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**The *Manāqib* of ‘Abd al-Salām al-Asmar (15<sup>th</sup> Century) from Zlīten  
(Libya). A Short Overview on Language and Themes**

Las *manāqib* de ‘Abd al-Salām al-Asmar (siglo XV) de Zlīten (Libia).  
Breve descripción general de la lengua y de los temas

Giuliano Mion

University of Cagliari

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5504-2967>

**Abstract**

The literary genre of the so-called *manāqib* (sg. *manqaba*) was quite widespread over the past centuries. Some of these *manāqib* have been published in critical editions, and their circulation among scholars often concerns North African history or some aspects of popular religiosity. Nonetheless, these kinds of works have received very limited attention from a linguistic point of view, even if they exhibit features belonging to spoken varieties of Arabic. Consequently, they represent one of the rare sources that can be used for an analysis of Arabic as spoken and written in the past.

The aim of this paper is to study the language of the book entitled *Rawḍat al-azhār wa-munyat al-sādāt al-abrār fī manāqib Sīdī ‘Abd al-Salām al-Asmar*, a collection of *manāqib* linked to the Libyan Sufi saint ‘Abd al-Salām al-Asmar from the city of Zlīten (15<sup>th</sup> century), prepared by Karīm al-Dīn al-Baramūnī al-Miṣrātī.

**Keywords:** *Manāqib*; Libya; Tunisia; Sufism; Middle Arabic; Arabic Dialects.

**Resumen**

Las llamadas *manāqib* (sg. *manqaba*) son un género literario bastante extendido en los últimos siglos. Algunas de estas *manāqib* han sido publicadas en ediciones críticas, y su circulación entre los estudiosos suele referirse a la historia norteafricana o a ciertos aspectos de la religiosidad popular. Sin embargo, este tipo de obras ha recibido una atención muy limitada desde el punto de vista lingüístico, a pesar de que presentan características propias de las variedades habladas del árabe. Por lo tanto, las *manāqib* constituyen una de las pocas fuentes que pueden utilizarse para analizar el árabe hablado y escrito en el pasado.

El objetivo de este artículo es estudiar la lengua de la obra titulada *Rawḍat al-azhār wa-munyat al-sādāt al-abrār fī manāqib Sīdī ‘Abd al-Salām al-Asmar*, una colección de *manāqib* relacionadas con el santo sufí libio ‘Abd al-Salām al-Asmar de la ciudad de Zlīten (siglo XV), escrita por Karīm al-Dīn al-Baramūnī al-Miṣrātī.

**Palabras clave:** *manāqib*; Libia; Túnez; sufismo; medio árabe; dialectos árabes.

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## 1. Introduction

In many regions of the Muslim world, biographical works with laudatory purposes were quite common in previous centuries, and they ended up merging into the literary genre of hagiography.<sup>1</sup>

Over time, Islamic hagiography has developed several sub-genres that have often taken on specific definitions according to their textual, thematic, and structural features, such as for example *ṭabaqāt* (“classifications, generations”), *taḍkira* (“remembrance”), or *sīra* (“life story”), in which the biographical notice (*tarǧama*) of a pious figure highlights the spiritual qualities (*faḍāʾil*) and reports collections of anecdotes (*aḥbār*) and saintly marvels (*karamāt*).

One of these hagiographic sub-genres are the so-called *manāqib al-awliyāʾ* (lit. “virtuous of the saints”), *manāqib al-ṣūlahāʾ* (lit. “virtuous of the righteous”), or more simply *manāqib* (sg. *manqaba*), whose meaning would be something like “character traits” or “deeds” of a saint (*walī*),<sup>2</sup> which are an excellent combination of religiosity, history, and culture.<sup>3</sup> As clearly explained by Giovanna Calasso, these works are precious sources for a greater awareness of regional history and popular religion:

«La littérature hagiographique musulmane offre un terrain privilégié d’exploration en ce qui concerne les modalités de vivre et de penser l’expérience religieuse de l’Islam à un niveau qui ne coïncide pas avec celui de ses manifestations légales [...] Dans ces textes nous pouvons tirer quelques éléments qui concernent la dimension personnelle, individuelle de la religion, les émotions qu’elle produit, la façon dont elle est pensée et agie».<sup>4</sup>

One should not expect to find theological treatises when reading these works, because the *manāqib* are always characterised by a very basic intertextuality and a great simplicity of the moral and religious messages conveyed. However, they are also very interesting because of their style and their literary and content quality. For this reason, the opinion expressed in his time by Robert Brunschvig can still be considered fundamentally appropriate:

«Nombreuses et de dimensions variées, souvent anonymes, sont ces vies de saints ou *Manāqib*, d’un genre, au reste, assez monotone, où les vertus et les miracles sont complaisamment énumérés sur la foi de témoins que l’on cite, morts ou vivants. Œuvres de panégyristes et de dévots, il n’y faut chercher nul esprit critique, et l’on doit même se défier des quelques données historiques qu’il leur arrive de contenir. Œuvres, souvent, de demi-lettrés qui s’adressent à un public faiblement cultivé, elles sont écrites dans une langue simple, aussi proche que possible de l’idiome parlé, qui apparaît d’ailleurs sans fard dans maint dialogue et qui influence la syntaxe et le vocabulaire un peu partout. A ce titre, elles constituent des documents linguistiques d’un certain intérêt».<sup>5</sup>

The final words of this quotation are meaningful, as they refer to the linguistic profile of these documents.

The written productions of pre-modern Arabic which feature dialectal elements vary from one genre to another ranging from poetry to prose, as explained by Liesbeth Zack in her excellent survey on the potentialities of research in this field,<sup>6</sup> and, in this respect, the genre of the *manāqib* are often a treasure of linguistic anomalies.

Their authors are often semi-illiterates who address a semi-illiterate readership by using a register that reflects their linguistic skills. The outcome is exemplified by texts written in a Classical Arabic featured by the influence, if not exactly the great presence, of colloquial elements which demonstrate the informal use and circulation of these documents among the community of devotees.

As already observed by Mohamed Meouak, unfortunately until now this kind of material has been investigated very partially and irregularly from a linguistic point of view, although they can give significative information about the Arabic spoken in pre-modern ages.<sup>7</sup> The most suitable definition in this case is still debated: “Middle Arabic” or “Mixed Arabic”, “Moyen Arabe” or “Arabe moyen”<sup>8</sup> or even other labels refer to texts that at first glance could be considered as written in Classical Arabic, but in which the substandard regional features are so strong that the result is a highly interfered, and the text is written in something different from the pure Classical lan-

<sup>1</sup> Pellat, “Manāqib”; Amri, “La gloire des saints”; Amri, “L’hagiographie islamique”; Amri, “Figures du Prophète”; Calasso, “Les sourires et les larmes”.

<sup>2</sup> A study focused on the notion of sanctity (*walāya*) in Medieval Tunisia is Amri, “*Walī* et *awliyāʾ*”.

<sup>3</sup> For the structure of the North African *manāqib*, see Touati, “Les modèles d’écriture”, and Zeggaf “Remarques”.

<sup>4</sup> Calasso, “Les sourires et les larmes”, p. 445.

<sup>5</sup> Brunschvig, *La Berbérie Orientale*, II, p. 381.

<sup>6</sup> Zack, “Historical Arabic Dialectology”.

<sup>7</sup> In particular, see Meouak, “Éléments d’approche”.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Blau, “The State of Research”; Larcher, “Moyen arabe”; Lentin, “Unité et diversité”, “Dix esquisses”.

guage. A very clear definition has been provided by Joshua Blau:

«Die Verfasser der Texte, die im mittelarabischen Substandard geschrieben sind, wollten eigentlich Klassisches Arabisch, die Prestigesprache der Gebildeten ihrer Zeit, schreiben. Da jedoch ihre Kenntnisse des Klassischen Arabisch beschränkt waren, verwendeten sie irrtümlich nicht nur neuarabische Formen, sondern bildeten in ihrem Bestreben, Klassisches Arabisch zu schreiben, auch Formen, die weder klassisch, noch neuarabisch waren».<sup>9</sup>

The interference in these texts of the so-called “Neuarabisch”, i.e. the (regional) dialect or, often more precisely in our case, the author’s one, occurs at different levels: in phonetics (even if many authors tend to classicize the orthography, thus obfuscating its interpretation), morphosyntax, and lexicon.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. The *Manāqib* of ‘Abd al-Salām al-Asmar

A descendant from a tribe with a long tradition of maraboutism, the Fawātīr (of the Awlād Sa‘īd, Riyāhid Hilālīans) from which the *nisba* al-Faytūrī is derived, ‘Abd al-Salām b. Salīm al-Asmar<sup>11</sup> was born in 1475 in Tripolitania, more precisely in Zlīten. The toponym of this village is derived from Iṣlīten, a Berber branch of the Nefzawa tribe, and in the *manāqib* of al-Asmar it appears in two spelling variants, زليتن and يزليتن. For the sake of completeness, the oldest variant of the toponym, including that used by Ibn Ḥaldūn (1332-1406) in his works, exhibits an initial <ز> and a central <س>, like in the spelling يصلين. Another spelling variant is زليطن that is the written version of a phonetic realisation *zliṭan*, where the first consonant is a pharyngealised alveo-dental sibilant (even if written <ز>) that extends the emphasis also to the following syllable, but this spelling variant is completely absent in al-Asmar’s *manāqib*. After a long period through the centuries of alternances, the contemporary spelling of the toponym is زليتن.

