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Webb, P.A.

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# Desert Perception: Representations of Pre-Islamic Arabian Space in Classical Arabic Literature

*Peter Webb* | ORCID: 0000-0002-6861-0767
University Lecturer Arabic Literature and Culture, Leiden Institute for Area Studies, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands
*p.a.webb@hum.leidenuniv.nl*

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## Abstract

Stories set in the desert, and particularly narratives about the pre-Islamic Arabian desert are ubiquitous in Arabic literature, yet the tellers, audiences and writers of the stories were almost all urbanites, few of whom had actual lived experience with Arabia itself. The setting of pre-Islamic Arabia was accordingly mediated through texts, and this paper analyses how authors set the scene. Taking the main sources for the iconic "Thrust and Dusty War" (*al-Dāḥis wa-l-Ġabrā'*) as a case study, we find that attention to physical setting is surprisingly scant, almost non-existent, and the curiously austere spatial narratives prompt questions about the meanings and purpose of the story. Via methods of geocritical analysis, this paper explores the spatial narratives and the possible ways premodern readers responded to them.

## Keywords

Pre-Islamic Arabia – Classical Arabic literature – the Arabian Desert – spatial narratives – geocriticism – Bakhtin

A core element of a story is its setting. By virtue that any given story occurs via the playing out of events in some particular time and place, setting is as elemental to the anatomy of a story as its plot, and from this fundamental premise contemporary literary theorists push further to ponder the more dynamic and

cognitive aspects of setting. What has been labelled a "spatial turn"[1] in literary criticism seeks to revise the traditional, static perceptions of setting as merely the time and space in which a narrative occurs, and now apprehends the production of space as a potent narrative strategy which underlies and shapes how narratives are understood.[2] Responding to the call to embrace the conceptual revision of space as a matter of theory,[3] this paper extends the methods to Arabic literature, and specifically the culturally crucial corpus of Arabic stories about pre-Islamic Arabia.

Narratives of pre-Islamic Arabian history invoke very meaningful space since pre-Islamic Arabia was the setting in which Muslims situated the weighty topics of Arab ethnic origins, the birthplace of the Arabic language, and the milieu of the Arabic poetic ideal. Readers will likely visualise that space as a desert of Bedouin astride camels thanks to the venerable stereotypes about Arabia as a desert land, yet that imagined desertscape is actually a major stumbling block. The reduction of Arabness into a snapshot of desert Bedouin-ness is precisely the type of static conception of setting which geocriticism and spatial studies counsels us to re-examine. As a matter of topographic and demographic reality – although seldom remarked upon – Arabia is not at all simply one desert and its populations are in the main not Bedouin. Thus, when imagining Arabian space in Arabic literature, it is hasty to presume that the desert archetype is simply the "residue of the desert legacy" of the original Arabs.[4] In light of the inherent property of setting to produce meaning, the preponderance of the desert in Arabic literature may derive more from the narratives which Muslims created to conceptualise Arabia than the actualities of pre-Islamic

1 Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2016, p. 211–44 ("The Spacial Turn").

2 Key studies are Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991; Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, Boston, Beacon Press, 1994; and Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993.

3 Marta Puxan-Oliva, "Assessing Narrative Space: From Setting to Narrative Environments", *Poetics Today* 45:1 (2024) p. 79–103 (p. 81).

4 Joseph Sadan ("The 'Nomad versus Sedentary' Framework in Arabic Literature", *Fabula* 15, 1974, p. 59–86, p. 59) expresses what is likely a baseline understanding in scholarship and popular opinion about the original Arab culture as a product exported from desert Arabia to the Fertile Crescent via the Caliphate, and when it mixed with other cultures, the desert ethos constitutes the "Arab component" of Muslim civilisations. Such generalisation is, on its face, rather ahistorical and it overlooks the key possibilities of the constructedness of the stereotyped desert-Arab ideal, a "Bedouinisation of memory" (Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, p. 321–331), and the privileging of Nadj in canonical Arabness (Nathanial Miller, *The Emergence of Arabic Poetry*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024, p. 248–260).

Arabia itself, and the matter calls for scrutiny. The putative origins of Arabs from billowing dunes of sand is, at least in part, a construct communicated and maintained via literature, and its investigation thus needs a literary analytical approach.

Since Muslim narratives about pre-Islamic Arabia pervade so many corners of Arabic literature, the present paper can but open upon the enterprise, and our case study is the function and visualisation of space that emerges from contextualised analysis of one of the most famous narratives of pre-Islamic Arabian history – the so-called 'Thrust and Dusty War' – *Dāḥis wa-l-Ġabrā'* – a series of battles said to have raged for forty years between two central Arabian lineage groups, the 'Abs and the Ġaṭafān. This paper analyses the earliest extant narrative from the mid-third/ninth century, and its major reiterations from the fourth/tenth, alongside close consideration of contemporaneous geographical accounts about Arabia in order to form a baseline for intertextual relations that can help reconstruct reader responses to Arabian space.

## 1 The "Spatial Turn"

A brief outline of the parameters of the contemporary theoretical interest in space reveals how strikingly germane the methods are for re-reading the setting of Muslim narratives about pre-Islam. As noted above, the crux of the "Spatial Turn" stems from the pioneering work of Gaston Bachelard and Henri Lefebvre who demonstrate that space transcends simple geographical coordinates, and they identify spatial narratives at the heart of shaping meaning.[5] Questions then emerge about how such meanings are elicited and how we are to elucidate them, and in order to grasp the understanding and visualising of literary spatial narratives, subsequent theorists consider manifold factors at play.

In literary works, such as narratives about pre-Islam, readers consume a text and then initiate a mental process of arranging space and the objects within it from a relational perspective and with the aid of their own cognitive experiences, *i.e.* their embodied and emotional responses.[6] A wide range of personal

5 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*; Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.

6 Marco Caracciolo, "Narrative Space and Readers' Responses to Stories: A Phenomenological Account", *Style* 47 (2013), p. 425–44, 429; see also David Herman, "Spatial Reference in Narrative Domains", *Text* 21 (2001), p. 515–41, Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu, *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2016.

interpretations is accordingly possible, but spatial narratives are not completely open-ended for at least two salient reasons. Firstly, they are triggered by the specific presentation of space in the text, and thus the narrative choices of the text itself delineate boundaries of possible interpretation and visualisation. Secondly, the act of reading a text occurs within a historical, social and political context, and consequently the representations of space in readers' minds take shape via intertextual relations with other narratives and experiences. This second element has particular significance since, under the belief that the structure of societies induces particular responses to the linguistic representations of space, the space narrated in a given story will become embodied in the minds of readers in ways particular to their society.[7] Because space exists in literary narratives as language, it is inherently mutable:[8] interpretation of space is subject to changing cognitive interrelations that are perpetually under construction as reader contexts evolve. Doreen Massey thus observes: "the spatial is political";[9] visualisation and meaning are part and parcel of discourses and power apprehended in a Foucauldian sense.

Geocritical theory therefore would stress that the desert of Arabia is anything but inert – we should not expect to find a single desert tableau upon which pre-Islamic history happened, rather the ways in which readers conceptualise it lies quite literally upon the shifting sands of cognition. To grasp the stories and their spatial narratives we thus need pay close attention to both (i) how the space is portrayed as a matter of text and language, and (ii) what intertextual relationships operated upon readers' production of space from that language from time to time. In both cases, the pre-Islamic Arabian desert setting has surprising narrative features, as this paper explores.

The space visualised in the minds of readers has been called "storyworlds"[10] or "narrative environment",[11] and their operation is studied within the realm of reader response theory. This paper's approach adopts three core components of geocritical theory,[12] namely that (i) literary depictions of space are visualised

7 Philip Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 22.

8 This core underpinning of the theory was already in Kant's conception of space as "subjective and ideal … originating from the mind's nature" (*Kants gesammelte Schriften* II, p. 403; translation: Andrew Janiak, "Kant's Views on Space and Time", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, First published Mon Sep 14, 2009; substantive revision Fri Apr 1, 2022).

9 Doreen Massey, *For Space*, London, Sage, 2005, p. 9.

10 Herman, "Spatial Reference".

11 Puxan-Oliva, "Assessing Narrative Space", p. 80.

12 Ryan, Foote, Azaryahu, *Narrating Space*: geocriticism is conceived as the investigation of how fictional worlds intersect with the world of human geography.

intertextually, (ii) the abstract qualities of generic spaces (*i.e.*, in our case, the desert) are intrinsically connected to political and contextual features and thus the building of space involves the deployment of cultural components,[13] and (iii) space is simultaneously real and imagined, it is "socially in use", and operates in both textual and real worlds.[14] Imagining space emerges as a dynamic interplay of textual and intertextual features, and we aim to explore how texts about the Dāḥis and al-Ġabrāʾ War may have elicited reader responses. Reader response involves the visualisation of setting, and herein our investigation intersects with the theme of this issue. By exploring the visualisation of pre-Islamic space in light of its inherent conceptual mutability, we hope to open a new way of thinking about Muslim narratives of pre-Islam, thereby striving for what Lefebvre predicted as the ultimate goal of geocriticism[15] – a deeper appreciation of spatial narratives prompting us "to look at history itself in a new light."[16]

## 2 Arabia and Arabic Literature

The evolving interaction between real geography, textual representation of space and reader response leads us to the first salient discovery regarding Arabic literary representations of pre-Islamic space – that the relationship between Arabian geography and Arabic memories experienced remarkable evolutions during the centuries surrounding the recording of texts about pre-Islam. At the outset, the events that constitute pre-Islamic Arabian history occurred amongst varied peoples inhabiting varied locales of the Arabian Peninsula and were inscribed in local memories. Most memories initially remained localised: pre-Islamic poetry references events local to the poets, poets generally did not

13 Puxman-Oliva, "Assessing Narrative Space", p. 84.

14 This third point derives from Soja (6) a real material world (firstspace) and it is then interpreted through imagined representations of spatiality (secondspace). And then Thirdspace sits above this – the simultaneously real and imagined space.

15 The term "geocriticism" post-dates Lefebvre, as it was advocated by Bertrand Westfal (*Geocriticism. Real and Fictional Spaces*, translation: Robert T. Tally Jr, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; or. ed. *La Géocritique, Réel, Fiction, Espace*, 2007), though his methods stem from Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*.

