point, with Abū Ḥabīb having finished delivering his tall tale to the attentive crowd in China—which will presumably reward the trickster monetarily for bringing them news of such wonders—that the narrator al-Sā’ib recognizes his erstwhile companion (379). As is typical in many of al-Saraqusṭī’s *maqāmāt*, Abū Ḥabīb then recites a section of verse excusing his behavior and makes off with his ill-gotten gains.

It would have been clear to al-Saraqusṭī’s Andalusī audience that the Maghrib was not home to fantastic beasts like the island-sized turtle and the giant bird that so captivated the trickster’s audiences in China. Nonetheless, the western Mediterranean was often the site of such wonder tales, or ‘*ajā’ib*’, in classical Arabic literature, and the ‘*anqā*’ was frequently called the “‘*anqā*’ *mughrib*” due to its supposed origins in North Africa. Indeed, in both medieval Arabic and European geographical literature, these tales of strangeness tended to be set in China or India, the edge of the known world. By setting this *maqāma* in China and the Maghrib, al-Saraqusṭī plays on literary conventions that directly contradict what Andalusis and Maghribis knew to be true about their own homelands. He interrogates the contrast between center and periphery through the lens of the ‘*ajā’ib*’, of which he is ultimately critical.

This negative attitude towards the ‘*ajā’ib*’ is evident when the trickster Abū Ḥabīb begins to speak of his travels, taunting,

O people of China, where are your men of balanced reason and sound intellect,
where are your heroic souls and your soaring Arab ambitions
. . . that I may inform them about rare matters and tell them of wondrous

²² “تلك سلحفاة هذا اليوم الزاخر، وآفة الفلك المواخر، كم هلك من هالك، وسلك على ظهرها من سالك، سبحان من قضى لكم بالنجاة” (al-Warāklī 340).

things (*ʿajāʾib*)? . . . You neither know . . . what large cities contain, or what ages and epochs have produced. (372)²³

By emphasizing the element of naiveté and ignorance he associates with the *ʿajāʾib*, al-Saraqṣṭī highlights the view that such marvelous tales do a disservice to everyone by misrepresenting the places they describe and duping their audience. In the *maqāma*, the trickster Abū Ḥabīb condescends to his Chinese audience, even as he attempts to sell them on a fantastical account of his travels elsewhere.

I suggest that here al-Saraqṣṭī is speaking to his contemporary audience through the trickster when he warns against the excessive credulity he connects to “soaring Arab ambitions” and *ʿajāʾib*. Furthermore, by choosing a known and mundane locale for the man’s wonder tale, al-Saraqṣṭī challenges the classic wonder tale’s characterization of the western Mediterranean as peripheral. By the same logic, other wonder tales located on the opposite side of the world, such as China, are set up as equally suspect. The assumed center of the known world, the Arabian Peninsula, is decentered—and Arab identity along with it.

As previously discussed, the conventions of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry are especially open to scrutiny in multiple *maqāmāt*, and the utility of poetry itself is questioned at various points. This may be a result of the increased reverence and nostalgia for pre-Islamic poetry that Monroe has identified as characteristic of Andalusī verse under the Almoravids.²⁴ Al-Saraqṣṭī’s own experience composing panegyrics for the king of Almería, and his time spent in various Andalusī courts, may also have rendered him somewhat skeptical of the increased and often propagandistic

²³ يا أهل الصين، أين أهل الرأي الأصيل، والعقل الرصين؟ أين النفوس الأبية والهمم العربية؟...أحذثها بالغرائب، وأخبرها عن العجائب...لا” (al-Warāklī 338). “تدرون...ما تظمه الأمصار، ولا ما جَرَّبَ به الدهور والأعصار

²⁴ “The present is experienced as hostile to the poet whose poetry is no longer appreciated in his homeland. As the present dwindled, the immediate past loomed large in the eyes of the poet, who sought refuge in the excellence of his art and erudition . . . the very revival of this archaic theme [starting in the conventional way of the old Arabic *qasīda*, with a desert journey completely foreign to Andalusī life] that had almost disappeared in the preceding century indicates the extent to which reverence for the past had developed under the Almoravids” (Monroe, *Hispano-Arabic Poetry* 38).