This region had many relations with the Tunisian milieus as it was ruled by the Ḥafṣid governor Abū ‘Amr ‘Uṭmān al-Manṣūr (1434-1488),<sup>12</sup> following the renewed expansion process started

by Abū Fāris ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (1394-1434).<sup>13</sup> According to tradition, ‘Abd al-Salām could have received the *laqab* of “al-Asmar” either because of the darkness of his face (*asmar* “brown”) due to sun exposure while worshipping, or because of sleepless nights spent praying (*samar* “night conversation”).

He was initiated into Sufism by his mentor of Moroccan origin ‘Abd al-Wāhid al-Dukālī who lived in Misallāta, southeast of Tripoli, and was the master of the ‘Arūsiyya order<sup>14</sup> founded by the Tunisian saint Abū l-‘Abbās Aḥmad Ibn ‘Arūs (died in 1463).<sup>15</sup> It is worth remembering that even Ibn ‘Arūs (or Ben Arous, according to the contemporary Tunisian custom) had his own *manāqib* in the form of the book entitled *Ibtisām al-ḡurūs wa-waṣy al-ṭurūs bi-manāqib al-ṣayḥ Abī l-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. ‘Arūs* which was prepared by one of his Algerian students, a certain ‘Umar b. ‘Alī al-Ġazā’irī al-Rāšidī.

The region was going through a difficult political period, characterised by a succession of internal uprisings against the Ḥafṣid authority, some of which were even violent. It is in this context that we must place certain statements often attributed to some prominent figures of that time who saw ‘Abd al-Salām al-Asmar as a new, strong, religious leader. We cannot be sure nowadays to what extent the attribution of some statements is an *a posteriori* ideological work, but nevertheless we can be certain of the “messianic” overtones of some accounts.

Suffice it to recall a couple of examples. Ibn ‘Arūs would have said: «*sa-yaḡharu bi-Ṭarābulus al-ḡarb raḡul yu’rafu bi-‘Abd al-Salām fātiḥan li-hāḡihi l-ṭarīqa*»<sup>16</sup> (“A great *walī*, named ‘Abd al-Salām, conqueror of this *ṭarīqa*, will appear in Tripolitania”<sup>17</sup>); Aḥmad Zarrūq (1442-1493), the famous Moroccan jurist and saint affiliated to the

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, *Ḥulāṣat tārīḥ Tūnis*, pp. 103-104; Brunschvig, *La Berbérie Orientale*, II; Rossi, *Storia di Tripoli e della Tripolitania*.

<sup>14</sup> Amri, “al-Dukālī”.

<sup>15</sup> Brunschvig, *La Berbérie Orientale*, II, pp. 341-351; Fontaine, *Histoire de la littérature tunisienne*, pp. 29-30; Kerrou, “Ibn ‘Arūs”.

<sup>16</sup> *Rawḡat al-azhār*, p. 89. The quotation is also repeated by al-Qaṭ‘ānī, *al-Quṭb al-anwar*, p. 34, who slightly changes some words: «*sayaḡharu bi-Ṭarābulus walī ‘aḡīm ismuḥu ‘Abd al-Salām wa-sayakūnu fātiḥan li-hāḡihi l-ṭarīqa*» (“A great *walī*, named ‘Abd al-Salām, conqueror of this *ṭarīqa*, will appear in Tripolitania”).

<sup>17</sup> The choice of the term “Tripolitania” in our translation is only a matter of convenience: it is well known that *Ṭarābulus* was a word referring to a somewhat wider geographical area than the one we refer to today with the same term.

<sup>9</sup> Blau, “Das frühe Neuarabisch”, p. 97.

<sup>10</sup> Meouak, “Place-Names”, “Éléments d’approche”, “Inventaire préliminaire”, “Notules sur le lexique”.

<sup>11</sup> For more extended biographical details, see Amri, “Al-Asmar al-Faytūrī”; al-Kāhławī, “al-Asmar”; Javad Shams, “Al-Asmar”; al-Zāwī, *A’lām Lībiyā*, pp. 222-225; the most complete portrait is the book by al-Qaṭ‘ānī, *al-Quṭb al-anwar*.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, *Ḥulāṣat tārīḥ Tūnis*, p. 105; al-Qaṭ‘ānī, *al-Quṭb al-anwar*, p. 32.

Šādīlī order,<sup>18</sup> would have told the *mu'addib* who was lecturing in the Quranic school «*sa-yakūnu li-hādā l-walad ša'n 'aḍīm bi-Ṭarābulus ilā an yafūqa ahl 'ašrihi*» (“This guy will be great in Tripolitania until he surpasses the people of his time”).<sup>19</sup> Needless to say, this ideological reconstruction also pertains to the saint’s family which would have been composed of pious spirits:<sup>20</sup> his mother, a chaste, virtuous woman, was born on the day of *īd al-ḥiṭr* and was named Salīma; his father, a simple yet strict man was named Salīm; his grandfather died a martyr (*istašhada*) during one of the “oppressive Christian campaigns” (*al-ḥamalāt al-našrāniyya al-ḍālīma*) against Tripolitania and was named Sulaymān bin Sālīm.<sup>21</sup>

Al-Asmar founded his own order, called al-Salāmiyya and frequently known as ‘Arūsiyya-Salāmiyya, which was based on ecstasy and spiritual attraction, characterised by many ritual, musical, and bodily practices typical of asceticism and fakirism, that flourished quickly and imposed itself on the other orders of the region spreading to Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.<sup>22</sup>

Having passed away in 1573, al-Asmar was buried in the same city of his birth, Zlīten: the tomb became a regular destination of pilgrimage, as often happens with the popular cult of the saints that has its principal expression in the so-called *ziyāra* (“visit”) during which the pilgrim quests for *baraka* (“blessing”).<sup>23</sup> A Quranic educational institution named al-Gāmi‘a al-Asmariyya was founded close to his tomb and a nearby mosque.

<sup>18</sup> For a portrait of this saint, see Khushaim, *Zarrūq, the Šūfī*, and Kugle, *Rebel Between Spirit and Law*.

<sup>19</sup> *Rawḍat al-azhār*, p. 90. Once again, it is slightly different in al-Qaṭ‘ānī, *al-Quṭb al-anwar*, p. 34: «*hādā ‘Abd al-Salām sulṭān waqṭihi wa-sayakūnu lahu ša'n 'aḍīm ḥayṭu yafūqu ahl zamānihi wa-yastahiru ismuhu*» (“This is ‘Abd al-Salām, the authority of this time; he will be great, for he will surpass all others and his name will become famous”).

<sup>20</sup> al-Qaṭ‘ānī, *al-Quṭb al-anwar*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>21</sup> So, it is now undisputable that, in this story, no one lacked a proper name derived from the root *ʾslm*!

<sup>22</sup> Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders*, p. 87; Khushaim, *Zarrūq, the Šūfī*, p. 182; Najem, “Murābiṭīn and Ashrāf of Libya”; Depont & Coppolani, *Les confréries*, is outdated and must be used with caution, as explained in Nallino’s review to Macaluso Aleo, *Turchi, Semussi e Italiani*.

<sup>23</sup> The bibliography on the cult of saints is gigantic. For a brief overview, see Buresi & Ghouirgate, *Histoire du Maghreb médiéval*, pp. 171-176. Several works about popular religious practices in many Muslim regions are included in the book edited by Chambert-Loir & Guillot, *Le culte des saints*. A work that is more oriented towards the North African region, mainly describing Algeria, is Dermenghem, *Le culte des saints*. Female saints are without any doubt an understudied field, but a recent analysis is El Hour, “Moroccan female saints”.

However, in August, 2012 the shrine was severely damaged and practically destroyed by Salafist paramilitaries.

Al-Asmar’s fame is also demonstrated by several testimonies of authors not directly related to Tripolitania.

The Moroccan Sufi and scholar ‘Abd Allāh bin Muḥammad al-‘Ayyāšī (1627-1679), for example, wrote a travelogue of his journeys to the holy places of Islam in the Ḥiḡāz, commonly referred to as *al-Riḥla al-‘ayyāšīyya*.<sup>24</sup> During his stay in the region, he had a visit to Zlīten and to the *zāwiya* of ‘Abd al-Salām al-Asmar and wrote that the saint was described as “abundant in saintly marvels, high-ranking, and among the best pupils of Aḥmad Ibn ‘Arūs from Tunisia” («*kaṭīr al-karāmāt, ‘ālī l-maqāmāt, min aḡall talāmīdat sīdī Aḥmad ibn ‘Arūs nazīl Tūnis*»). Alongside his moral virtues and spiritual qualities, a quick reference seems also to echo the story of al-Asmar’s grandfather and the socio-political conditions of the region, because “the reports of his victories over the titans and the liberation of many captives from the Christian yoke during his lifetime were famous” («*aḥbāruhu fī qahr al-ḡabābira wa-fakk al-asrā min aydī l-ifraṅḡ fī ḥayātihi wa-ba‘da mamātihi šahīra*»).<sup>25</sup>

The popular devotion to such a figure, of course, could not fail to encourage the composition of a hagiographic work.