16 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 42 "We should have to study not only the history of space, but also the history of representations, along with that of their relationships – with each other, with practice and with ideology. History would have to take in not only the genesis of these spaces but also, and especially, their interconnections, distortions, displacements, mutual interactions and links with the spatial practice of the particular society … under consideration".

recall memories of other tribes, and even seminal events such as the Meccan Hajj was restricted in the main to poets of the region around Mecca.[17] Evidence of connections between different parts of Arabia does suggest itself, notably in the widespread citation of the term "Maʿadd" connoting a super-tribal identity,[18] but even this term did not encompass all of Arabia nor all tribes in central Arabia. Various levels of indicators suggest that zones of fragmentation existed across pre-Islamic Arabia, and that the spaces mentioned and remembered in literature were circumscribed on a local scale, proprietary and physically experienced by the original storytellers, poets and their immediate kin audiences. Spatially, the many references to toponyms in pre-Islamic poetry demonstrate how the setting was "socially in use" – it was imaginable in a present and physical sense, since the poets referenced the very land upon which the audiences lived. Localised pre-Islamic audiences could mentally convert the name of a toponym in a poem into an actual parcel of physical geography with which they were intimately familiar, and with which they would have interacted in their quotidian lives.

Given the initial context, the rise of the Caliphate and its outward expansion in the first/seventh century was an enormous catalyst for seismic socio-political change. Under the early Caliphate, peoples from across the Peninsula became, for the first time, constituents of one political entity, and for the first time they migrated as connected peoples and were settled and reorganised in close living proximity in newly-built and exclusively-for-them *amṣār* towns across the Caliphate. The socio-political change transformed what had been fragmented communities of Arabians with their own proprietary tracts of land and associated memories into literal next-door neighbours in entirely new and distant environments in which they were common stakeholders in a new, and large

17 For the regionalism evident in poetry about the pre-Islamic Hajj, see Peter Webb, "The Hajj before Muhammad: The Early Evidence in Poetry and Hadith", *Millennium* 20 (2024), p. 33–63, 38–9 and 48–49. The expanding ambit of the memory of battles from pre-Islamic significance limited to particular tribes which became pan-Arab heritage during the Abbasid period is explored with the case study of Ḏū Qār, Peter Webb, "Making War Ethnic: Arab–Persian Identities and Conflict on the Euphrates Frontier", in *War and Collective Identities in the Middle Ages*, ed. Yannis Stouraitis, York, ARC Humanities Press, 2023, p. 33–63. An important study of localised cultural production in pre-Islamic Arabia and the prominence of promoting Najd as emblematic of Arabness is articulated in Miller, *The Emergence*.

18 For the ambit of Maʿadd as an identity, see Peter Webb, "Ethnicity, Power and Umayyad Society: the rise and fall of the People of Maʿadd", in *Umayyad World*, ed. Andrew Marsham, London, Routledge, 2021, p. 65–102.

political operation.[19] In the nexus of evolving identity and senses of space, the blending of previously different spaces began as a more cohesive sense of "Arab history" was needed. A homogenisation of imagined space of origins began as the peoples themselves articulated their new social groupings. During this period, groups still retained former tribal identities in addition to their identities as *amṣār*-dwellers, so one can expect that critical geographical notions of homeland, self and other were in flux. Few, if any texts are preserved from such early Islam up to the end of the second/eighth century, and analysis can only be gleaned through poetry and scattered anecdote in later literature. This era of thinking about Arabian space is also not the subject of our paper, but it is the backdrop for our period, and it represents a first stage separation from the initial context of recording Arabian history. What had been senses of space connected to territory that was lived in and experienced by the audience of the stories in localised parcels of Arabia began a shift into a more theoretical imagination of Arabia, in its entirety, as the common homeland for now relocated peoples. Given these circumstances, it is remote to think the early Caliphate's social processes of reorganising Arabian people and dislocating them from their original lands would leave their conceptions of Arabian space inert and exactly the same as it had been in pre-Islamic times.

This paper scrutinises texts written during the succeeding two centuries – the third/ninth and fourth/tenth – and during this period, the cultural context of real and conceptual connections with Arabia changed yet again, opening new avenues and intertextual relations to visualise pre-Islamic Arabia. Our chosen period is also seminal in Arabic literature, as it was the time when accounts of pre-Islam assumed canonical shape, primarily through the work of Iraqi and a number of Iranian writers. These writers, however, were not in the main from Arabian tribal backgrounds, and even those who were nonetheless lived in an environment where tribal identities were losing traction in the way Iraqis conceptualised their own senses of self.[20] As the texts on Arab history were being written, the contemporaneous asset value of being Arab, pride in Arabian tribal lineages and a sense of Arab rule over the Caliphate was dwindling, and so the formerly proprietary senses of Arabian tribal history and homeland lost social and political potency in favour of more generalised

19 The social, economic and ethnic elements of the expansion and the potentials to create new discourses about self in the Caliphate's *amṣār* are considered in the light of anthropological theory in Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, p. 126–141.

20 The collapse of tribalism as a primary means to identity self, and even a retreat from express use of 'Arab' to denote the heterogenous yet Arabophone society of Iraq is examined in *ibid.*, p. 270–278, and accompanying references.

and homogenised histories of 'the Arabs' constructed from an Iraqi perspective and projected onto the past with different aims and purposes emergent from and serving new discourses of power atop the Caliphate and across Iraqi urban centres.

The third/ninth and fourth/tenth-century Iraqi scope to reinterpret the imagined world of pre-Islamic Arabia also intersects with a significant change in the physical apprehension of the real Arabia. Peeking backwards into the second/eighth century, we can discern that Iraqis and other Middle Eastern Muslims had been able to visit Arabia thanks to the enormous attention paid to Hajj pilgrimage infrastructure by the early Abbasid Caliphs. Textual and archaeological evidence reveals the many way-stations, wells, cisterns and roads constructed by the Abbasids between the urban centres of Iraq to Mecca and Medina,[21] and when we read of the Arabian travels of historical figures contemporary with the first 60 years of Abbasid rule, it was the provision of travel amenities by the central government which enabled their connection. Writers and many educated readers possessed a lived context based on observation to situate narratives of pre-Islamic history, though it is significant to bear in mind that these readers had not travelled across a very wide swathe of Arabia. In the main they experienced just the thin lines of the Kufan and Basran Hajj routes through Najd, and only in transit, not as residents, and those who settled for longer in Arabia were concentrated in a narrow slice of the central Hijaz in the developed agricultural estates around Medina and Mecca.[22] Much pre-Islamic history took place in other parts of Arabia which lay off the Iraqi Hajj routes on land neither settled nor developed by the Abbasid government, so it is erroneous to consider that second/eighth-century Iraqis were in

21 Abbasid patronage of the Hajj is well-discussed: see Travis Zadeh, "The Early Hajj: Seventh-Eighth Centuries CE", in *The Hajj: Pilgrimage in Islam*, ed. E. Tagliacozzo and S. Toorawa, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 42–64, and Hugh Kennedy, "Journey to Mecca: a history", in *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam*, ed. Venetia Porter, London, British Museum Press, 2012. Textual and archaeological evidence for the infrastructural works themselves are detailed in Saad al-Rashid, *Darb Zubaydah: The Pilgrim Road from Kufa to Mecca*, Riyadh, 1980; significantly updated in Saʿd al-Rāšid, *Darb Zubayda ṭarīq al-ḥajj min al-Kūfa ilā Makka al-mukarrama*, Riyadh, 1993.

22 The establishment of Hijazi settlements is discussed in Harry Munt, "Caliphal Estates and Properties around Medina in the Umayyad Period", in *Authority and Control in the Countryside: From Antiquity to Islam in the Mediterranean and Near East* (*6th–10th Century*), ed. A. Delattre, M. Legendre, P. Sijpesteijn, Leiden, Brill, 2018, p. 432–463 and *Idem*, "Caliphal Imperialism and Ḥijāzī Elites in the Second/Eighth Century", *al-Masāq* 28 (2016), p. 6–21. Sense of the limited state presence in Najd emerges from Ṣāliḥ ibn Sulaymān al-Wašmī, *Wilāyat al-Yamāma*. Riyadh, Maktabat al-Malik ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, 1412/1991–92, p. 109–118, 127–145.

a realistic position to imagine Arabian space in its full panoply of forms, or that their interaction with the spaces of pre-Islamic history resembled those of the original inhabitants. Their experience was formed from extrapolations from the tracts of their peregrinations, but at least they did have ready connection with part of Arabia and some of the Arabians.

Returning to our period of the third/ninth century, a dramatic change was in process. The former connection with Arabia was decisively severed as the early Abbasid-era politico-religious system of the Hajj-going Caliphs who relied upon lines of communication into Arabia as an element of their legitimacy came to an abrupt and decidedly messy end prior to the period in which most of the earliest extant Arabic literature on Arabia was recorded. The last caliph to perform the Hajj in person was al-Rašīd in 188/804,[23] and as a result of the succession crisis after his death and Iraqi economic decline consequent to the war between his sons, Caliphal funds available for maintaining the Hajj roads dwindled. Within thirty years, the inattention had become so bad that water resources dissipated, pilgrims died of thirst, and Arabian populations began raiding pilgrim caravans.[24] The unfurling of the third/ninth century witnessed progressive inaccessibility of Arabia, mounting danger and insecurity, and the process climaxed with the rise of the Qarāmiṭa, who, through deliberate predations on Hajj caravans and Mecca itself, brought the pilgrimage to a halt for 10 seasons (317–326/930–938).[25] The Qarāmiṭa represent a major step in Arabia's separation from all semblance of outsider control and influence,[26] and many would-be pilgrims were driven away from central Arabia and towards alternative routes to Mecca, particularly via the Red Sea.[27] As a consequence, the

23 al-Maqrīzī, *al-Ḏahab al-masbūk fī ḏikr man ḥaǧǧa min al-mulūk*, ed. and trans. Jo van Steenbergen, Leiden, Brill, 2016, §95.

24 Details of the political instability, collapse of infrastructure and violence are set out in Peter Webb, "Bedouin, Bandits and Caliphal Disappearence", in Maaike van Berkel and Letizia Osti (eds), *The Historian of Islam at Work*, Leiden, Brill, 2022, p. 269–275.

25 Abū al-Ḥasan Muḥammad ibn Abī al-Faḍl al-Hamaḏānī, *Qiṭaʿ tārīḫiyya min Kitāb ʿUnwān al-siyar fī maḥāsin ahl al-badw wa-l-ḥaḍar*, ed. Šāyiʿ ʿAbd al-Hādī al-Hāǧirī, Tunis, Dār al-Ġarb al-Islāmī, 2008, p. 317.

26 Landau-Tasseron, E., "Arabia" in Chase Robinson (ed), *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 1, p. 395–477, p. 475 refers to Arabia's disappearance from the historiographical map in the fourth/tenth century; the period is also when largescale inscriptions cease being made on the Hajj routes (see Saʿd al-Rāšid, *al-Ṣuwayḍara*, Riyadh, al-Layyān, 2009), and this is also the period when walls were erected to defend Medina (Harry Munt, "The construction of Medina's earliest city walls: defence and symbol", *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 42, 2012, p. 233–243).