poetic production sponsored by competing *ṭā'ifa* kingdoms. His critique in the *maqāma* of the '*anqā*' certainly goes beyond mere literary commentary, however. As with his critique of the tropes of pre-Islamic poetry, al-Saraqusṭī's critique in this *maqāma* is aimed more broadly at problematizing the idealization and perceived superiority of Arab culture. This is a culture whose peak al-Saraqusṭī views as largely past, and ripe for replacement with a vision of Islamic unity more firmly rooted in the present and looking towards the future.

To gain a deeper understanding of the critique of the wonder tale in this *maqāma*, it is helpful to look at the two wonders it presents: the giant turtle and the '*anqā*'. Abū Ḥabīb and his companions were transported on the turtle's back without knowing what it was. It was not until they met the ascetic that the nature of the turtle was explained to them, as the bane of ships, which had caused many travelers to perish. I suggest that the giant turtle should be read as the kind of marvel or wonder typical of the '*ajā'ib*'. It is diverting in both senses of the word—in that the description of the turtle entertains the audience, but also in the sense that both the audience and, in the *maqāma*, the travelers, are ultimately diverted from their true destination. This sentiment is echoed in the work of various other Muslim writers who had at times denounced the more secular usage of the wonder tale in the representation and othering of geographically distant peoples, on the basis that they strayed from the Qur'anic focus on God as the source of the earth's marvels.²⁵

This is where a reading of the '*anqā*' comes in. If the island-sized turtle in al-Saraqusṭī's *maqāma* is a wonder with no religious significance or edifying purpose, the '*anqā*' in contrast can be understood as a marvel in the Qur'anic sense of the term—and may be read as a representation of the Muslim community. After condemning the turtle as dangerous, the ascetic in the *maqāma* spends a fair amount of time singing the praises of the '*anqā*'. Though not the creature's master, the ascetic plays an essential

²⁵ As Syrinx von Hees has noted in the case of the thirteenth-century al-Qazwinī ("The Astonishing"). See also Zadeh, "The Wiles of Creation." The term '*ajā'ib*' appears in the Qur'an referring more widely to the marvels of God's creation (Dubler, "Adjā'ib").

role in nourishing it, maintaining its strength, and even admonishing it, saying, “I fed the chick with my very own hand and raised it until it grew up . . . I summon it and it responds; I chide it and it is driven away; I scold it and it hides and turban its head in its feathers” (375).²⁶ It appears that much of this reproof consists of encouraging the *‘anqā* to visit more places and spread its message. He praises the bird’s “gifted tongue” and “ample wing,” asking what it has to report, and commenting “on how many a distant journey have travelers taken news about [it] to foreign parts, and how much pride has the west taken in [it]” (375-76).²⁷ He urges the *‘anqā*, “Come, come, when will you don your sandals for the journey, lead the vanguard, and perform good deeds?” (376).²⁸ In return for his care, he tells us, the ascetic receives offerings from the *‘anqā*. The bird travels far and wide, bringing the ascetic water from the rivers of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Turkey, but also, he says, “what I abhor, abstain from, and avoid; what I will neither smell nor sip, yet occasionally I did drink of it” (375).²⁹

These statements, taken together, can be read as commentary on the simultaneously awe-inspiring and at times problematic nature of the *dār al-Islām* as such a sprawling and variegated entity. The *‘anqā* can traverse vast distances with ease, just as Islam spread quickly in the century after Muhammad, uniting otherwise peripheral lands. Nonetheless, the ascetic appears to find it necessary to remind the bird, as a symbol of the Muslim community, that it now remains to continue this expansion. This would not have been an easy task in the early twelfth century, when Baghdad was more of a theoretical center of the caliphate than a real one, with competing claims emerging in the Levant, Egypt, and North Africa. Al-Andalus too was in the midst of a turbulent transition between the *ṭā’ifa* kingdoms and the Almoravids, and soon the Almohads. Al-Saraqṣī’s promotion of the unity and expansion of Islam could, therefore, have had an immediate resonance for audiences in various locales.