Thus, the *manāqib* of ‘Abd al-Salām al-Asmar was prepared, around 1590, by Karīm al-Dīn al-Baramūnī al-Miṣrātī and the book is entitled *Rawḍat al-azhār wa-munyat al-sādāt al-abrār fī manāqib Sayyidī ‘Abd al-Salām al-Asmar*. Born in Misurata in the spring of 1488, al-Baramūnī’s father was an Egyptian who arrived in Libya to follow the *šayḥ* Aḥmad Zarrūq. Al-Baramūnī started his education with Zarrūq and later joined the *šayḥ* ‘Abd al-Salām al-Asmar: at the very beginning he was one of his opponents, but finally ended up being one of his most wholehearted devotees. After the death of his master, al-Baramūnī moved to Egypt, to Tanta, and finally to Makkah.<sup>26</sup>

The book *Rawḍat al-azhār* by al-Baramūnī underwent a recension by the Tunisian Sufi and scholar Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Maḥlūf, with the title of *Kitāb tanqīḥ rawḍat al-azhār wa-munyat al-sādāt al-abrār fī manāqib mawlānā sayyidī ‘Abd al-Salām ibn Salīm*. Born

<sup>24</sup> Ben Cheneb & Pellat, “al-‘Ayyāšī”.

<sup>25</sup> Naḡm & ‘Abbās, *Lībiyā fī kutub al-ḡuḡrāfiyā wa-l-riḥlāt*, p. 203.

<sup>26</sup> al-Zāwī, *A ‘lām Lībiyā*, pp. 315-316.

in 1864 in the city of Monastir, on the Central Tunisian coast, Muḥammad al-Maḥlūf was an adherent of the Šāḍilī order and held the post of *qāḍī*, preacher, and *bāš muftī*. The work that made him famous was principally the book *Šağarat al-nūr al-zākiya fī ṭabaqāt al-mālikiyya*, published in Cairo in 1932, which was a compilation of the biographies of all the Maliki scholars from both the East and West. His book *Mawāhib al-raḥīm* was first published in Tunis in 1907-1908 and later reprinted by al-Maṭba‘a al-Yūsufiyya in Cairo on behalf of al-Maktaba al-Lībiyya in 1966.<sup>27</sup> For our study we used an old edition published in Beirut by al-Maktaba al-Ṭaqāfiyya.<sup>28</sup> We are aware of the risks indicated by L. Zack concerning the text editors who very often feel the need to correct the language of a deviant text in order to align it to a standard level for a wider public.<sup>29</sup> However, despite these considerations, the text of these *manāqib* exhibits dialectal interferences that are worthy of investigation.

### 3. The Language of the *Manāqib*

The narrative parts of the text are written in Classical Arabic. However, the most captivating sections of the book are the reported direct speech that is attributed to ‘Abd al-Salām al-Asmar.

This reported direct speech is typically introduced by:

1. the use of fixed expressions, like *wa-min kalāmihī raḍiya llāhu ‘anhu...* “and from his words, may God be pleased with him, ...”;
2. the use of *verba dicendi*, like *takallama* “to speak”, *taḥaddaṭa* “to speak”, *naṭaqa* “to pronounce”, *qāla* “to say”, *anšada* “to sing, to chant”, and so on.

Both these conditions trigger a direct speech in which al-Asmar speaks in the first person. His words almost always consist of poems which are marked by mystical exaltation of the ego and can be easily defined as theopathic utterances (*šaṭaḥāt*),<sup>30</sup> and this particular condition explains also the common presence of the verbal combination *anšada yaqūl* “he sang and said”.

These poems are sometimes in a register really close to Classical Arabic. It is the case,

for example, of a passage<sup>31</sup> in which the *šayḥ* al-Samalqī described his visit to al-Asmar for a question concerning the sowing and he could not complete his speech that immediately our saint was rapt in ecstasy and began to recite («*fa-lam yatimma kalāmahu illā wa-š-šayḥ aṣābahu ḥāl ‘aḍīm wa-anšada yaqūl*»):

الآن بالأمطار	زرعك يا خليلي يروى	1
وتفوح أسرار الباري	وعلى الله يتقوى	2

- 1 Your sowing, my darling, is quenched with the rains
- 2 It strengthens with God, as the secrets of the Creator spread their perfume

To fully understand the atmosphere of these theopathic moments, the passage quoted goes on to explain that immediately the clouds appeared and the rain covered the east and west of the earth («*fa-lam yatimma kalāmuhu ḥattā ḍahara as-saḥāb wa-nazala l-maṭar alladī ‘amma mašāriq al-arḍ wa-mağāribihā*»).

In other cases, Classical Arabic is not written in its cleanest form and some phonetic interferences of the dialect show up in the spelling, as shown by this short example that deals with the relations with the Aḥāmīd tribe:<sup>33</sup>

يا محيي العبد بعد الممات	يا الله يا واحد	1
حتى يبقى على ثلاث شذيات	شق وطن الأحامد	2
يارب يا قابل الدعوات	وأجعل وكرهم بايد	3

- 1 Oh God, the Unique, the Giver of life to the servant after the death
- 2 Divide the homeland of the Aḥāmīd, so that it remains in three fragments
- 3 Let their den perish! Lord who accepts supplications

But most of the theopathic utterances consist in vernacular or semi-vernacular poems where the linguistic register, contrary to the previous example, is quite distant from Classical Arabic.

This (semi-)vernacular language is a typical example of Middle Arabic and/or Mixed Arabic, of which we offer a summary below.

#### 3.1. Phonetics and Phonology

As for phonetics and phonology, we will focus our analysis partially on the vocalic system, and

<sup>27</sup> Fontaine, *Histoire*, p. 184; Maḥfūz, *Tarāğim al-mu‘allifīn al-tūnisiyyīn*, IV, pp. 257-262.

<sup>28</sup> Our copy is a reproduction, without a specific date, of the edition published in Cairo by al-Maṭba‘a al-Yūsufiyya.

<sup>29</sup> Zack, “Historical Arabic Dialectology”, p. 214.

<sup>30</sup> One of the first mystics having produced this kind of poetry is Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 1182) with his *Tā‘iyya*. See Nallino, “Il poema mistico”.

<sup>31</sup> Page 126 of the edition we used.

<sup>32</sup> *Mašāriq al-arḍ wa-mağāribihā* is a very common expression inspired by Q 7, 137.

<sup>33</sup> Page 102 of the edition we used.

more extensively on the consonantal changes, i.e. \**q*, \**j*, dentals and interdental, and finally the glottal stop symbolised by the *hamza*. No particular information on suprasegmentals can be inferred from our text.

### 3.1.1. Vocalism

As for the long vowels, a Classical Arabic orthography is used, thus we found no evidence of particular phenomena (for example, palatalisation of \**ā*, the so-called *imāla*).

As for the short vowels, it is impossible to comment on their nature because the text is completely unvocalised and does not exhibit any diacritic.

It must be noted that sometimes a prosthetic *alif* appears in positions that would be unexpected in the Classical Arabic orthography, and its presence symbolises an epenthetic vowel before a biconsonantal cluster: انخلوه “we let him” (→ *ʔnhallūhʔ*), وأندوروا “and we turn around” (→ *w-ʔndūruʔ*), وانزوروا “and I pay a visit” (→ *w-ʔnzūruʔ*), وتفكروا “remember (p)!” (→ *ʔfakkaruʔ*).<sup>34</sup> By the way, in such an unvocalised text, the presence of this *alif* is the only cue on the syllabic structures we have, because it shows the outcome of the shift \**CvC*- > *CC*- > *ʔCC*.

### 3.1.2. \**Qāf* and \**Jīm*

We cannot find any evidence about the pronunciation of \**q* and \**j*, as the graphemes used are simply ق and ج. It must be preliminarily remembered that the coastal Tunisian sedentary dialects realise \**q* as a voiceless uvular *q*, and that the Tunisian rural and Bedouin dialects as well as all Libyan dialects realise it as a voiced velar *g*. \**J*, instead, in unmarked conditions is always realised as a fricative *ʒ* in both the geographical areas under examination.<sup>35</sup>

The orthographic use of ق and ج offers no chance of understanding their concrete phonetic realisation in the text, i.e. whether ق is pronounced as a voiceless uvular *q* or a voiced velar *g*, and whether ج is pronounced as an affricate *ǧ* or as a fricative *ʒ*. For the first letter, no evidences can be found of the presence of alternative graphemes used in other Arabic speaking areas to write the

phoneme *g*, like for example ف (very common in Tunisia) or گ (very common in Morocco). For the second letter, the rare presence of a word like زاز “to pass through” is a clue of the shift \**j* > *z* in a consonantal context including another sibilant.