27 Pilgrims from Iraq and the East did continue to venture into Arabia via the route through Najd, though in military convoys, at risk of violence. The decline of the Najd road is graphically described in al-Qāḍī al-Wakīʿ Muḥammad ibn Ḫalaf ibn Ḥayyān, *Kitāb al-Ṭarīq*, ed.

period which witnessed the greatest proliferation of sources about Arabia in Arabic literature was also one of increasingly scarce opportunity for authors to actually explore the place, and by the time of the compilation of the classic sources on Arabian history in the fourth/tenth century, much of the region was entirely off-limits. What therefore was possible to be visualised was not produced from memories of experience; instead, the sense of space that could form in the minds of fourth/tenth century readers was mediated through reports of danger lurking in uncertain desert. Arabian space was still "socially in use": it remained an important topic both from the perspective of history and contemporary politics, but the use of the idea of Arabian space had fundamentally changed from the parameters of the previous two centuries.

## 3 Arabian Space in Geographical Compendia

To reconstruct the possibilities of visualising Arabian space and potential parameters for third/ninth- and fourth/tenth-century reader response to stories of pre-Islam, the wide array of intertextual links needs consideration. This is itself a major undertaking, but if we are to grasp how the pre-Islamic setting was visualised in the past, effort to find their eyes is imperative, and to begin exploring the potentials, a prevue of geographical texts about Arabia written contemporaneously with the accounts of pre-Islamic Arabia is a logical starting point. There are four extant texts which expressly evidence how Arabian space was recorded and perceived in Iraqi worldviews and they exhibit palpable parallels to the changing political reality of Arabia's progressive instability and isolation from the lived world of Iraqi audiences.

*Asmāʾ ǧibāl Tihāma wa-sukkānihā*, an early third/ninth-century text by ʿArrām ibn al-Aṣbaġ al-Sulamī on the mountains of the Hijaz region around Mecca reveals the work of a writer personally familiar with the terrain he describes, and he offers readers visceral and experiential descriptions of topography. There is ample reference to sugarcane farms,[28] numerous varieties of trees, shrubs and flowers and notes on their distribution alongside

ʿAbd Allāh al-Wuhaybī, Riyadh, 1999–2000 (p. 41–110) which describes the numerous "ruins" (*ḫarāb*) along the former Abbasid Hajj road. The change is firmly attested by the absence of any archaeological evidence of construction from the fourth/tenth century onwards. In textual sources, the Syrian route and Red Sea passage becomes much more prominent from the fourth/tenth century.

28 ʿArrām ibn al-Aṣbaġ al-Sulamī, *Asmāʾ ǧibāl Tihāma wa-sukkānihā*, in *Nawādir al-maḫṭūṭāt*, ed. ʿAbd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, IV, p. 395–441, 417.

references to monkeys and lofty mountain peaks[29] – these are indeed real features of the topography of this particular part of the Hijaz, and they confound the putative archetype of Arabia as a desert. Al-Sulamī wrote at a time when Arabia was generally accessible, and it is insightful to encounter this text as a window provided to Iraqis by a local onto Arabia's geographical variety. But it is equally clear from the slightly later geographical compendium, Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih's *Masālik wa-l-mamālik*,[30] that Iraqi awareness of Arabia was distinctly un-uniform, and decidedly restricted to experience gained on the ground of the Hajj routes from Iraq.

Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih describes the Kufan and Basran Hajj routes in good detail, presenting them as a linear sequence of places, each named and provided with quantitative data about distances between them. His *al-Masālik* was written during the caliphates of al-Wāṯiq and al-Mutawakkil, a period of enhanced official interest in the Hajj routes as the Caliphs endeavoured to restore the roads and infrastructure to their second/eighth-century heyday. The efforts would not succeed in the long run, but intention at the time was manifest, and hence it is not unexpected that Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih, an official scholar of the Caliphal court, had knowledge of the route.

Such is the empirical geography; as for the qualitative features of the spatial narrative which the chapter engenders, Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih's approach is consistent in developing a particular impression. Firstly, the abundance of recorded place names in sequence has the effect of taming the space, making it comprehensible and, in effect, difficult to become lost. He also refers to most places as rest stations for travellers with the comforting term *al-mutaʿaššā*, the "stopping place for dinner." The combination of fully-identified places, the provision of precise distances between them, and their descriptions as waystations combines to create a sense of progressive motion towards Mecca across a great distance, yet always within known (or at least knowable) territory. In terms of visualising the space of that progression, the text proffers two salient features. First, physical features of the land are entirely geared towards description of water resources – reference to wells (*biʾr*, pl. *ābār*), cisterns (*birka*, pl. *birak*), abundant water sources (*ʿayn ǧārī*), and animal-powered water sources (*sāniya*, pl. *sawān*) reveal a narrative construction of a space in which water is the vital, and indeed the sole concern. A pair of references to a place which

29 Descriptions of plants and mountain peaks are repeated throughout the text; for monkeys, see al-Sulamī, *Asmāʾ*, p. 407, 409, 413, 417.

30 Ibn Ḫurḏādbih's death date is traditionally given as 300/913; though this is conjectural. His *al-Masālik wa-l-mamālik* is said to have been written between 232/846 and 272/885 (see Zadeh, "Ibn Khurdādhbih", *EI*[3]).

has "no water and no inhabitants"[31] underscores the perception of a challenging desert, passable only thanks to the chain of wells which Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih so meticulously details. This is geographically accurate: the Iraqi Ḥajj routes cut straight through an arid part of central Arabia, but this kind of space is a far-cry from ʿArrām al-Sulamī's monkeys and mountains of which the Iraqi domiciled Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih makes no mention (even though the latter part of the route does enter the Hijazi mountains after Ḏāt ʿIrq and Awṭāṣ).[32] This first feature of the spatial narrative suggests how early Abbasid-era Iraqi perception of Arabian space was, to a considerable degree, blinkered to the thin line of the Ḥajj route and focused on the region's identity as arid desert.

Given Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih's particular context as a courtier in the mid-third/ninth century, his emphasis on water supply can be well understood via some intertextual consideration. In the years immediately preceding Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih's composition of *al-Masālik*, the Iraqi Ḥajj suffered its first major shock of widespread pilgrim death on account of water shortage in 228/843,[33] and an attempted Hajj by the Caliph al-Wāṯiq in 231/846 was cancelled since water infrastructure repairs he ordered had not been completed to a sufficient level.[34] Rebellions across Arabia during al-Wāṯiq's caliphate began to shift the rest of Najd from official control too, but Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih's patron, al-Mutawakkil did endeavour to maintain the water supply on the Hajj route itself.[35] Thus the image of Arabia as it filtered into the court through reports and dispatches of their teams in Arabia would have been very much on the topic of water along the Hajj route.

The impression that Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih's Arabia was focused on the potential perils of Ḥajj travel without water is affirmed by the second salient feature of the spatial narrative – evident in the language which Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih employs to describe rest of Arabia. At the outset of the chapter, he remarks:

> When you leave al-Kūfa and reach al-ʿUḏayb you are deep into Najd [*waqaʿta fī naǧd*] … on your right from Kufa to Syria is Najd, on your left from al-ʿIrḍ to al-Ṭāʾif is Najd.[36]

31 ʿUbayd Allāh ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ḫurdādhbih, *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-mamālik*, ed. M.J. de Goeje, Leiden, Brill, 1889, p. 130, 135.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 132–134.

33 al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, IX, p. 123.

34 *Ibid.*, IX, p. 150.

35 al-Wakīʿ, *al-Ṭarīq*, p. 73, 95, 98. See discussion in al-Rāšid, *Darb Zubayda*.

36 Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih, *al-Masālik*, p. 125.

This "Najd" of Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih's description is afforded no differentiation – in striking contrast to the step-by-step detail of his Hajj road accounts, the mass of Najd is merely stated as vast, and its locations are neither named nor discussed. The Najd of Ibn Khurdāḏbih's *al-Maṣalik* has no discernible places, Najd *is* simply Najd. A kernal of the sweeping, and sweepingly inaccurate construction of Arabia as a grand desert tableau surrounding all sides of that thin watered line of the Hajj route is in full evidence here. Since Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih's dedicated geographical text proffers no substantial detail on the inner regions of Najd, it seems that by the mid third/ninth century Najd was indeed far from the familiarity of the general Iraqi worldview, and that Iraqi *un*awareness of what constitutes the bulk Arabia was beginning to shape the imagined awareness of the region.

Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih's account of Arabian routes beyond the Iraqi Hajj road further abet impressions of Arabia as realm of unknown space. While the well-trafficked Mecca-Medina path is described with the same level of detail as the Iraqi Hajj road, and is furnished with the names of each waystation and descriptions of water resources,[37] all topographical description and sense of daily itineraries is absent in Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih's descriptions of the routes from Oman and al-Yamāma (Najd to the south of the Hajj route).[38] These non-Hajj-traversed tracts of Arabia are cursorily handled, and Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih's treatment of the route from Basra into central Arabia is particularly revealing – he writes

> From Kāẓima to a station [*manzil*], then to a station [*manzil*], then to a station [*manzil*], then to al-Qarʿāʾ … then to a station [*manzil*], then to a station [*manzil*], then to a station [*manzil*], then to the well of Turāb, then to a station [*manzil*], then to a station [*manzil*].[39]

Two contrasts with the description of the Iraqi Hajj road are apparent. First, the description is expressed as a list, and not with the second-person pronouns noted above which accompanied the opening discussion of the Iraqi Hajj road. Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih is thereby not inviting the reader to mentally accompany the journey in this further part of Arabia, and he presents it instead as non-experienced space. Second, and most telling, is the degree to which the route into central Najd emerges as an unknown entity. In contrast to the narrative of the Iraqi Hajj track, the above quotation makes no reference to the

37 *Ibid.*, p. 130–131.
38 *Ibid.*, p. 147–148.
39 *Ibid.*, p. 151.

*mutaʿaššā* stopping places, almost all of the stations are starkly nameless, and there is no sense of whether they have water or not. The sum constructs an image of a truly featureless land in a reader's imagination. Without place names, the tools which the reader needs to connect the space with known geography is withheld, and hence the land emerges as separate from a sense of reality or even possible experience. Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih's depiction of the Syrian Hajj road from Damascus has similar gaps in knowledge.[40] The Arabia of Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih's construction consequently has two faces: a vast, undescribed and largely unknowable swathe of territory penetrated by a just few lines of familiar tracks, though those are described as hinging on the existence of water, making Arabia materialise in the mind as a desert adventure.