²⁶ “فرقته بيدي زقا، ورقبته فترقى...أدعوه فيجيب، وأزجره فينجزر، وأعابه فيتقنع بريشه ويعتجر” (al-Warākī 340-41).

²⁷ “ياذا اللسان النايغ، والجنح السايغ...كم أغرب بذكرك المغرب، وناه بك المغرب” (al-Warākī 341).

²⁸ “تعال، تعال، متى تلبس النعال، وتسبق الرعال، وتحسن الفعال؟” (al-Warākī 341).

²⁹ “ما أعافه وأتقشفه وأعرض عنه ولا أستافه ولا أترشفه، وربما وردته” (al-Warākī 340-41).



Division within the *dār al-Islām* was not solely political in nature, however. Several *maqāmāt* deal with the matter of sectarian and theological divisions within Islam. Elements of Sunni, Shi'i, and Sufi thought are the object of both praise and critique, such that it is not entirely clear what brand of Islam al-Saraqusṭī advocates, other than a united one. Monroe has suggested that the emphasis on free will in the collection ought to be connected to Shi'i *mu'tazilī* thought, and argues that al-Saraqusṭī himself may have had Shi'i leanings (Introduction 39). He demonstrates that the deliberately ambiguous nature of the *maqāma* form makes it particularly open to an in-depth exploration of the opposing views of Shi'i and Sunni theologians on the issue of free will versus predestination. In Sunni thought, God's omnipotence necessitates predestination. This principle is invoked as an excuse for immoral conduct by various characters in the *maqāmāt* who make frequent references to fate. Through the negative example of these characters, the *maqāmāt* seem to suggest the merits of the *mu'tazilī* belief in free will. This places the onus of behavior on individuals, rather than divine ordination (Introduction 3-6, 52-53).

Personal responsibility is often emphasized in the *maqāmāt* in the context of the temptation to engage in behaviors contrary to Islam. With the acquisition of new lands inevitably comes a measure of acculturation on the part of conquerors and conquered alike, and this prompted a substantial amount of tense discourse for both Muslims and non-Muslims in the centuries following the initial Islamic conquests. When the '*anqā*' brings the ascetic those things he abhors but of which he still occasionally partakes, then, al-Saraqusṭī is acknowledging the ways that expansion can effect the relaxing or neglect of essential features of religious practice and observance. Sexual promiscuity and the consumption of alcohol, for instance, are prevalent throughout other *maqāmāt* in the collection. One *maqāma*, set on an Indian island, highlights these behaviors as the most prominent dangers associated with exotic locales, rather than the wonder tales dealt with in the *maqāma* of the '*anqā*' (425-30). Just as al-Saraqusṭī critiques the privileging of Arab identity, therefore, he also implicitly critiques a reliance on predestination as a means to unburden oneself of

personal responsibilities and excuse misconduct. In his *maqāmāt*, virtue and worth stem from personal choice and practice rather than from ancestry, fate, or predestination.

Monroe's analysis of al-Saraqṣṭī's sympathies for *mu'tazilī* ideas is persuasive. Nonetheless, the *maqāmāt* can also be read as critical of aspects of Shī'i thought at times. The same tale that opens with the narrator mourning over the lost Egyptian past in front of the pyramids also makes reference to the Shī'i Fatimid ruler of Egypt. While seemingly intentionally confusing two schools of Shī'i doctrine, Abū Ḥabīb refers to the Fatimid ruler as sultan instead of caliph, stressing his secular rather than religious authority. Each of these details seems to favor Sunni over Shī'i doctrine, or at the very least suggests that if Abū Ḥabīb is a Shī'i, he is not a particularly knowledgeable one. Additionally, when offering panegyric praise to the ruler, apparently with the sole aim of a monetary reward, Abū Ḥabīb emphasizes Fatimid "orthodoxy," which he connects especially to the noble lineage of the prophet Muhammad and his family (247).³⁰ Interestingly, therefore, al-Saraqṣṭī may imply that even certain theological differences within Islam can be traced back to an over-identification with a specific genealogy. This is presented as problematic because it prioritizes the Prophet's lineage over his religious revelations.