### 3.1.3. Dentals and Interdentals

As for interdental fricatives, it must be preliminarily remembered that (Muslim) Tunisian Arabic maintains *t*, *d* and *ḏ* (< *d/ḏ*),<sup>36</sup> and that in (Western) Libyan Arabic the three phonemes have merged into the dental stops *t*, *d* and *ḏ*.<sup>37</sup>

Now, in our text every word having an etymological interdental fricative maintains the proper grapheme ذ or ظ in an extremely stable and systematic way. Although interestingly enough, we found four suspicious occurrences of graphemes representing dental stops (ت and ض) in words where fricatives would be expected. The first one allegedly regards the shift *t* > *t*: كثير “many” (Cl.Ar. *kaṭīr*). The other cases concern confusion between the two emphatics *d* and *ḏ*: نضل “I stay” (Cl.Ar. *aḏallu*), ننضر “I look” (Cl.Ar. *anḏuru*), شضييات “fragments” (Cl.Ar. *šaḏiyya*), and finally a sentence in which the same verb alternates in two different shapes at a very close distance: فتظلموا [...] فتظلموهم “and you oppress them [...] so you oppress them”.

If we exclude a merely editorial mistake, these cases could be best interpreted in two ways:

1. the whole text has been re-standardised following the Classical Arabic phonology, and these few examples have been forgotten;
2. the re-classicisation of the whole text does not just follow only the Classical Arabic phonology, but also the Tunisian Arabic phonology because it maintains the interdental fricatives and overlaps a high model of the *fushḥā*.

Both these interpretations demonstrate that the editorial role of Muḥammad al-Maḥlūf cannot be underestimated. But, at the same time, both these interpretations seem to lead to one conclusion: originally, al-Asmar’s *šaṭaḥāt* would have been uttered with dental stops, according to the usual shift interdental fricatives > dental stops that normally occurs in Libyan Arabic.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Lentin, “Normes orthographiques”, p. 222; La Rosa, *L’arabo di Sicilia*, p. 62.

<sup>35</sup> Aguadé, “The Maghrebi dialects of Arabic”, p. 45; Pereira, “Arabic in the North African Region”, pp. 956-957; Pereira, *Le parler arabe de Tripoli*, pp. 62-64; Benkato, “The Arabic Dialect of Benghazi”, p. 63; D’Anna, “Two Texts in the Arabic of Miṣrāta”, p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> Pereira, “Arabic in the North African Region”, p. 956.

<sup>37</sup> Pereira, *Le parler arabe de Tripoli*, pp. 49-55; D’Anna, “Two Texts in the Arabic of Miṣrāta”, p. 22. Eastern Libyan Arabic, and particularly the modern dialect of Benghazi, maintain the interdental fricatives, according to Owens, *A Short Reference Grammar*, pp. 5-7, and Benkato, “The Arabic Dialect of Benghazi”, pp. 67-68.

<sup>38</sup> Aguadé, “The Maghrebi dialects of Arabic”, pp. 44-46.

### 3.1.4. Hamza

As in the case of all texts in Middle Arabic, the *hamza* is unstable and this orthographic condition reflects the phonemic instability of the glottal stop that this grapheme symbolises.<sup>39</sup>

At the beginning of a word, the glottal stop often disappears and the word loses its first syllable: the orthographical result consists in the lack of the initial *hamza*, like in بو “father”. It is needless to say that all the North African Arabic dialects, until nowadays, share this phenomenon: \**abū* > *bū* “father” and \**aḥū* > *ḥū* “brother”.

In the central position of the sequence -*ā*'*i*-, the *hamza* is systematically substituted by the grapheme of its *kursī* (ي), thus phonetically shifting to -*āy*-: الدائرة “the circle” (Cl.Ar. *dā'ira*), بايد “dead” (Cl.A. *bā'id*), طائر “flying” (Cl.Ar. *ṭā'ir*), الرجال “the free men” (Cl.Ar. *ḥarā'ir*), بلاد الجزائر “Algeria” (Cl.Ar. *al-ḡazā'ir*), البعائر “the camels” (Cl. Ar. *ba'ā'ir*), سراير “intentions” (Cl.Ar. *sarā'ir*), وثائق “documents” (Cl.Ar. *waṭā'iq*).

In other cases, the absence of the *hamza* causes a lengthening of the next vowel: نامر “I order” (Cl. Ar. *na'mur*), روس “heads” (Cl.Ar. *ru'ūs*).

At the end of the word, a hamzated verb is often graphically realised with a final *alif maqṣūra*, like: بدى “he started” (Cl.Ar. *bada'a*), ظمى “thirsty” (Cl.A. *ḍāmi* ← verb *ḍami'a*).<sup>40</sup>

Finally, also consider cases like: ريس “leader” (*rayyās*?, Cl.Ar. *ra'īs*), ضو “light” (Cl.Ar. *ḍaw*), روا “they saw” (Cl.Ar. *ra'aw*).

## 3.2. Morphology

As for the morphology, our analysis will focus on some segments of the pronominal system, on the verbal system (conjugations, weak verbs, and derived forms), and finally on the formation of some plural patterns of the nominal system.

### 3.2.1. Pronouns

As for independent personal pronouns, the only occurrence that is clearly different from the system of Classical Arabic concerns the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural, in instances like احنا “we”, واحنا “and we”. The presence of the initial *alif* leads to the interpretation of *iḥna* ~ *aḥna*. For this pronoun, modern Tunisian dialects have *aḥna* (Tunis, Sousse, Sfax), *naḥna* (Le Kef, Mateur, Kairouan), and *ḥnā* ~ *ḥnē* (La Chebba, Gabès,

Ben Gardane, Douz);<sup>41</sup> modern Libyan dialects exhibit *ḥne* (Tripoli, Misrata),<sup>42</sup> *niḥna* (Bengazi).<sup>43</sup>

As for suffixed personal pronouns, visible differences from the Classical Arabic system are not in evidence and cannot be found. The 3<sup>rd</sup> singular masculine is always marked by *ḥ*, so it is quite difficult to detect whether the grapheme refers to -*u* (as in the Pre-Hilali dialects) or -*ah* (as in the Hilali dialects),<sup>44</sup> and neither the metrics nor the rhyme of the poems help to decode the realisation of this pronoun.

As for indirect suffixed pronouns, there is an interesting occurrence: كلام ماليه نيه “a discourse that has not any intention” (→ ...*mā līl-u* ~ *mā līl-ah*?, lit. “not to-it”), with a reduplication of the preposition \**li*- > *līl*- “to”.

The relative pronoun is اللي “that”.

The demonstratives manifestly different from the Classical Arabic system are: هاذاك “that (m)”, هذيك “that (f)”, هاذوك “those (m)”. Finally, as is often the case in Middle Arabic texts, هاذا “this (m)” is spelt without the *alif ḥanḡariyya*, but with an *alif tawīla*.

There are two types of presentatives, one derived from *hā*- and another from *rā*-, both followed by suffix pronouns: هاني “here I am”, رايك “here you are”, راه “here he is” that also has an allomorph in the sentence الصمت راهو الراحة “silence is rest”.<sup>45</sup>

### 3.2.2. Verbs

While the narrative parts of the *manāqib* do not exhibit any significant variation because they are written essentially in Classical Arabic, reported direct speech includes many instances of a verbal morphology that is heavily influenced by the colloquial.

#### 3.2.2.1. Conjugations

In all the passages of reported direct speech, the typical Maghrebi *n*-imperfect is attested sys-

<sup>41</sup> Mion, “Réflexions”, p. 274, “Ben Gardane”, p. 118; Ritt-Benmimoun, *Grammatik*, p. 66; Singer, *Grammatik*, p. 250.

<sup>42</sup> Griffini, *L'arabo parlato*, p. 184; Pereira, *Le parler arabe de Tripoli*, p. 240; D'Anna, “Two Texts in the Arabic of Miṣrāta”, p. 142.

<sup>43</sup> Owens, *A Short Reference Grammar*, p. 91; Benkato, “The Arabic Dialect of Banghazi”, p. 84.

<sup>44</sup> Pereira, “Arabic in the North African Region”, pp. 960-961.

<sup>45</sup> For the sake of convenience, the present study makes no differentiation between the *hā*- and the *rā*- series, but for the analysis of the latter see Taine-Cheikh, “Grammaticalized Uses”; Klimiuk, “The Particle *ra*-”; Procházka & Dallaji, “A Functional Analysis”.

<sup>39</sup> For example, La Rosa, *L'arabo di Sicilia*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>40</sup> Beaussier, *Dictionnaire*, p. 626.

tematically, since we find the *n-* prefix in the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular and the *n---u* circumfix in the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural.

In the singular: نرقد “I sleep”, نبغى “I want”, نصره “I hit it”, أخرج الكتابين نقراهما “take off the two books and I’ll read them”, نبات “I spend the night”, نبكى “I cry”, قبل ان نموت “before I die”, نبرى العليل “I turn”, ندور “I call”, ننده “I live”, نده “I heal the sick”, العريان نكسى “I dress the naked”, جعلت تضرب به “I order”, نامر “I protect him”, I started hitting it”, نوصلك “I reach you”, نوصيك “I look”, انا صرت نقاسى “I recommend you”, نوصيك “I’m starting to suffer”, انا نعيط “I claim”.

In the plural: ونسقوه “we listen to it”, ونسقوه “and we water it”, ننسوه “we let him”, ننسوه “we forget him”, ننقلوه “we transfer him”, ننقلوه “we protect him”, ننطوفو “we circumambulate”, ننطوفو “we do”, نحصدوه “we harvest it”, نحصدوه “we cut”.