Contemporary with Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih a larger monograph devoted to Arabia, the *Bilād al-ʿArab* by al-Ḥasan ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Aṣfahānī (fl. mid to late third/ninth century) endeavours with considerable detail and success to enumerate toponyms beyond the Hajj routes. Quantitatively, Arabian space is detailed here with ample names, but it is hasty to read this as a window into Iraqi conversance with wider Arabia. The organising principle of al-Aṣfahānī's material is not to delineate itineraries or routes across Arabia, and distances are infrequently provided. Akin to Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih, his account of the Hajj roads from Basra and Kufa are detailed, and the itineraries are clear in the latter portion of the work,[41] but much of the toponyms from wider reaches of Arabia are presented in a fashion more technical than practical. This corresponds with the fact that al-Aṣfahānī compiled his text not from actual experience, but from reports gleaned in urban centres.[42] The rich text deserves close scrutiny; to suffice here with an overview of the quality in which it presents Arabian space, several recurring features are relevant.

Al-Aṣfahānī manifests greater interest in description of desert than of the mountainous or fertile oases which he describes. For example, the famously lush region of Ḥalya in Tihāma south of Mecca is mentioned only by name without any topographic description,[43] whereas efforts to elaborate upon desert topography are more developed throughout, and sometimes they are quote evocative. The Ḥazn of the Banū Yarbūʿ, for example, is furnished with the following:

40 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

41 al-Aṣfahānī, *Bilād al-ʿArab*, ed. Ḥamad al-Ǧāsir, Ṣāliḥ al-ʿAlī, Riyadh, Dār al-Yamāma, 1968, p. 242–371.

42 Hamad al-Ǧāsir, "Muqaddimat al-Kitāb", in al-Aṣfahānī, *Bilād al-ʿArab*, p. 1–72, 47.

43 al-Aṣfahānī, *Bilād al-ʿArab* p. 23.

> a three-nights' journey of nothing but a plain of desiccated bitter weeds [*qaff ġalīẓ masīrat ṯalāṯ layāl fī miṭlihā*] … neither sheep nor donkey can graze on the land, and there is not a dropping of either animal to be found there.[44]

Deserts which can only support limited growth seem to be of abiding interest to al-Aṣfahānī, as these are variously specified,[45] and it is a sense of lack of fertility which emerges from the text's sparing allusions to plants in general[46] and sundry references to the scarcity of water. For examples, description of al-Munkadir reads – "The Hajj pilgrims used to come by here, but they abandoned it because its water is so scarce;"[47] and al-Naqr, described as a "wells [*mā'*] of the al-Ġanī, but now mostly buried over [*sudum*]."[48]

The events which al-Aṣfahānī situates on the territory are also fitting of a spatial narrative invoking scarcity and hardship – references to fighting between tribes is the most common, and there are addition references to "devil-like thieves" (*luṣūṣ šayāṭīn*),[49] and thieves pillaging watering holes.[50] The absence of itineraries and the qualification of the space in such ways abets impression of forbidding aridity inhabited by people who are not entirely tame. In his refraining from descriptive passages of more favourable Arabian terrain, it would seem that al-Aṣfahānī chose to engender this impression, and the fact that he did so from afar is suggestive of the operation of an Iraqi imagination relishing a certain otherness of the desert.

A second recurring feature is the list-like nature of the text's structure. As noted, constructing itineraries is not the central purpose of the work – the Hajj roads are mentioned alongside a number of their amenities, and in this segment of the text the second-person pronoun does guide a would-be reader down the Hajj track, but the text lacks the same precision as Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih as distances are infrequently mentioned and waystations are seldom described,[51]

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44 *Ibid.*, p. 281.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 277–279, 317.

46 For a list of plants, see the index, *ibid.* p. 518. Few are mentioned more than once other than palm trees; a contrast to the list of plants and their frequent repletion in al-Sulamī's *Asmā'*, and this is a device which engenders conception of desert in al-Aṣbahānī's text, notwithstanding scattered reference to farming, e.g. p. 252, 282, 304–305, 316, 328, 339.

47 al-Aṣfahānī, *Bilād al-ʿArab*, p. 286.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 219.

50 For examples, see *ibid.*, p. 86, 314, 316, 330, 372.

51 There is a general description of the presence of waystations belonging to "the government" (*al-salāṭīn*), al-Aṣfahānī, *Bilād al-ʿArab*, p. 331, 335, 357. I have found three references to a *mutaʿaššā* waystation in *Bilād al-ʿArab* p. 333, 373, 404, but consider that

and the bulk of al-Aṣfahānī's material concerns tribal lands, references to local water resources of the tribes, without specific focus on the ways which a traveller can use them. The structure of the bulk of the book's material suggests an encyclopaedic desire to compile disparate information, with mentions of routes insofar as they concern Hajj travel from Basra and Kufa.

Consequently, a large number of toponyms have no description whatsoever – they are simply names which al-Aṣfahānī had heard, yet of their locations he knew no specifics, though in the interests of completeness, he lists them all. For examples, there are seven named wells in the Namlā region,[52] to go along with seven named mountains,[53] but the nature of their locales and quite how these relate to each other, what they look like, or how one would reach them is absent. Likewise thirty-three wells of the Taym are simply named without explanation.[54] There is no doubt that he complied the names from his sources and that one could find the locations by exploring, but this is unlikely to have been al-Aṣfahānī's intention. The primary goal can be gauged quantitatively from the text: it is furnished throughout with a conspicuously-large number of poems, and where a toponym in his lists also appears in a poem, al-Aṣfahānī narrates the verse and devotes frequent attention to explaining its meaning. Given the text's size, more could be extracted from its Arabian spatial narrative, but a reader can readily perceive that behind al-Aṣfahānī's *Bilād al-ʿArab* is an academic/literary interest in Arabian topography – more abstract than practical. The place names are there to be possessed as nuggets of knowledge about Arabia, not physically visited. The tremendous importance of old Arabian poetry amongst al-Aṣfahānī and his peers entails that listing place names and checking them against the preserved poetry was a worthy cultural pursuit in and of itself.

Thus the text seems to be striving for a dual purpose of (i) furnishing an empirical list of Arabian place names as quantitative affirmation of toponyms in pre-Islamic and early Muslim-era poetry; and (ii) bestowing flavour of aridity and difficulty of Arabia (as opposed to its towns and agriculture), and the truculence of its inhabitants. Given that al-Aṣfahānī wrote his text at the precise period when (i) old Arabic poetry was being codified and expounded upon, and (ii) when Arabians were raiding Hajj caravans and when water infrastructure resources along the Hajj routes were in a state of collapse, the text's

Ibn Ḫurdāḏbih used the term for nearly each step of the Iraqi Hajj road, contrasting al-Aṣfahānī's three across 400 pages of text.

52 al-Aṣfahānī, *Bilād al-ʿArab* p. 129–130.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 142–143.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 255–260.

particular manner of discussing Arabia is aligned with his cultural and social realities. Herein the "spatial is political" – experiential space is restricted to the Hajj roads, and otherwise the Iraqi inability to negotiate and/or control Arabia is breeding texts that depict the land as quite wild and dangerously arid, an othered space befitting a territory beyond the control of Caliphal authority.

The narrative of desiccation and decay is central in the fourth extant geographical text contemporary with our period, al-Wakīʿ's (d. 306/918) manual on the Hajj routes, the *Kitāb al-Ṭarīq* written at the outset of the fourth/tenth century. It is the most comprehensive extant work on the Iraqi Hajj route, written by an Iraqi who clearly had first-hand experience with the territory, but he wrote it during the apex of the infrastructural decline and he gives vivid evidence of the decay which had ruined waterworks, caused way-stations to be abandoned and desiccated wells. The word *ḫarāb* (ruined/ruins) or *dāris* (obliterated) is repeated 23 times in the topographic descriptions of the Kufan Hajj track,[55] applied to buildings, mosques, storehouses (*ḫawānīṭ*), domed rest stations (*qubab*) and walled enclosures (*quṣūr*). The decline of water resources is also attested: there is a "cistern without water",[56] a "well filled in an unusable" (*ṭammat wa-ʿuṭṭilat*),[57] and at Samīrāʾ the text notes "there used to be water".[58] Al-Wakīʿ's text does also note where water still *is* available, and comments in a handful of places on well-built structures still in place as amenities to pilgrims,[59] though these are in a minority compared to the reference to decay. By weight of material, the nature of the text's descriptions paints a vivid picture, setting the scene of the twilight of the infrastructure and the return of the road to a desolate, desert path. And, in common with the texts encountered hitherto, al-Wakīʿ's descriptions do not venture off the track – the lands surrounding the would-be Hajj-goer are unnamed, befitting impression of a very large, unknown, undifferentiated space of Najd.

Survey of geographical texts about Arabia complied contemporaneously with the recording of pre-Islamic history serve as a reminder that notions of "the desert" as the setting of Arabian history are potentially misleading. Indeed, much of Arabia is a desert and access to water resources is crucial in many regions, but Arabia is both topographically more complex, and, most important for our purposes, the nature of its desert can be experienced in a plurality of ways. The geographical texts, written by outsiders, reveal the production of a

55 Al-Wakīʿ, *al-Ṭarīq*, p. 44–110.
56 *Ibid.*, p. 58.
57 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
58 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
59 *Ibid.*, p. 67, 70, 87, 107, 108.

certain kind of desert space via text, the boundaries of their knowledge and the socio-political reality of declining Caliphal authority in Arabia entailed that their experience of the desert was different from the generations before, and radically different from those who had lived in the region in pre-Islamic times. The social production of space is therefore the more pressing question than rehearsing flat archetypes about Bedouin and their putative desert. From the land of everyday life of the pre-Islamic Arabians, the idea of Arabia in Arabic literature converted to an increasingly abstract idea of desertness, much of it unknown, or filled with toponyms signifying unknown and disconnected spaces from which violent stories of rebellion and raiding emerged. A key question now is whether the contemporary Arabian situation prevailed upon how writers narrated its past. To open the enquiry, accounts of the pre-Islamic Arabian conflict of the 'Thrust and Dusty War' constitute an appropriately violent and chaotic narrative to begin.

## 4 The 'Thrust and Dusty War'

The conflict derives its name from two horses, Dāḥis (Thrust) and al-Ġabrāʾ (Dusty), and while the precise details were debated in the earliest sources and never fully resolved, the essence of the story is that Qays ibn Zuhayr, a notable from the ʿAbs lineage, agreed to wager on a race involving these horses with Ḥuḍayfa ibn Badr, a leader of the Fazāra clan of the Ġaṭafān. When Qays' horse appeared to be winning, Ḥuḍayfa cheated to divert it from the racetrack and claimed his own horse the winner. Qays and the rest of the ʿAbs naturally cried foul, and matters escalated from argument to bloodshed. Pride and an ethos of blood-revenge ascended, and after reciprocating murders of several high-profile clansmen on both sides, the ʿAbs and the Ġaṭafān mustered against each other in a series of battles that became immortalised under the names of the horses whose contested race sparked the violence.