Sufi ideas and figures are also present throughout the collection. In the *maqāma* of the '*anqā*', for instance, we see al-Saraqṣṭī engage with the distinction between the marvelous and the mundane. It is worth considering both the '*anqā*' and the ascetic in this tale as allusions to Sufi thought. Within a century-and-a-half of al-Saraqṣṭī, the '*anqā*' appeared as a prominent symbol in Sufi texts, such as those of the Andalusī thinker Ibn 'Arabī and the Persian scholar Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (Buendía 20). Houari Touati has noted the ideological similarities between the '*ajā'ib*' and mystical discourse. "Both," he observes, "were thought to contribute to resolving the enigma of relations between the human and the divine, the visible and the invisible, the natural and the supernatural, the ordinary

³⁰ "الهدى" (al-Warāklī 184).



and the extraordinary, and the believable and the unbelievable” (164). A comprehensive history of the reception and dissemination of Sufi discourse in al-Andalus has yet to be written (Fierro, “Opposition” 174), but there is evidence that during the twelfth century, Sufi figures like Ibn Barrajān were gaining prominence in the peninsula (Bellver Martínez). Furthermore, we know that al-Saraqustī corresponded with and may even have met a man who was personally acquainted with the mystic al-Ghazālī from Baghdad (Monroe, Introduction 24).

While the *‘anqā’* is portrayed as wondrous and powerful, however, the ascetic’s role is more ambiguous. He nourishes the bird/the Muslim community and encourages the spread of its message. That the ascetic does indeed partake of that which he should not, however, is a reminder that Sufi mystic and ascetic figures are not infallible. Furthermore, Sufi garb is one of the trickster’s most frequent disguises, and Abū Ḥabīb is generally successful in using both his supposed poverty and his rhetorical skills to cheat people of their money. Significantly, in one *maqāma* Abū Ḥabīb says of himself, “no veil of diaphanous gauze has ever revealed me, and no threadbare garment has ever humbled me” (212).³¹ By suggesting that humble apparel does not necessarily reflect a humble soul, al-Saraqustī differentiates between appearances and reality as they relate to ascetic lifestyles, and to matters of faith and religious practice more generally.³²

Al-Saraqustī’s emphasis on the misleading power of rhetorical skills in a religious context may also indicate that he views charismatic preachers as a means by which Muslims avoid taking responsibility for thinking through their beliefs. This is similar to his portrayal of predestination as a means to avoid taking personal responsibility for one’s actions. As Fierro has noted, building on the work of Tilman Nagel, Sufism and Sunni Ash‘arism were increasingly related in Islamic religious thought in al-Andalus and the *dār al-Islām* more broadly in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Both emphasized the importance of Muslims coming to believe in the truth of God and Islam

³¹ “ما شفني الدهر شف ولا أزدت أطمار” (al-Warākli 142).

³² It is also worth noting that Abū Ḥabīb is said to have died after what appears to be a true repentance and conversion to a Sufi ascetic lifestyle (Monroe 490-501).

through their own individual experience. In the case of the Ash'aris this was to be accomplished through the use of reason, and through intuition for the Sufis (Fierro, "Spiritual Alienation" 243). Al-Saraqusṭī expresses a suspicion of charismatic religious figures such as Sufi leaders, suggesting that their persuasive powers can be used to mislead Muslims and excuse them from taking responsibility for their religious beliefs. Gullibility and an uncritical acceptance of rhetorical skill is portrayed negatively in a religious context, just as it is in the *maqāmāt* that critique Arabic poetry and *'ajā'ib*.