In the conjugation of the imperfect, plurals exhibit only an *-ū* ending (no traces of Cl.Ar. *-ūna* ending is found): يهدوا “people go crazy”, يهدوا “they break down the wall”, يخلوا “they let”, يضور “they illuminate”.

The *alif otiosum* often disappears: وانقلو عني “and remove from me!”, يضور “they illuminate”.

Unfortunately, the text does not seem to have any contexts that in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular and plural or in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural imply the use of a theoretical feminine, because otherwise it would certainly have been useful to observe the treatment of the gender opposition in the verb.

### 3.2.2.2. Weak Verbs

As for the hollow verb, the only particularly deviant phenomenon concerns the imperative which maintains a long vowel in the *Cv̄C* syllable of the 2<sup>nd</sup> masculine singular: توب “repent (m)!”, كون “be (m)!”.

As for the defective verb, it should first be noted that this category includes both verbs that are properly defective, as well as verbs that originally belonged to other verbal categories, but which have undergone morpho-phonological changes.

In the perfect, the model of the defective verb is applied by final hamzated verbs and geminate verbs.

The first loses its *hamza*: قرئت “I read” (with a final *-ayt ~ -ēt ~ -īt*), whereas the second receives an *\*-ay-* affix ( $\rightarrow$  *-ay-*, *-ī-*, or *-ē-*?) before the consonantal personal suffixes: حسيت “I felt”.<sup>46</sup>

In the sentence البلاد خلات “the country is gone”, the graphical final *ت* ending of the verb ( $\rightarrow$  ...

*hlāt*?) seems to exhibit a 3<sup>rd</sup> singular feminine in *-āt*. The interference of the graphic level is not negligible, because it should be remembered that this kind of ending belongs to a Pre-Hilali typology, like the sedentary dialects of Tunisian Arabic (which have a *mšāt* model), whereas the Hilali typology to which many Libyan dialects belong prefers an *-at* allomorph (with a *mšat* model).<sup>47</sup>

Beside these considerations, some remarks can be done concerning the reflexes of the Classical Arabic verb *ġā’a* “to come”. It loses its *hamza* in both the perfective and the imperfective: جا “he came”, جو “I came”, جيت “he came to it”, يجي “you come bringing”, يجينى “it comes to me”, يجوا “they come”.

It is worth noting that, on the basis of a graphical final *و*, the plural apparently exhibits an *-ū* ending ( $\rightarrow$  *zū?* “they came”, *yzū?* “they come”). With respect to this phenomenon, the treatment of the final suffix in the weak verbs differs according to the type of dialect, as summarised by the model below:

	Pre-Hilali	Hilali
Perfect	<i>-āw</i>	<i>-ū</i>
Imperfect	<i>-īw</i>	<i>-ū</i>

The application of the model produces respectively *zāw* and *yzīw* in the Pre-Hilali dialects, and *zū* and *yzū* in the Hilali dialects.<sup>48</sup>

Now, if this final *و* corresponds actually to an *-ū* ending, there are two possible interpretations: either this is a Classical Arabic influence (*\*ġā’ū*, *\*yaġī’ū*), or this is an interference of the underlying dialect.

As a final remark, the imperative of the defective verb maintains the long vowel also in the 2<sup>nd</sup> masculine singular: اعطيني “give (m.) me!”.

### 3.2.2.3. Derived forms

The VII form confirms a passive-reflexive value: ما يفتح لك بابك “the door doesn’t open to you”, تنبنى الزاوية “the zawiya is built”.

The imperfect of the X form of the hollow verbs, instead of the expected *ī* in a central position, exhibits quite systematically an *ā*: يستتاب “he invites to repent” (Cl.Ar. *yastatību*), يستراح “he rests” (Cl.Ar. *yastariḥu*),<sup>49</sup> يستغاث “he asks

<sup>47</sup> Pereira, “Arabic in the North African Region”, p. 963.

<sup>48</sup> Pereira, “Le parler arabe de Tripoli”, pp. 102-104; Mion, “Réflexions”, pp. 272-273; Benmofteh & Pereira, “Remarks”, p. 314; D’Anna, “Two Texts in the Arabic of Miṣrāta”, p. 32.

<sup>49</sup> Panasci, *Studi lessicali*, IV, p. 221.

<sup>46</sup> D’Anna, “Two Texts in the Arabic of Miṣrāta”, p. 35.



for help” (Cl.Ar. *yastaġītu*).<sup>50</sup> The same phenomenon is found in some Tunisian dialects where a few verbs are conjugated with a central vowel *ā*, differently from Classical Arabic and many other dialects, like *yistiġāṭ* “he asks for help”, *yistihār* “he renounces”, *yistidām* “he perpetuates”, *yistarāh* “he rests”.<sup>51</sup>

The rare XI form (*if‘ālla*) of Classical Arabic is highly productive in the medieval and modern Maghrebi dialects.<sup>52</sup> In the text this phenomenon is clear in the perfect: اخماج “it has gone bad”.<sup>53</sup> It is also attested in the imperfect: يطمأن “he is reassured”,<sup>54</sup> يحقار “he despises”. It is attested as a participle: مطمأن “reassured”, مديال “faded”.<sup>55</sup>

### 3.3. Plural of the nouns

In Classical Arabic some nouns receive a broken plural that is called by the grammatical tradition *muntahā l-ġumū‘* which consists of two main patterns, i.e. *CaCāCīC* and *CaCāCiC*, that are applied to the noun according to its syllabic structure in the singular (so, for example, *miṣbāh* “lamp” → pl. *maṣābīh*, but *naṣīḥa* “advise” → pl. *naṣā’ih*).

Their use in the modern North African varieties has differences: whereas Hilali dialects maintain a distinction between *CaCāCiC* and *C(a)CāCīC*, Pre-Hilali dialects confuse these patterns in a unique *C(a)CāCiC* scheme with the loss of the ancient *ī*.<sup>56</sup>

In our text, aside from the occurrences of the regular *CaCāCiC* pattern, *CaCāCīC* regular patterns without any confusion can also be found, like in السلاطين “the sultans”, مصابيح “lamps”, بنادير “bendirs”, شياطين “demons”, الفواتير “the Fawātīr”.

Therefore, at first glance the presence of a *C(a)CāCīC* pattern could be explained simply because the text is basically written in Classical Arabic. Nonetheless, as shown in these pages, the text exhibits a huge interference with the dialect at many levels and this makes it much more

difficult to explain the complete absence of any irregularity (i.e. the lack of the dialectal use of the *C(a)CāCiC* pattern). Moreover, the extensive use of the tribonym *fawātīr* (a *CaCāCīC* pattern) with absolutely no exception, and without even a mistake in the whole text, leads us to question if this plural pattern with *ī* can be explained not only as a feature of Classical Arabic, but rather as a feature of the Hilali typology of Libyan Arabic too.

### 3.4. Interrogatives

The only interrogatives that have been found are: إيش “what?”, كيفاش “how?”, لاش “why?, for what?”. To this list we can add also the interrogative “where?” that can also receive a pronominal suffix, like in: اينك و اين كنتاك “where are you and where is your book?”. Interestingly enough, as for the interrogative “what?”, modern Tunisian Arabic uses many items, among which for example sg.m. (*a*)*šnuwwa*, sg.f. (*a*)*šniyya*, pl. (*a*)*šnūma* (Tunis),<sup>57</sup> or sg.m. (*ā*)*šinhu*, sg.f. (*ā*)*šinhi*, pl.m. (*ā*)*šinhum*, pl.f. (*ā*)*šihin* (Douz),<sup>58</sup> or their simplification *šin/šini* (Ben Gardane).<sup>59</sup> Libyan Arabic uses *āš, šānu, šni* (Tripoli),<sup>60</sup> *šinu* (Misrata),<sup>61</sup> *šinu, šin, eyš* (Benghazi).<sup>62</sup> As for “why?”, both modern Tunisian and Libyan Arabic use ‘*alāš* that seems to be ignored by our text.

### 3.5. Negations

The text exhibits many examples of verbal circumfix negation *mā---š*: ما تغفلوش “do not neglect (pl.)!”، ما صبتش كيفاش انجيك “I don’t leave”, ما نتركش “I cannot figure out how to reach you”, ما غاضكمش “it didn’t annoy you”, ما يدورش بيكم “it doesn’t surround you”, ما تقيسش “don’t measure”, ما تعومش “I don’t swim in it!”، ما عدشى نرفد “I don’t sleep anymore”.

The same pattern occurs also in a nominal negation: ماهوش “he is not”.

### 3.6. Lexicon

Several items exclusively belong to non-Classical Arabic and many of these words are typical of a Maghrebi milieu.

<sup>50</sup> Panasci, *Studi lessicali*, IV, p. 401.

<sup>51</sup> Data taken from Panasci, *Studi lessicali*, IV. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find references to this phenomenon in the works dealing with Libyan Arabic.

<sup>52</sup> Durand, *Dialettologia*, p. 388; La Rosa, *L’arabo di Sicilia*, p. 189.

<sup>53</sup> Panasci, *Studi lessicali*, IV, p. 157.