The significance of the Thrust and Dusty War is its elevation to the status of the iconic, emblematic example of pre-Islamic Arabian warring and history. It was one of the two best-known conflicts in Arabia before Islam – the other being the War of al-Basūs – and references to the war are ubiquitous in collections of poetry, maxims and Arabian anecdote. Its iconic prominence was already established by the second/eighth century: Abū ʿUbayda (d. 210/825) counts it as one of the three "great wars of the pre-Islamic Arabs;"[60]

60 Abū ʿUbayda, *al-Dībāǧ*, ed. ʿAbdallāh b. Sulaymān al-Ǧarbūʿ and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Sulaymān al-ʿUṯaymīn, Cairo, al-Ḫānǧī, 1411/1991, p. 78.

and the early fifth/tenth-century Andalusian writer Ibn Zaydūn in his voluminous list of pre-Islamic Arabian icons gives Thrust and Dusty and al-Basūs the pride of place as the representative pre-Islamic Arab wars.[61] The compilation of its events was underway by the late second/eighth century, but the earliest extant texts with cohesive narratives emerged amongst third/ninth- and fourth/tenth-century writers. At the forefront is Ibn Ḥabīb's (d. 245/860) recension of the commentary on the *Naqāʾiḍ* of Ǧarīr and al-Farazdaq,[62] which furnishes a lengthy account to explain one allegorical reference to the horse Thrust in a line of a poem by Ǧarīr to threaten his rival al-Baʿīṯ al-Muǧāšiʿī. Subsequently Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih (d. 328/940) in his *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, Abū l-Faraǧ al-Aṣbahānī (d. 356/967) in *al-Aġānī*, and, later, in al-Maydānī's (d. 518/1124) *Maǧmaʿ al-amṯāl* recorded the war narrative in detail. It is these four classic texts that our analysis of spatial narratives explores.

## 5 The Core Narrative: Ibn Ḥabīb

Ibn Ḥabīb's *al-Naqāʾiḍ* is both the earliest surviving source to proffer a contiguous narrative of the war's events, and it is a complete narrative, containing essentially all the components for which the war is memorialised. Ibn Ḥabīb reveals debate over some details, but the essential core is clear, and the tangential debates would never subsequently be resolved – Ibn Ḥabīb's version was to be emulated many times. The narrative therefore emerges into Arabic literature fully-told, or at least with sufficient detail to satisfy the subsequent generations of writers who made only limited amendment and expansion.[63] The main focus of Ibn Ḥabīb's narrative is the prelude to the war itself: the

61 See Ibn Zaydūn's *al-Risāla al-hazliyya* recorded in Ibn Nubāta, *Sarḥ al-ʿuyūn*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, al-Qāhira, Dar al-Fikr al-ʿArabī, 1964, p. 71.

62 *al-Naqāʾiḍ* is conventionally ascribed to Abū ʿUbayda, but the extant version is that of Ibn Ḥabīb as transmitted first by his student, the poetry specialist al-Sukkarī (d. 275/888), and then by Muḥammad ibn al-ʿAbbās al-Yazīdī (d. 310/922) – a Baghdadi scholar of Arabian history and Arabic language. Ibn Ḥabīb did study under Abū ʿUbayda at some point, but the *isnād* of the extant text presents the book as Ibn Ḥabīb's own version of what Abū ʿUbayda was known to tell (*al-Naqāʾiḍ*, 1, p. 1), and moreover the *isnād* of the 'Thrust and Dusty War' is ascribed to "al-Kalbī" (*al-Naqāʾiḍ*, 1, p. 83), presumably Hišām ibn al-Kalbī, one of Ibn Ḥabīb's main teachers, and thus we would seem to be reading Ibn Ḥabīb's notes from al-Kalbī, and not Abū ʿUbayda.

63 As will be discussed below, Ibn Ḥabīb's narrative is nearly unchanged in the account of the war in al-Aṣbahānī's *al-Aġānī*; the re-telling of the story in precisely the same form in the Mamluk-era Egyptian scholar Ibn Nubāta (d. 768/1366) reveals the story's very long-durée robustness in Arabic literature.

inauspicious circumstances in which the horse 'Thrust' came to be born, how it came to be owned by Qays ibn Zuhayr of the ʿAbs, the circumstances of the wager with Ḥuḍayfa ibn Badr of the Fazāra, the race itself, and then the gradual escalation from argument to murder. Once the story reaches the point of the war's eruption into a conflict between the whole clans, the narrative moves more swiftly, pausing only in particular detail upon Ḥuḍayfa's death in battle of al-Habāʾa, and then we are given only brief depiction of further battles and migrations of the ʿAbs before a settlement was brokered.[64]

Ibn Ḥabīb's account reads as a coherent narrative, events are logically connected in a fashion that explains the escalation of the war, and while the battle descriptions are quite limited, they do contain names and the genealogy of the main antagonists and notable casualties, alongside poetry excerpts. What is missing, however, is express reference to setting. There are no descriptive passages about scenery at any point, there is not even brief reference to give sense of the physical setting, and even toponyms are mostly absent too. A reader of Ibn Ḥabīb's narrative is thus offered intriguingly scant clues to visualise the space. If we consider time in the ambit of setting as well, the narrative's time is sparse in equal measure – while it is clear that events occur in linear sequence, there is deliberate vagueness concerning the effluxion of time between events, and the stated duration of the war as "forty years"[65] is itself elusive, since the number forty was symbolic for "a long, indeterminate time," and not an empirical marker of actual years.[66] We therefore confront an absence of specificity in terms of space and time in equal measure. Not every narrative need indulge a visceral interest in expressing space, yet the extreme sparsity of Ibn Ḥabīb's text points to a narrative strategy with an effect of its own, and the details reveal how this may be interpreted. We begin with analysis of the text itself and consider reader response at the end of this paper.

## 6 Time/Space Setting in Ibn Ḥabīb's Account

Imprecise and decidedly vague reference to space commences from the very outset. The story starts with the circumstances in which Thrust was conceived,

64 The narrative appears in Ibn Ḥabīb *al-Naqāʾiḍ*, 1, p. 83–108, the actual outbreak of the war following the murder of Mālik ibn Zuhayr occurs at p. 92, and the latter part of the narrative is largely composed of poetry citations, thus, by volume, the preliminaries before the actual outbreak of war constitute more than 50% of the prose text.

65 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Naqāʾiḍ*, 1, p. 108.

66 For the "topos" of forty as equivalent to "multitude", see discussion in Lawrence Conrad, "Abraha and Muhammad: some observations apropos of chronology and literary topoi in the early Arabic historical tradition", *BSOAS*, 50 (1987), p. 225–240 (232–236).

and here the action is set in an expressly indeterminate time and space: "One day [*ḏāt yawm*] the Banū Yarbūʿ set out in search of pasture [*nuǧʿa*]".[67] Absolute chronology is absent, even the time of year is unspecified, and the terrain in which the Yarbūʿ resided and across which they traversed is left entirely for the reader to imagine. Yet the reader has no clues to steer his imagination: was it spring and the Yarbūʿ had exhausted their winter pastureland, or was it a dry year and their usual lands were reduced to arid desert? The story gives no indication. The absence of all reference to terrain also leaves a reader wondering about how to visualise the topography: were the Yarbūʿ traversing a rocky volcanic plain, a mountainous desert, sandy dunes, shrubby steppe, or the edges of oases? Readers would not be able to fill in the details from external sources either: Ibn Ḥabīb does not furnish this episode with any toponyms, so there is no chance to know the locations by cross-reference, there is nothing to look up and no direction as to where we might place the episode. It could have happened anywhere, somewhere in the vast reaches of that expansive, undifferentiated "Najd" of the geographical texts,[68] and the events could have occurred at any time, sometime before the dawn of Islam.

Thrust matured and was then seized by Qays ibn Zuhayr during a raid on the Yarbūʿ, and markers for the setting are again absent here. The location of the raid is not specified, nor is there indication as to the amount of time that elapsed since the birth of Thrust. The period during which Thrust then lived under the care of Qays before the fateful race is likewise not disclosed, and the location of the race is a problem too. It is at least furnished with a toponym – Ḏāt al-Iṣād – but the toponym is an empty signifier: its location is actually unknown. Ibn Ḥabīb does not gloss where Ḏāt al-Iṣād is, although a little later it is said to be near al-Wāridāt, however, neither of these places were precisely known by Muslim audiences. The geographical texts which we explored above do not mention either locations,[69] and later texts such as al-Bakrī's *Muʿǧam mā istaʿǧam*, define Ḏāt al-Iṣād only as "in the land of the Fazāra, and is the place where Ḥuḏayfa ibn Badr hid the youths who diverted

67 Ibn Ḥabīb *al-Naqāʾiḍ*, I, p. 83.

68 Even a reader well-acquainted with the tribal lands of pre-Islamic Arabia would have difficulty placing the story since the Yarbūʿ ranged across a wide area of Najd between central Saudi Arabia and the southern reaches of the Syrian Desert.

69 There is a reference to "Haḍab al-Qalīb" in al-Aṣfahānī, *Bilād al-ʿArab*, p. 141, and the much-later geographical gazetteer by Yāqūt, *Muʿǧam al-buldān*, V, p. 407 states that it is in the Ḏāt al-Iṣād region, but al-Aṣfahānī makes no connection and his text is devoid of any reference to either the Dāḥis and al-Ġabrāʾ War or any of the locations named in the battle narratives.

the racehorse."[70] Since the later gazetteers take recourse in the circular statement referring back to the narrative, and do not supply its position relative to any other known locations, it is clear that readers outside of Arabia did not know the land sufficiently and lacked intertextual indicators to specify where the Thrust and Dusty War began. An educated reader could at least have known that the Fazāra lands were situated in border regions between the Hijaz and Najd north of Medina, but it is nonetheless a large area with varied topography, and the location of this key episode in the narrative is ultimately unplaceable. It is not "nowhere", but it is not more than a "somewhere": the name signifies a place, but not a knowable geographical coordinate.[71] Interpretations of this peculiar spatiality are addressed in the next section.