While critical of religious division, al-Saraqusṭī does not propose that Muslims adopt either Sunni, Shi'i, or Sufi thought wholesale. Indeed, it is the blurring of boundaries between these kinds of oppositions that constitutes the heart of al-Saraqusṭī's *maqāmāt*, in which the line between truth and untruth remains ambiguous. At the beginning of the *maqāma* of the *'anqā'*, al-Sā'ib's Chinese friend tells him twice that Abū Ḥabīb speaks in a combination of verse and prose, and says, "I suspect he is at times sincere, and at times merely pretentious; he combines the *nab'* with the *gharab*, poison with white honey, the possible with the impossible, the unadorned with the adorned; he confuses his words when he formulates his statements" (371).³³ This reiterates a number of themes relating to the question of Muslim and Arab identity present throughout the collection: the discussion of the comparative truth value of prose and poetry, the imagery of the *nab'* and the *gharab* trees, and the relationship between the mundane and the marvelous.

What, then, are we to make of the *Maqāmāt al-luzūmiyya*'s proposed removal of cultural oppositions between Arabs and non-Arabs, and its replacement with an opposition between Muslims and non-Muslims? Al-Saraqusṭī mentions non-Muslims only rarely, and appears much more focused on creating a sense of unity and solidarity within Islam. Christians are generally referred to in the context of illicit temptations contrary to Islam. It is significant, however, that the threats they pose in al-Saraqusṭī's work are at heart moral rather than military, despite the increasing military success of the Christian kingdoms in Iberia in the twelfth century. If

³³ "أظن به تارةً صدقاً وتارةً رياءً، يخلط التَّبَعُ بالقرب، والسم بالضرب، والحقيقة بالمحال، والعاطل بالحال، يلبك القول ليكاً، ويسبك البيان" سيكاً" (al-Warāklī 337).



anything comes across in a reading of the *maqāmāt*, it is al-Saraqusṭī's belief that Muslims are perfectly capable of corrupting themselves and one another without any outside help. It is precisely this kind of immorality, regardless of its origin, against which he cautions.

Overall, the *maqāmāt* of al-Saraqusṭī emphasize Arab ethno-cultural heritage as a relic of the past, and specifically the pre-Islamic past. Scores of references and allusions to pre-Islamic Arab figures, tribes, and poetry throughout the collection underline the idea that when the glory of Arab civilization is invoked, it is a glory long gone. To al-Saraqusṭī, this elevation of Arab identity is merely an act of nostalgia. More importantly, an adherence to pre-Islamic cultural and tribal affiliations is shown to divide more than it unites. Characters in the *maqāmāt* proclaim their proud Arab ancestry, but proceed to deceive and cheat one another by means of elaborate poetic description which creates a fiction so vivid for the audience that they cannot perceive the reality of the lie right before their eyes. It is this same kind of rhetorical acrobatics, al-Saraqusṭī implies, which so successfully creates an image of the pre-Islamic past as an ideal for people in his own time.

If divisive ethno-cultural identities are based on false ideals associated with the past, the *maqāmāt* seem to suggest religious identity as the most viable alternative. Al-Saraqusṭī recognizes the many difficulties inherent in basing a sense of unity and identity on a religion as widespread as Islam. In the face of increased political fragmentation throughout the Islamic world, he proposes a moral and religious center as a means of connecting peripheral lands and peoples, though it is unclear precisely what form such a center should take. In this vein, al-Saraqusṭī also probes at the existence of religious and sectarian divisions within Islam, and ultimately seems to suggest that, like cultural and ethnic divisions, these must be overcome. In the *Maqāmāt al-luzūmiyya*, the wondrous achievements of pre-Islamic civilizations are underlined as chronologically distant, just as the fantastic tales of the *ʿajāʾib* are set in faraway lands. Both are equally misleading and unreachable marvels. In their place, al-Saraqusṭī invites his audience to contemplate Islam itself as a unifying ideal, the source of all wonders, and the sole bridge between the mundane and the extraordinary.

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