<sup>54</sup> Panasci, *Studi lessicali*, IV, p. 349; *Dictionnaire Colin*, p. 1194.

<sup>55</sup> Panasci, *Studi lessicali*, IV, p. 166; *Dictionnaire Colin*, p. 502 (where it is given derived from  $\sqrt{dbl}$ ).

<sup>56</sup> The situation is undoubtedly more complex in Middle Arabic. See, for example, Lentin, “Unité et diversité”, p. 313; La Rosa, *L’arabo di Sicilia*, p. 142.

<sup>57</sup> Singer, *Grammatik*, pp. 267-268.

<sup>58</sup> Ritt-Benmimoun, *Grammatik*, p. 88.

<sup>59</sup> Mion, “Ben Gardane”, p. 120.

<sup>60</sup> Pereira, *Le parler arabe de Tripoli*, pp. 272-274.

<sup>61</sup> D’Anna, “Two Texts in the Arabic of Miṣrāta”, p. 142.

<sup>62</sup> Benkato, “The Arabic Dialect of Benghazi”, p. 85.

Nouns: “Quranic school”,<sup>63</sup> ذرية “guys” (as in ذرية اولاد الترك “between your guys and the guys of the Turks”),<sup>64</sup> شاش “turban”,<sup>65</sup> قمره “moon”,<sup>66</sup> ثنيه “trail”,<sup>67</sup> جبانة “cemetery”,<sup>68</sup> the plural form الكيسان “the cups”, طشان “a bit (lit. “a splash”, a denominal from *tašš* “to splash”)), مزامير “faded”, هنشير “farm, rural property”,<sup>71</sup> “flutes”, زاوية “oratory (= religious and educational institute)”,<sup>72</sup> مدردر “sprinkled”,<sup>73</sup> جنان “garden” used as a singular, while in Cl.Ar. *ġinān* is the plural of *ġanna*.<sup>74</sup>

Verbs: “I sleep”,<sup>75</sup> نرقد “he brought you” and جيت “I brought”,<sup>76</sup> وتجي تهز ثيابك “and you come and take your clothes”, يحوم “he seeks” (II form *ħawwam*),<sup>77</sup> شفت “they picked up me”, شالوني “I saw”, نستنه “I wait”.<sup>78</sup> The verb “to want” is attested by the Cl.Ar. *arāda*, like in نريد “I want” (often used in technical Sufi contexts like that of being a *murīd*), but there are many occurrences of reflexes of *√bgy*, like نينغي “I want”. It is worth

remembering that Libyan Arabic use *bbā yibbī* which seems to be the result of an assimilation.<sup>79</sup>

Particles: لين “in order to”, in the sentence لين يعود اشتات “in order to get back scattered”.

Expressions: إذا أشرت إلى المطر أن تصب تصب “if I tell the rain to fall, it falls” (i.e. verb *ṣabb* “to pour” + noun *mṭar* “rain”), اسمع كلامي ورد الببال “listen to my words and pay attention!” (see *radd bāl-u* “prendre garde, faire attention” according to Beaussier’s dictionary).<sup>80</sup>

### 3.7. Varia

Orthographic affixation appears in: ما عدشى “I don’t sleep anymore” (= *mā ‘ād-š[i]*, with shortening of the central *ā*), ما بقالي حد “I have none left” (= *mā bqā-li ḥadd*), محلاها “how beautiful it is!” (= *mā ahlā-ha*, with loss of the *alif* in *mā*), نستكيله “we complain to him” (= *ništakī-lu/ah*).

## 4. An Example of Semi-Vernacular Poem

Scholars who are merely interested in dialectological issues will enjoy and delight while reading these *manāqib* because, as already seen, they will find many examples of linguistic deviances from the norm. But the general results they may come up with, however, should not come as much of a surprise, as the deviant material mostly seems to fall within the broad range of linguistic variation that any Middle Arabic text exhibits.

Thus, in order to avoid the (dangerous and even too frequent!) sterility of such a linguistic analysis for its own sake, it seems useful to seize the opportunity to also provide an idea of the contents of these *manāqib*. The plentiful intertextual and cultural references, the wealth of the content as well as the style, make them a work that should attract attention not only from the point of view of language history, but also as an example of mystical language and popular culture.

The reported direct speech of ‘Abd al-Salām al-Asmar consists almost always in *ṣataḥāt* expressed in the form of (semi-)vernacular poetry.

The book under examination includes a huge corpus of poems that await to be studied by scholars, and the present paper represents the occasion to offer an excerpt of this poetry.

It is not possible to apply the established Khalīlian metrical system to this type of poetry, because this system was conceived for the syl-

<sup>63</sup> Brunschvig, *La Berbérie Orientale*, II, p. 357; Panasci, *Studi lessicali*, IV, p. 440; Beaussier, *Dictionnaire*, p. 850.

<sup>64</sup> Marçais & Guïga, *Glossaire*, III, p. 1379: the term is unknown in Takrouna, but the authors give the meaning of “posterité”, “enfants d’un individu”, and “enfants en bas âge”.

<sup>65</sup> Dozy, *Dictionnaire*, pp. 235-240. Originally, the term indicates a piece of cloth rolled around the head. It could be linked to the typical North African brimless cap called *šāšiyya* (Dozy, *Dictionnaire*, pp. 240-244).

<sup>66</sup> Beaussier, *Dictionnaire*, p. 828; Panasci, *Studi lessicali*, p. 441; Marçais & Guïga, *Glossaire*, VI, pp. 3298-3299, where the primary meaning is “lune lorsqu’elle a cessé d’être croissant et que s’en annonce la forme ronde”.

<sup>67</sup> Panetta, *L’arabo parlato*, p. 277; Marçais & Guïga, *Glossaire*, II, p. 540.

<sup>68</sup> Panetta, *L’arabo parlato*, p. 52; Marçais & Guïga, *Glossaire*, II, p. 564.

<sup>69</sup> Panetta, *L’arabo parlato*, p. 30.

<sup>70</sup> Singer, *Grammatik*, p. 468; *Dictionnaire Colin*, p. 892: *maš’ūm* “funeste, sinistre; qui porte malheur, guignard”.

<sup>71</sup> Brunschvig, *La Berbérie Orientale*, II, p. 198; Marçais & Guïga, *Glossaire*, VIII, p. 4192.

<sup>72</sup> Beaussier, *Dictionnaire*, p. 448; Lentin, *Supplément*, p. 120; Brunschvig, *La Berbérie orientale*, II, p. 326.

<sup>73</sup> Panasci, *Studi lessicali*, IV, p. 170; *Dictionnaire Colin*, p. 517.

<sup>74</sup> La Rosa, *L’arabo di Sicilia*, p. 267.

<sup>75</sup> Griffini, *L’arabo parlato*, p. 94; Beaussier, *Dictionnaire*, p. 408; Panasci, *Studi lessicali*, IV, p. 214.

<sup>76</sup> Beaussier, *Dictionnaire*, p. 171; Griffini, *L’arabo parlato*, p. 217; La Rosa, *L’arabo di Sicilia*, p. 258; Panasci, *Studi lessicali*, IV, p. 94.

<sup>77</sup> Used in several dialects of Southern Tunisia (Ritt-Benmimoun, *Grammatik*, p. 338; Mion, “Ben Gardane”, p. 122), as well as in Libyan Arabic (Griffini, *L’arabo parlato*, p. 240).

<sup>78</sup> Beaussier, *Dictionnaire*, p. 10; Durand, *Dialettologia*, p. 392; Pereira, *Le parler arabe de Tripoli*, p. 146; La Rosa, *L’arabo di Sicilia*, p. 257; Panasci, *Studi lessicali*, p. 20.

<sup>79</sup> Griffini, *L’arabo parlato*, p. 308; Pereira, *Le parler arabe de Tripoli*, pp. 140-142.

<sup>80</sup> Beaussier, *Dictionnaire*, p. 391.

labic structure of Classical Arabic and not for the dialect. Moreover, since our text is not vocalised, it becomes impossible to comment with certainty on the nature of short vowels, diphthongs, and consonantal clusters.<sup>81</sup>

The following lines give an excerpt of a poem extracted from the *manāqib*:<sup>82</sup> it is rewritten in its original shape and, finally, is accompanied by a translation. The poem has a monorhyme structure with two hemistichs in which each one rhymes with the other.