The narrative construction of indeterminate time and space remains an enduring feature right to the end of Ibn Ḥabīb's account. For example, time elapses between the contested race and the revenge killings on both sides, but it is not related to us in terms of days, weeks and months, let alone actual chronology and dates – instead time is marked for readers via the expression "*mā šā' Allāh*" – "so things remained for as long as God wished".[72] It could therefore have been a matter of days between the end of the race and the argument between Ḥuḍayfa and his kin that led to a serious insult being made against the ʿAbs and the murder of one of Ḥuḍayfa's relatives, or it could have been some months. And after the first murder, it could have been weeks, months or even years before the next murder – that of Qays ibn Zuhayr's brother Mālik, which deeply offended the ʿAbs and made full-scale war almost inevitable. And through all these events, toponyms are but scarcely mentioned and the physical space receives neither comment nor description. For example, the only named place in this part of the narrative is the location where Mālik was murdered – al-Luqāṭa, described as being near al-Ḥāǧir.[73] Akin to the Ḍāt al-Iṣād toponym, the precise location of al-Luqāṭā was unknown to Muslim-era scholars, it was known only as the site of Mālik ibn Zuhayr's death.[74]

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70 al-Bakrī, *Muʿǧam mā istaʿǧam* ed. Muṣṭafā al-Ṣaqqā, Cairo, Laǧnat al-Taʾlīf wa-l-tarǧama wa-l-našr, 1947, I, p. 161–162.

71 Note that Ḍāt al-Iṣād is itself contested too – al-Bakrī states that Ḍāt al-Iṣād may instead have been the location of a subsequent battle in the Thrust and Dusty War, and not the location of the race that sparked the fighting (*Muʿǧam*, I, p. 162); in either case the name was only redolent in memory with events of the Thrust and Dusty War, not with a recognised location in Arabia.

72 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Naqāʾiḍ*, I, p. 88, the expression occurs twice.

73 *Ibid.*

74 Al-Bakrī does not mention al-Luqāṭa at all, suggestive of its obscurity; Yāqūt includes it in his gazetteer (*Muʿǧam*, V, 21), but his definition simply copies the wording in Ibn Ḥabīb's

It is intriguing that in the commentary on the location of al-Luqāṭa, the narrative mentions al-Ḥāğir without explaining where that place is; seemingly under the assumption that reference to al-Ḥāğir is sufficient to place the location's general vicinity. At first blush, al-Ḥāğir is not well attested in Arabic geographical literature: al-Bakrī defines it by the vague phrase "a place in the lands of the Tamīm"[75] – which was a truly vast territory spanning central and northern Arabia, and Yāqūt's *Muʿğam al-buldān* is laconic, but at least gives more precision, noting it is near al-Nuqra.[76] To present-day readers, the seemingly opaque reference to al-Ḥāğir seems recondite and in need of better explanation than Ibn Ḥabīb's narrative gives it, but in the context of the story's genesis, the toponym may have signified more to early readers. Ibn Ḥabīb's account of the Thrust and Dusty War is narrated on the authority of the second/eighth-century Iraqi scholar al-Kalbī,[77] and his urbanite Iraqi audiences were in a position to apprehend the location. Al-Ḥāğir lies directly on the Abbasid Hajj route from Kufa to Mecca, it was one of the developed stopping points for pilgrims, and it is mentioned in the contemporaneous geographical texts considered above.[78] The choice to gloss the location of the obscure toponym al-Luqāṭa via al-Ḥāğir would have placed it within the familiar experienced world of al-Kalbī's students and audience, and while they may never have heard of al-Luqāṭa (and it is not mentioned in the geographical literature), the reference to al-Ḥāğir enabled them to fix the action on a familiar mental map of western Najd. The collapse of the Kufan Hajj route by the beginning of the fourth/tenth century, however, would render al-Ḥāğir nearly as unknown as al-Luqāṭa, thereby explaining the muted discussion of it in the later gazetteers, but at the time of the narrative's first recording it would have signified a more specific and knowable place. Nonetheless, while early readers may have known the location, the story still does not elaborate upon the setting of Mālik's death. Was Mālik alone in the desert, was he camped amongst mountains and suffered an ambush, or was he caught in pasturelands with his camels? None of these details could be ascertained, and as third/ninth- and fourth/tenth-century readers lost familiarity with the region as the Kufan Hajj road declined, the space becomes difficult to visualise from memories of experience.

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*al-Naqāʾiḍ*, indicative that its renown was based entirely upon the phrase in Ibn Ḥabīb, and nothing more could be ascertained.

75 al-Bakrī, *Muʿğam*, II, p. 416.

76 Yāqūt, *Muʿğam*, II, p. 204.

77 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Naqāʾiḍ*, I, p. 83.

78 Ibn Ḫurḍāḏbih, *al-Masālik*, p. 137; al-Aṣfahānī, *Bilād al-ʿArab*, p. 243–244; Wakīʿ, *al-Ṭarīq*, p. 71–72.

Throughout the rest of the narrative, the absence of concrete references to both space and time is a stable and notable feature. The sequence of events leading to the major battle at al-Habā'a give no indicators as to the amount of time that had elapsed since the race, and the migrations of the ʿAbs across Arabia seeking alliances and protection from other tribes after al-Habā'a are likewise devoid of temporal reference. There is yet another *kanū maʿahum mā šā' Allāh* (they stayed with them for as long as God wished)[79] – all the reader is given is a sequence: we can be confident that time elapses in order, but we do not know how much time is involved, and we have nearly no further place names to plot the movement of the ʿAbs during the long progression of the war either. As noted above, the reference to the war's duration as "forty years", it itself a topos for an indeterminate amount of time. And as an overall consideration of chronology, the narrative makes no effort to temporally position the events with Islamic time either. There is no cross-reference to events in Mecca, so the question of how long before the rise of Islam these events transpired is left both undiscussed and unsolvable.

The foregoing has set out Ibn Ḥabīb's express textual references to setting. From the perspective of geocritical method, this is half of the job: a text provides readers with material from which they then process and visualise the setting, and in our case the material is decidedly scant. But this does not entail that there is no setting: readers will summon intertextual ideas to fill in the blanks, and the nature of the blanks in Ibn Ḥabīb's narrative also condition meaning. The ways in which the sparse stage engenders reader response and generates meaningful pre-Islamic history is now the pressing question.

## 7 The Setting: the Range of Inferences

Ibn Ḥabīb's spatial narratives need be read firstly within the parameters of the overarching *ḫabar* or *aḫbārī* style of Arabic storytelling, a style well known for presenting events as episodes with considerable writerly economy and with a tendency to depict action with limited narration and more inclusion of the direct speech of the characters. Reliance on direct speech to convey action reduces scope for the narrator to intervene and craft setting, however, the style does not preclude all description of setting and scenery. Other texts of *aḫbārī*-style literature do offer a steer to their readers to conjure a visualisation of the scene, even if it is only with a few words, and we have seen that

79 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Naqāʾiḍ*, p. 99.

al-Aṣfahānī's *Bilād al-ʿArab* was able to engender desert imagery which short and disparate phrases inserted to paint the scene. Hence Ibn Ḥabīb's narrative is at an extreme end of the spectrum in its very sparse use of spatial and temporal markers, and among the effects is that a reader feels much closer to the characters and their actions than to the environment in which the action takes place.

Consideration of the terseness of topographic description in the few examples where Ibn Ḥabīb does describe space underscores a patent tendency away from the creation of setting, a deliberate withholding of topographic information except in very limited circumstances. For example, the nature of the racetrack's ground is not described, but we are informed that Ḥuḍayfa ibn Badr's trick to win the race was via the stratagem of hiding a troop of men in an ambush on the racetrack with the instructions to divert Qays' horse if it was in the lead as it passed their position. With the ruse so described, it does become necessary for the narrator to explain how the men could have been concealed, and in this instance, the narrative refers to a *ṯaniyya* (a mountain pass, defile) as the physical feature in which the men hid, awaiting the horses.[80] In the build-up to the race, the narrative had given no reference to mountains in the region, but considering the convenience of conjuring a mountain defile as a means to situate the ambuscade, the narrative makes a rare employment of a topographical term. Likewise, a series of mountain defiles (*ṯanāyā*) are described in the battle at al-Habāʾa as a means to explain how the opposing armies were separated and the ʿAbs were able to evade and then ambush the Ġaṭafān.[81] Once the ʿAbs set upon the Ġaṭafān, no further reference to mountainous terrain is made. Setting thus has an instrumental function: it enables certain actions, and once those acts are committed, the scenery immediately fades out of view.

The third, and the only other express descriptive reference to setting in the entire narrative occurs at the end of the Battle of al-Habāʾa. Memory preserved that Ḥuḍayfa ibn Badr and his kin were surprised and killed in a pool of water, and in order for the narrative to get the warriors of the Fazāra into a pool so that they could be killed in it, Ibn Ḥabīb's text makes several references to the "intensifying heat" of the day, and describes al-Habāʾa as a "rounded natural pool" (*ǧafr*).[82] Readers are thereby enabled left to visualise Ḥuḍayfa and his retainers suffered from the intensifying heat in their desperate flight from their ʿAbs pursuers, and that when they reckoned they had put enough distance

80 *Ibid.*, p. 87.
81 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
82 *Ibid.*, p. 95.

between them and their foe, they sought relief in the water. We can thus discern rudiments of setting in three instances where they serve to explain action, but they are brief and ad hoc. These few topographical lexemes indicate that setting *could* be described, hence the abiding silence on space suggests authorial intention to focus on action, not setting.

The paucity of described spaces resembles the infrequency of named toponyms, and as noted above, those few toponyms expressed in Ibn Ḥabīb's narrative are obscure and even elusive; contemporary audiences likely lacked the geographical knowledge necessary to situate them on a map. For example, the third/ninth-century geographers of Arabia did not identify a location called "Ḏāt al-Iṣād," and its occurrence in Ibn Ḥabīb's text accordingly directs readers to a place outside of their conception of Arabian geographical reality. Despite having a tangible name, Ḏāt al-Iṣād could only have been imagined as an intangible "somewhere" in Najd, and based on the presentation of Najdi space in the contemporaneous geographical compendia, it is clear that Najd itself was not precisely understood either. In short, the place of Ḏāt al-Iṣād represents two degrees of separation from readers' physical geography: it was itself unknown and the conceptual map which they possessed of its region was vague too, so when processing the toponym readers would be placing an abstraction upon an abstraction.

This is a key observation when considering how third/ninth-century readers encountered and comprehended narratives of pre-Islamic history. Thanks to the presence of the toponym, one could *say* where the action took place, but one does not *know* where, and this seems a sure way to create a sense of *specific* remoteness. Readers encounter an ostensibly identified place, but it is far outside their experienced world, and since they lived during a period of fading connection with Arabia, their experience of the narrative's space and time both point to realms of dimly perceived remoteness. Essentially unknowable Arabian toponyms in the literature of third/ninth-century Iraq may therefore have elicited responses redolent with a sense of lost, past space. These toponyms were accordingly not empty signifiers: they instilled mental imagery of the enigmatic and the arcane, a flavour for a distant and remote visualisation of pre-Islamic Arabia.

The properties of the spatial narrative prompt consideration in the light of Bakhtin's theories of chronotope and epic. Bakhtin's sense of epic rests upon the literary construction of absolute distance between the epic world and contemporary reality,[83] and in order to elicit such remote, epic space,

83 Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (ed. and trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson), Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 13.

the narrative must construct elusive distance. That would indeed constitute a logical response to the dearth of spatial indicators in Ibn Ḥabīb's text. The presentation of essentially unknowable toponyms devoid of description and set in territory they had not, and likely were unable to visit confound the readers' task of visualising the action in terms that can be linked to any empirical reality of their contemporary world.

The Thrust and Dusty War also reflects Bakhtin's observation that the epic be "already well defined and real … and absolutely completed and finished generic form"[84] – Ibn Ḥabīb's narrative, the first extant telling of the War, is already in its finished form. The express absence of chronology or any markers that could fix Thrust and Dusty in a relative chronology to events outside of the war itself further match the hallmarks of Bakhtin's epic: the "monochronic" epic is absolutely separated from the readers' present.[85] For the Thrust and Dusty narrative, this separation is also apparent in the complete absence of links to Islamic chronological history which could have enabled readers to gauge when the war occurred. Upon reading the text, it is difficult to imagine it as occurring in anything other than a monochronic vacuum of pre-Islamic time, radically separated from any sense of the history that can be understood as leading to the present of the narrators, which neatly reflects the mono-spatial, undifferentiated notion of the space of Najd in the contemporaneous geographical texts and Ibn Ḥabīb's Thrust and Dusty narrative too.

More support for reading Thrust and Dusty as a Bakhtinian epic is the story's status as one of the seminal episodes of the *Ayyām al-ʿArab* – the Wars of the Pre-Islamic Arabs – which constitute the core of Arab origins as imagined in the Muslim period. Bakhtin identifies epic as at the core of any people's national myth, and there is little more essential in the third/ninth-century conception of Arab identity than the heroes, poets and adventures of the Thrust and Dusty War. If the story was therefore intended as Bakhtinian epic, the absence of tangible guidelines for setting would be efficacious: the lack of markers means readers are left with little other than to visualise the story in images of remoteness and foreign-ness, a lost, primordial world of Arab origins.

All in, the twentieth-century Russian Bakhtin's theories of the purpose and nature of epic seem to find no uncertain reflections in the eighth- and ninth-century Iraqi accounts of the pre-Islamic Arabian war. The fit, however, is nonetheless not absolute. While there are only three toponyms of note in the whole narrative, we noted that one, al-Luqāṭa, was identified as being near al-Ḥāğir, and this explanatory diversion is a breach of the absolute separation

84 *Ibid.*, p. 14–15.
85 *Ibid.*, p. 15–17.

of narrated past for Bakhtinian epic. Al-Kalbī brought the action of pre-Islam into proximity with his contemporaries' Hajj road, and Bakhtin's epic seal is thereby somewhat broken. Also, the long lines of genealogy, while meaningless to readers today, may have encoded notions of chronology for earlier audiences. Under the operation of what has been called a "genealogical imagination",[86] Arabian lineage groups can conceptualise the passage of time in terms of generations of ancestors, and thus the lack of references to empirical time in terms of months and years is not necessarily evidence of the absence of chronology. If a reader approaches the story thinking about time in terms of generations, the long lists of names and clans of the ʿAbs and Ġaṭafān may in fact have encoded a distinctly knowable history for members of the lineage groups. The narratives, therefore, as opposed to deliberately crafting an epic, might have initially been recording a standard history, but one which operates to different standards to which we are accustomed.

Nonetheless, when Ibn Ḥabīb's audiences encountered the narrative, senses of time and space had moved along. As noted above, reference to Arabian tribal lineage in people's identification of self declined during the third/ninth century – the members of Iraqi society were no longer tribally organised and the social capital of belonging to an Arabian lineage such as the ʿAbs or the Ġaṭafān had much less, if any sway, and thus during the course of the third/ninth century, Thrust and Dusty shifted from the mnemonic property of the descendants of the belligerent clans to a more theoretical and open-ended world of Arab history. Arabness as a social asset was not as it had been, ownership of the origin story was no longer about flesh and blood, and the story could be approached more dispassionately. Herein, former chronological markers of a "genealogical imagination" would no longer have been meaningful, the place names were either obscure or forgotten altogether, and the fact that narrators neither reworked the chronology to make it fit into the historical models of the then-emergent Islamic historiographical universe, nor described the setting in terms of more knowable geography does suggest some sort of "epic" removal of the story from the realms of ordinary history had occurred.

Bakhtin's framework is accordingly one way to interpret Ibn Ḥabīb's production of space as conjuring an undifferentiated *Ǧāhiliyya*-time, but if we consider what the narrative does say, as opposed to searching for a setting which it does not provide, further interpretation becomes possible. As noted above, a reader always feels close to the action: the provision of direct speech and the absence of setting gives pride of place to the characters and their acts. While

86 Shryock, Andrew, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination*, Berkeley, University of California, 1997, p. 146.

the characters do most of the work, the narrator does make interjections, but not to set the time of day or describe the space, rather they focus upon the repetition of a pair of words: *šarr* and *ḥilm*. The former means evil and rancour, the latter, restraint and forbearance. The term *al-Ǧāhiliyya* is formed from the root *ǧahl*, the opposite of *ḥilm*[87] – the label for pre-Islamic time is, in other words, one of the faces of *šarr*-evil, and this opens onto another realm of meaning for Thrust and Dusty as embodiment of the operation of the binary pair of rancour and restraint.

Virtually every episode from the conception of Ḍāḥis to the outbreak of war between the ʿAbs and Ġaṭafān concerns an *act* which caused a disagreement between two parties, an outbreak of *šarr*, in which one of the parties is unrelenting in their rancour, while the other maintains *ḥilm*. If the party with *ḥilm* preserves their restraint despite the rancorous mood of their opponents and thereby *acts* reasonably, violence does not result, but if the anger of the antagonist causes a loss of *ḥilm* and a resultant *act* of *šarr* from the wronged, then the narrative depicts violence ensuing. In the Thrust and Dusty story, each such *act* of *šarr* is shown to entail a ratchetting-up of violence by one step until we finally reach the inevitability of full-blown war following the death of Mālik ibn Zuhayr. The pattern and words are repeated with such frequency as to render the fateful acts as the emphasised nodes of the narrative. A moral story thereby comes into view, whereby the narrative's tension is embodied in the storyteller's constant communication of the ever-present possibility that the war could have been averted at any point, if only one of the sides (usually the Ġaṭafān) would have acted reasonably for once, or if the other (the ʿAbs) had maintained their usual restraint.

If Thrust and Dusty is a moral narrative on the core issues of rancour and restraint, and if the violence that results is insinuated as an embodiment of the problems caused by the *ǧahl* of *al-Ǧāhiliyya*, the story does not strictly need a setting beyond the "once upon a pre-Islamic time somewhere in central Arabia". Particulars of geography and chronology are not essential to the theme, and their absence is in fact helpful as it permits a reader to generalise that all pre-Islamic time across all of Arabia was like this. And the sparse and

87 Modern scholarship debates the root meaning of *al-Ǧāhiliyya* between "passion", the opposite of *ḥilm* Goldziher, *Muhammedanishe Studien* (Halle, Maz Niemeyer, 1889–90, I, p. 221) or "ignorance", the opposite of *ʿilm*; Franz Rosenthal argued that 'passion' was the "secondary meaning", (*Knowledge Triumphant*, Leiden, Brill, 1970). The earliest Arabic dictionaries contemporary with Ibn Ḥabīb mentions only "ignorance" (al-Ḫalīl ibn Aḥmad, *al-ʿAyn*, ed. Mahdī al-Maḫzūmī and Ibrāhīm al-Sāmarrāʾī, Baghdad, Wizārat al-Ṯaqāfah wa-l-Iʿlām, 1980, III, p. 390), though pre-Islamic poetry engages both connotations, with an overall majority connoting the opposite of *ḥilm*.

essential inattention to setting does place the moral drama at centre stage. In short, the bare spatial narrative engenders meaning of a moral message cast on a pan-Arab level, transcending the particular ambit and minutiae of the tribes and places involved in the Thrust and Dusty War.

Given the *aḫbārī*-style rubric in which Thrust and Dusty is narrated, there is a further issue relevant to setting. While the provision of toponyms as essential empty signifiers that delineate places in an unfamiliar space is an efficacious method to create a sense of remote distance in the minds of third/ninth-century Iraqi readers, the infrequency of express reference to toponyms is noteworthy. Remoteness could presumably be enhanced via the insertion of more such toponyms, but Ibn Ḥabīb does not indulge this device, and it would therefore seem that he was earnest in his approach to preserving the names which were still preserved in memory, and as faithfully as he could, even though he had no actual sense of where the places were, or how the locations looked. Readers could still interpret the names as signifiers for distant, lost space, but also as factoids within the cultural edifice of the ancient *Arabica*.

Herein, the Muslim-era Iraqi narrators' abiding concern with preserving truth is relevant: for reasons that need fuller elaboration in a separate forum, authors were overall reluctant to tamper with historical material concerning pre-Islamic Arabia and were distinctly meticulous in preserving the narratives as they received them so as to maintain the claim to be narrating facts.[88] Under this rubric, the addition of descriptions of scenery to the pre-Islamic stories would have constituted a tampering with the factual edifice. They did not know, for example, how craggy the mountains around al-Ḥabā'a Well actually are, and in any event, the height of the mountains is not relevant to the manifestation of great *šarr* and lack of *ḥilm* that was about to be played out with the murder of Ḥuḍayfa ibn Badr. Hence Ibn Ḥabīb's narration does not indulge his readers with such detail, and express reference to topography could be limited to those three cases noted above where the physical features of the land explain essential aspects of the action.