أنا الشيخ الاسمر أنا ريس الاقطاب	1
مدفعي معمر لضرب العدو ينصاب	2
بارودي صادي يأخذ على الأوجاب	3
أنا سيفي ماضى لروس العدو يصاب	4
شدوا أحزابي تنجوا من كل عذاب	5
أنا الصيد الأصفر أنا نايب النياب	6
[...]	
اسمع كلامي أنا شيخك أنا نهاب	7
تغمس في نوري وترفع كل حجاب	8
أنا الغوث الأزهر ورقيت كل حجاب	9
من النار تنجي من قدرة الوهاب	10
ثم أولادي نشفع لهم بخطاب	11
في القبر نراهم ننورهم يا لحباب	12
أنا الشيخ الاسمر وقريت كل كتاب	13
بالك تخالف نزميك في سرداب	14
الله أكبر أنا نعطب أنا العطاب	15
اقروا سلامي إلى فقرا الاصحاب	16

#### Translation:

- 1 I am the *šayḥ* al-Asmar, the first among the *aqtāb*  
I am a living being who contemplates, I am the one  
of the *aḥzāb*
- 2 My cannon loaded to take down the enemy is hit  
But I keep striking with a bow and arrow
- 3 My powder is thundering and does its duty  
My bullets are tightly screwed, O benevolent ones
- 4 My sharp sword is ready to strike the heads of enemies  
Listen to me, I am the salvation among the saints
- 5 Follow my *aḥzāb* and you will be saved from all torment  
Listen to my words, I recommend you, practice the good
- 6 I am the tawny lion, the deputy of the deputies  
I take my mortal enemy at once with arrows

<sup>81</sup> See, among the others, the many remarks by Stumme, *Tripolitanisch-Tunisische Beduinenlieder*, pp. 24-47; Zack, "Historical Arabic Dialectology", pp. 218-220, and Marzūqī, *al-šī'r al-ša'bi al-tūnīsī*. Anyhow, in the *manāqib* many poems seem to belong to the vernacular genres of the *gšīm*, *zindāl*, and *malzūma*.

<sup>82</sup> Pages 153-154 of the edition we used.

[...]

- 7 Listen to me, I am your *šayḥ*, I am venerable  
Remember my words, and remain with the penitents
- 8 Immerse yourself in my light, and you will remove  
every curtain  
Listen to my words, and you will be saved from all  
torment
- 9 I am the luminous rescue, and I removed all curtains  
In heaven I look for permission from the Forgiver
- 10 From the fire you will be saved with the power of the  
Bestower  
The pond is mine and from it I water my beloved
- 11 Then I shall intervene for my disciples in the final  
judgement  
In the agony I shall join them and give them judgement
- 12 I'll see their graves and illuminate them, O beloved  
companions  
I, the venerable knight, will comfort them forever
- 13 I am the *šayḥ* al-Asmar and have studied all the Book,  
My saw will mill the lying traitor
- 14 Be careful not to transgress or I shall throw you in a cell  
In the depths of Hell, O perjurer
- 15 God is greater, I destroy, I'm the destroyer  
With God's permission I medicate, I'm the healer
- 16 Send my greetings to the poor people  
All pray to our venerable ancestor

Despite the brevity of this excerpt, the complexity of these sixteen verses brings several remarks and observations. We organised them based on the line number.

#### [VERSE 1]

The poem opens with the self-presentation of al-Asmar who describes himself as the first among the *aqtāb* (a possible reading could be *rayyās al-aqtāb*). It is well-known that *qutb* (pl. *aqtāb*) is a rank of the cosmological Sufi hierarchy, a terminology that pertains to the Classical Arabic lexicon but that, as a technical term, is maintained also in dialect, as confirmed by its presence in the Marçais & Guïga's *Glossaire* of Takrouna according to which a *qutb* is a "personnage qui a atteint le plus haut degré de sainteté".<sup>83</sup>

In this self-presentation, al-Asmar claims himself as the *šāḥib al-aḥzāb*. The word *ḥizb* (pl. *aḥzāb*) is often used in Sufi literature where the figurative and symbolic language of poetry suggests a double meaning. The first value is undoubtedly technical: the term indicates a sixtieth of the Quran, the group of verses used during the collective recitation in a

<sup>83</sup> Marçais & Guïga, *Glossaire*, VI, p. 3229.

Sufi ceremony. However, the context also suggests a second meaning: an implicit reference to Q 33, the Sūra *al-Aḥzāb* (The Confederates), where the word *ḥizb* indicates the coalition of polytheists who fought against Muslims in the so-called Battle of Ḥandaq that took place in 627. In this way, al-Asmar cannot only introduce himself as the one of the Quranic sixtieths, but also as the one who can count on his *ḥizb* of Sufi companions ready to fight against the unbelievers.

This is obviously a subtle image of warfare which, however, should come as no surprise: war metaphors are one of the *topoi* of Sufi literature, in which the boundaries between a spiritual *ḡihād* and a physical *ḡihād* (with the well-known distinction between *ḡihād kabīr* and *ḡihād ṣaḡīr*) are often blurred, also because of the historical and political circumstances in which a composition was written.

These warlike images are suggestive and take up much of the text.

[VERSES 2-6]

Immediately following the first verse, a comparison between the *ṣayḥ* and some weapons begins.

The use of a whole range of technical artillery terms (*midfa*<sup>84</sup>, *bārūd*, *kūr*, *qaws*, and *naššāb*) is very striking.

The first evidence of the use of firearms in the Maghreb dates to Ibn Ḥaldūn's account of the siege of Siḡilmāsa (1274) by the Merinid sultan Ya'qūb. Despite some fluctuations in the meaning of the word through the Maghreb, at least in the Ḥafsid Tunisia *midfa*<sup>85</sup> was a "cannon", and this *midfa*<sup>86</sup> fired *kūr* "cannon-balls, shell" (sg. *kūra*). These *kūr* were filled with *bārūd* "(gun)powder", a formula based on saltpeter that was described for the first time by Ḥasan al-Rammāḥ (d. 1294).<sup>84</sup>

Al-Asmar's powder is "thundering", an expression that survived over time. In fact, according to Marçais & Guíga's *Glossaire* (V, p. 2211), *bārūd ṣādi* is "poudre qui résonne, est souvent mentionnée dans la poésie populaire".<sup>85</sup> The same dictionary also includes a verse of a *msaddes* in a Bedouin dialect that says «*ma zīnt l-'mur kān lubb'ādi // u-bārūd ṣādi // ubnāt teḥt elmrageḡ eddādi*» [original transcription], translated into French as "l'hornement de la vie, c'est seulement les steppes, la poudre tonnante et des jeunes filles qui se balancent sous les étoffes bariolées des palanquins".<sup>86</sup>

All this warlike background is not surprising when one considers that even today in several areas of North Africa *al-Bārūd* is also the name given to the ceremony consisting of a dance with a team of players with rifles forming a circle around a chief.

Nevertheless, aside from firearms, the repertoire of the poem obviously also includes cold weapons.

[VERSES 4-6]

Al-Asmar's sword is ready to be used.

Starting from the role played in the tradition by *Dū l-fiqār* (the Prophet's sword) as well as from the nickname of Sayf al-Islām attributed to Ḥālid ibn al-Walīd (7<sup>th</sup> century), the sword is the symbol of religious power and the tangible emblem of an authority that can unleash a war or sanction peace.

However, the sword is accompanied by a bow and arrows, which in our text are represented by *qaws* and *naššāb*,<sup>87</sup> both cold weapons which are part of the heritage of images used in Sufism, if one thinks for example of the more recent *Rimāḥ ḥizb al-raḥīm 'alā nuḥūr ḥizb al-raḡīm* (The Lances of the Compassionate against the Throats of the Party of the Accursed) by al-Ḥāḡḡ 'Umar (1793-1864).

Even the tradition of the Moroccan *malḥūn*, nowadays, takes up the same motif of the arrows:

*ybāt šəml l-mru fə-ḥfəḍ lə-krīm məlmūm  
w-yšbaḥ mšəttət ṭālb əs-slāma  
ūla ymədd 'la rās 'dūh b-dūn qīyās  
ḥīn yxṭa b-dərbtu kāy'ūd nādəm  
ytləqqa l-mru nbāl m'a syūf l-fwārəs  
w la ytləqqa da 'ūt l-məḍlūm mən əḍ-ḍāləm*

Sibylle Vocke translates these verses as follows:

"Der Mensch verbringt die Nacht inmitten der Seinen, im Schutz Gottes, und am Morgen wird er von ihnen getrennt und bittet um Sicherheit. Wenn er die Hand erhebt gegen den Kopf des Feindes, ohne zu treffen, wenn er seinen Schlag verfehlt, so wird er es bereuen. Besser der Mensch wird von großen und kleinen Pfeilen getroffen und von den Schwertern der Reiter, als daß der Fluch des Verleumdeten unter den Schuldigen ihn erreicht"<sup>88</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Colin, "Bārūd".

<sup>85</sup> Marçais & Guíga, *Glossaire*, V, p. 2211.

<sup>86</sup> Marçais & Guíga, *Glossaire*, I, p. 175.

<sup>87</sup> Beaussier, *Dictionnaire*, p. 976, translates "arbalète". The *Dictionnaire Colin*, p. 1905, translates "flèche; bois de flèche; arbalète" and gives also the example *qōs-ū-nəššāb* (original transcription) "arc et flèche avec quoi jouent les enfants".

<sup>88</sup> Vocke, *Die marokkanische Malḥūnpoesie*, pp. 134-135

Incidentally, it is interesting to observe that S. Vocke explains in a footnote that the word *nbāl* refers to a type of “arrows” bigger and of a wider range than the *nšāšab*.<sup>89</sup>

[VERSE 6]

Returning to our poem, the text suddenly switches from the metaphor of war to that of animals, as the *šayḥ* becomes a “tawny lion” that can decree the death of the enemy.

A symbol of courage, firmness, cruelty and strength, the lion is a motif widely used in literature and in the East is not infrequently a symbol associated with ‘Alī. Literature on this subject is vast but suffice it to remember al-Damīrī (d. 1405) and his *Hayāt al-ḥayawānāt al-kubrā* (The Life of the Biggest Animals), in which he describes the physical and behavioural characteristics of the lion, its medicinal properties, and the interpretation of its presence in dreams. The oneiric dimension is particularly evocative: in a dream, the lion is a powerful man (*sultān*), a strong tyrant who can dispense death, but who can also instill science and wisdom.<sup>90</sup>

In our poem, this lion is “tawny” (*aṣfar*) and perhaps the choice of this colour is not accidental or dictated solely by the need to describe the animal’s fur, if one thinks that Marçais & Guïga’s *Glossaire* (V, p. 2297) includes *oṣṣēd laṣfor* [original transcription] which is described as a label frequently used in reference to saints.

*Aṣfar* is used in Q 77, 33, referring to animals: «*ka-annahu ġimālat-un ṣufr-un*» “as if they were yellowish camels”, where the camels have the same colour as the flames of Hell.

On the other hand, if the yellowness of the aforementioned Quranic verses evokes eternal damnation, in other cases the Islamic tradition gives to yellowness a value of brightness, glossiness, purity, and fidelity of faith; all of the elements that metaphorically represent salvation. This is the case in *al-Durra al-fāḥira* (The Precious Pearl) in which al-Ġazālī describes the scenario of a judgement day where the fortunate are divided into several groups, among them the lovers of God who are awarded with a banner (*rāya*) that is yellow and that is placed in the hands of Aaron (Hārūn).<sup>91</sup>

(original transcription).

<sup>89</sup> *Dictionnaire Colin*, p. 1881: *nbāl*, pl. *nbāl* (original transcription) “Flèche d’arc; fer de flèche”.

<sup>90</sup> Carusi, *Lo zafferano e il geco*, pp. 202-205.

<sup>91</sup> Günther, “The Poetics of Islamic Eschatology”, pp. 202-206.

[VERSES 10-11]

Explicit or implicit Quranic references continue in the other verses.

“The pond is mine” stands for *al-ḥawḍ ḥawḍī* (hypothetical transcription based on Classical Arabic), where the reference is clearly to *ḥawḍ al-Kawṭar* “the pond of abundance”, one of the four rivers that flow through Heaven (*Kawṭar*, *Kāfūr*, *Tasnīm*, and *Salsabīl*) from which the righteous will drink Divine Grace in the afterlife, and the righteous will receive the Master’s intercession for the final judgement (see *faṣl al-ḥiṭāb* of Q 38, 22).

[VERSES 13-14]

Punishment quickly becomes an almost physical threat again, as al-Asmar’s *minšār* (“saw”) is ready to saw off the culprits. Here, there is a subtle play on words because the meaning of the root  $\sqrt{nsr}$  is twofold, as it means both “to cut” and “to spread”. Now, if “spreading” the Sufi lore is one of the main concerns, the same root derives *minšār*, a noun of instrument (*ism al-āla*), with the meaning of “saw”. Thus, the “sawing” noise made while reciting *dīkr* out loud gave to a particular moment of the ceremony the name of *dīkr al-minšār* (lit. “recitation of the saw”).

No transgression will be permitted, otherwise the sinner will be turned away from that light which was repeatedly evoked so far and will be trapped in darkness. Which kind of darkness? That of a *sirdāb* located in the depths of Hell. Roughly speaking, a *sirdāb* is an underground living room, and even Beaussier’s dictionary of the Maghrebi dialects translates the word simply as “souterrain” without nuances (p. 469). According to Nejmeddine Hentati, the term is used more frequently in the Orient to indicate an underground prison, whereas the Maghreb prefers *dāmūs*, *kahf*, and *dihlīz*,<sup>92</sup> the latter confirmed also by R. Brunschvig who mentions it as the underground jail of Kairouan (“cachot souterrain”).<sup>93</sup>

Therefore, the context in which the term is used (*sirdāb qa ‘r ḡahannam*) is certainly a metaphor of the imprisonment of the soul in Hell. Moreover, the choice of the term cannot be accidental for the Sufi tradition, if one thinks for example of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Ša‘rānī (d. 1565) who explained that, for the practice of invocation, the disciple must choose a dark area of his retreat (*ḥalwa*) or his underground cell (*sirdāb*).<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Hentati, “La prison”, p. 180.

<sup>93</sup> Brunschvig, *La Berbérie Orientale*, I, p. 374.

<sup>94</sup> Patrizi, “Trasmissione”, p. 30.

## [VERSES 15-16]

Finally, while sending his greetings (*salām*), a symbol of enthronement of the Saints in Heaven, the final verses use two roots ( $\sqrt{dwy}$  and  $\sqrt{tbb}$ ) which refer to the disease/healing dichotomy initiated by Q 2, 10 («*fī qulūbihim maraḍun fa-zāda Llāhu maraḍan wa-lahum ‘aḍābun alīmun bi-mā kānū yakḍibūn*»), “there is a sickness in their hearts, then God increased their sickness, and there is a painful punishment for the lies they told”.<sup>95</sup>

The motif pervades all the Sufi literature up to the present day, including the North African *malḥūn*. The oral tradition of Sīdī ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Maḡdūb in Morocco, for example, still provides numerous cases today, such as the following:

*â Bû Mḥāmmad tāl əl-hāl*  
*â kud sərrik lâ yubâh*  
*gəlbi mṛəd u b āš mṛəd*  
*gəlbi mṛəd mən gēr jrâh*  
*jibû tḥêḥ idâwînî*  
*â yâ tḥêḥ gdâ nəhlək*  
*mâ li d-dwâ ‘illâ Rbbî*

Alfred-Louis de Prémare translates the verses as follows:

“O Bû-Moḥammad l’ état (d’extase) se prolonge!  
 Oh! prends ton secret! que point ne se divulgue!  
 Malade est mon cœur sans aucune blessure !  
 Amenez un médecin qui me soigne !  
 O Médecin ! demain je mourrai :  
 Point pour moi de remède que mon Dieu !”<sup>96</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

In bringing to a close our remarks on the language of the *manāqib* and on this poetic excerpt by ‘Abd al-Salām al-Asmar, a few final considerations are in order.

In these pages, we have tried to take a general look to three aspects:

- 1) al-Asmar: a Libyan saint from Zlīten, who is still a little-known figure outside his area of reference, about whom there is not a vast literature and about whose biography there is still some uncertainty;
- 2) the literary text of the *manāqib*: the work was composed by Karīm al-Dīn al-Baramūnī

al-Miṣrāti, and the version used here is the recension prepared by the Tunisian scholar Muḥammad al-Maḥlūf;

- 3) the language: Muḥammad al-Maḥlūf’s recension certainly tampered with the original text, yet despite the editor’s interventions (of which we have no certainty, but about which we may harbour some suspicious), the Middle Arabic elements are still strongly evident.

As explained above, and as is quite obvious, the linguistic study of Middle Arabic elements could be further explored: we gladly leave this task to those who are ready to find in this text other deviations from Classical Arabic. Indeed, it seems to us a task that, although meritorious, would still risk not bringing enormous scientific advances, and this for two reasons:

- 1) the sociolinguistic dimension should be investigated, but in our case this is not possible, because a (serious) historical sociolinguistics would only be possible by having a larger quantity of written productions that belong to the same text type;
- 2) in these texts, including the genre of *manāqib*, dialectal interference mostly displays elements that fall within the range of linguistic variation that any Middle Arabic text may exhibit. This is a tendency that has been amply demonstrated by scholarly literature.

Instead, it seemed much more prolific to dwell on certain lexical and content aspects of the *manāqib*.

Several lines of the poem contain themes and motifs that our analysis has tried to trace in a pendulum-like movement from classical sources to oral attestations of modern popular literature.

The various questions raised by the text confirm that al-Asmar’s *manāqib*, like any other works of this genre, are a treasure trove from a linguistic, historical, and religious point of view. Indeed, texts of this type contain many elements of great interest not only for the study of the evolution of regional Arabic(s), but also for reflecting on those intertextual and literary patterns that continue to be passed on over time.

A key point is that the constant repetition of the same terminology and motifs which originated in works of classical literature and finally end up in one broad paraliterary strand, has not happened by chance.

The relationship between hagiographic literature and, for example, the *sīra* genre, as well as the relationship between *zuhdiyya*, *ṣaḥḥ*, and *malḥūn*, should be examined in depth from a diachronic,

<sup>95</sup> It is pointless to go over the existing literature on this subject here, so we will only recall that the remedy for this disease is extensively investigated in the 22<sup>nd</sup> book of al-Ġazālī’s *Iḥyā’*, entitled *Kitāb riyāḍat al-naḥs wa-tahḍīb al-aḥlāq wa-mu‘ālaḡat amrāḡ al-qalb*.

<sup>96</sup> Prémare, *La tradition*, p. 147 (original transcription).

as well as spatial, perspective that does not take into account individual geographical areas.

However, perhaps such a significant inquiry should also focus on establishing how “high” literature has provided inspirational material for popular literature, and how the latter has reworked this material in order to return it, finally, in another form, to that same “high” literature.

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