To conclude, Ibn Ḥabīb presents readers with a narrative of apparent disinterest in the production of space, but the very sparsity and obscurity of the space should not be confused with the absence of setting or a lack of meaningful spatial narrative. On one level, the setting is so pared-down as to situate the action on a bare stage, with neither props nor setting cluttering the moral drama of *ḥilm* and *šarr* which is of evident central importance to the Thrust

88 A fuller critical study of the history of narrating the *Ayyām al-ʿarab* will be undertaken in Peter Webb, *The Arab Wars: al-Maqrīzī's* al-Ḫabar ʿan al-bašar vol. 3, Leiden, Brill, forthcoming.

and Dusty story as narrated by Ibn Ḥabīb. Living, as he was, at a time when the tribes involved no longer held political power, the memories of tribal history which once had been the basis of tribal honour and glory, could be put to a different use, and Ibn Ḥabīb weaves them into a generic story of *Ǧāhiliyya* Arab ways, whereby undifferentiated setting is an asset. He gives us the sense of world of the Arabs before Islam on a moral and qualitative level, not a geographical and quantitative one.

On a second level, we can expect that readers would nonetheless try to visualise the setting, and having been given just a bare stage by Ibn Ḥabīb, they would need to fill it from extraneous sources. In this regard, the third/ninth-century context entailed that essentially all of Ibn Ḥabīb's readers lacked physical contact with Arabia, and certainly with the locations of Thrust and Dusty, as demonstrated by the fact that those locations were beyond the grasp of contemporary geographical manuals. The space visualised is therefore necessarily an imagined space. From these inferences, key questions remain as to how readers of Ibn Ḥabīb's and subsequent generations themselves responded in visualising it, and one possible access point is subsequent accounts of the war: through analysis of their spatial narratives we may discern if their authors left us clues.

## 8 Thrust and Dusty War: the Later Narratives

The diffusion of the Thrust and Dusty War across varied genres of Arabic literature entailed that the story was put to work by different hands, and for reasons of space, this paper limits itself to the broad genre of *adab* – texts that collect accounts of the *Arabica* and narrate them with an array of didactic and edifying purposes in mind. Books that expressly refer to themselves as "History", such as Ibn al-Aṯīr's *al-Kāmil fī l-tārīḫ* and al-Maqrīzī's *al-Ḫabar ʿan al-bašar*, which include narrations of the Thrust and Dusty War will be considered in a separate forum;[89] and likewise popular literature needs separate study, particularly the resonances of the War in the voluminous *Sīrat ʿAntar*, since its eponymous hero was one of the historic warriors of the ʿAbs. In this section we consider three classic texts noted at the outset of this paper – Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih's *al-ʿIqd*, al-Aṣbahānī's *al-Aġānī*, and al-Maydānī's *Maǧmāʿ al-amṯāl*.

Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih records the war in the chapter of *al-ʿIqd* devoted to pre-Islamic Arabian wars. The chapter is organised by genealogy: conflicts

89 *Ibid.*

involving each major lineage group are narrated together, and so the Thrust and Dusty War appears in the section on the Qays ʿAylān, a large grouping of which both the ʿAbs and Ġaṭafān were clans. At the outset, and as a function of the chapter as a whole, the authorial choice to structure by lineage and not chronology removes Thrust and Dusty from linear history – it is separated from other wars which may have occurred at the same time, and the war is an entirely self-contained narrative: it is not narrated as a consequence of what happened before it, nor is it presented with any historical ramifications, as there is no way to discern from Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih's organisation of the material if it influenced subsequent events. It also lacks chronological markers to fix it upon a timeline understandable via the notions of Islamic historiography too. In sum, whilst the placement of the story in *al-ʿIqd* differs from its position in Ibn Ḥabīb's *Naqāʾiḍ*, the temporal narrative is the same: the event is situated at "some time in pre-Islamic Arabia", negating sense of chronological progression across pre-Islamic time.

In terms of the war's details, *al-ʿIqd* essentially tracks Ibn Ḥabīb's version, though much more condensed. The brevity is achieved via cutting the preliminaries and adopting terser narration of individual episodes, however, *al-ʿIqd* does mention the names and proffers a brief depiction of two more battles that occurred later in the war.[90] But throughout there is notably less direct speech and insight into individual actions, so readers acquire less feel for the characters and do not so strongly perceive the salient moral aspect of Ibn Ḥabīb's narrative of *šarr* and *ḥilm*. The reader of *al-ʿIqd* instead is presented with a factual overview in a digestible size, enabling him to understand the basics of the cause, salient names and facts of the battles. Setting is not developed, and the locations which Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih describes are the same as those few noted by Ibn Ḥabīb. There are only two minor setting-related expansions: Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih adds that the endpoint of the racetrack had "many defiles" (*fī ṭaraf al-ġāya šiʿāb kaṯīra*),[91] and the heat of the day which drove the leaders of the Ġaṭafān to seek repose in the well after the flight from al-Habāʾa is described with an array of vocabulary – whereas Ibn Ḥabīb sufficed with repeating the word "heat" (*ḥarr*), Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih summons the terms *qāʾīẓ* and *wadīqa*, conjuring a more expressive "searing midday heat."[92] But as in Ibn Ḥabīb's version, the brief references to setting are ad hoc in the service of explaining action.

90 Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī, Beirut, Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, n.d., v, p. 146–154.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 146. Ibn Ḥabīb's *al-Naqāʾiḍ*, i, p. 87, referred to a single defile (*ṯaniyya*).

92 Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, v, p. 151.

Taking stock, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*'s account would suit a reader interested in a digest of the key facts behind the war. The text affords less scope to engage emotionally, but it does enable a reader to claim to know the war in its essential outline. For this kind of reader, spatial narratives might actually distract from the speed of memorising, and this perhaps represents the interests of a reasonably large proportion of the audience over the centuries who were motivated to read about pre-Islamic history in order to acquire an aura of mastery over the culturally valuable *Arabica*.[93] *Al-ʿIqd* accordingly proffers a different reading experience compared to *al-Naqāʾiḍ*, but for their different reasons, both have cause to lack concern with setting the scene, and howsoever Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi himself visualised the story is withheld from us by his terse fact-oriented style of narration.

Al-Aṣbahānī's *al-Aġānī*, in contrast to Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, provides a voluminous narrative.[94] Its *isnād* expresses reliance on Ibn Ḥabīb's version as narrated in *al-Naqāʾiḍ*, but whereas the *Naqāʾiḍ* claims the source of the Thrust and Dusty War is the historian al-Kalbī, *al-Aġānī* cites Abū ʿUbayda and narratives from Ibrāhīm ibn Saʿdan al-Šaybānī, an eastern Iranian teacher of *adab* in the Iraqi caliphal court during the mid-late third/ninth century. The additional sources explain some expansions in *al-Aġānī*, but the differences are cosmetic: *al-Aġānī*'s narrative is faithful to Ibn Ḥabīb both in tenor and emphasis. It gives the greatest detail on the prelude to the outbreak of hostilities,[95] it portrays the action through direct-speech, and the narrative's flashpoints are aligned to emphasise the progressive spiral into violence that could have been averted. Thus, the ultimate impression from *al-Aġānī* is the same as Ibn Ḥabīb: a sense of tragedy emergent from the tragically inexorable ascendance of *šarr* over *ḥilm*.

In its essential conformity to Ibn Ḥabīb's recension, *al-Aġānī* likewise engenders the same sparse, undifferentiated spatial narrative. We can glean no insight into al-Aṣbahānī's own visualisation of the story since his text reveals little about himself beyond his fidelity as an earnest copyist of the tradition as he learned it. Herein we behold a literary canon at work: the structure, details and signification of Ibn Ḥabīb's account of Thrust and Dusty, likely inherited from the generation before him, remains unchanged over the effluxion of a century to al-Aṣbahānī, and consequently the same message is communicated.

93 For discussion of the importance of this material as a veritable form of medieval Muslim cultural capital, see Georges Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1990, p. 88–115.

94 al-Aṣbahānī, *al-Aġānī*, XVII, p. 187–210.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 191–205.

What had changed in the interval between Ibn Ḥabīb and al-Aṣbahānī was the reality of Iraqi interaction with Arabia, and hence the responses to the very same text were quite possibly different. The blank-stage pared down setting of monochronological time and undifferentiated space invite a broad scope for a reader to imagine, and al-Aṣbahānī's readers perhaps more readily visualised as a forbidding desert with more waterless perils and dangerous shadowy inhabitants, but this cannot be gleaned from the text since it merely presents us with what Ibn Ḥabīb gave us one century earlier. What can be concluded is that the nature of presenting the Thrust and Dusty War in *al-Aġānī* maintains pre-Islamic Arabia as a single moment of homogenised space, enabling the generalisation of all Arabian history before Islam into a tidy set of archetypes applicable to any number of other pre-Islamic Arabians.

Al-Maydānī's *Maǧmaʿ al-amṯāl*, written over a century after *al-Aġānī* yet again repeats the structure already established by Ibn Ḥabīb, further evidencing the robustness of the canonical narrative.[96] While al-Maydānī's account is condensed, his style of narration – direct speech, emphasis on action and complete absence of setting – is identical to Ibn Ḥabīb. Al-Maydānī does offer the odd additional anecdote or quotation, but these neither change the story in a material fashion nor afford greater emphasis on setting. The only addition related to setting is in the Battle of Ḏū Ḥusā, where al-Maydānī adds a toponym we have not encountered before: "al-Muġayqa."[97] The toponym, however, is not glossed beyond a reference to being near the Wadi of Ḏū Ḥusā (which is not identified in any geographical lexicons),[98] and it is also noted that the place may be called "Ġayqa," instead of "al-Muġayqa." Such confusion between orthographically similar words is a common issue Iraqi narrators faced when dealing with unfamiliar toponyms which had been corrupted in the narration of texts over several centuries.[99] Therefore, al-Maydānī's reference to al-Muġayqa/Ġayqa is no different from the signification of the toponyms in earlier versions: he gives us a place name which we can *say*, but not one which we can say that we *know* where it is, or what it should be called. Arabian space

96 Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Maydānī, *Maǧmaʿ al-amṯāl*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Bayrūt, al-Maktabat al-ʿAṣriyya, 2011, II, p. 418–430.

97 al-Maydānī, *Maǧmaʿ*, II, p. 422. It is not listed in al-Aṣfahānī's *Bilād al-ʿArab* or al-Wakīʿ's *al-Ṭarīq*.

98 According to al-Bakrī, al-Yazīdī, the narrator of Ibn Ḥabīb's account of the battle, refers to Ḏāt al-Iṣād as Ḏāt Ḥusā, but not as an alternative toponym, rather as an explanation of the meaning of the placename "pebbly place" (al-Bakrī, *Muʿǧam*, I, p. 162).

99 The issues faced in the obscurity and orthographic corruption of Arabian toponyms is discussed in Peter Webb, "Desert Places: Toponyms in Pre-Islamic Poetry", *Semitica et Classica*, 13 (2020), p. 251–268, particularly p. 257–60, 263–64.

is once again marked by empty signifiers – named places which do not operate as places that can be located on an empirical map; the conceptual map of the Thrust and Dusty War is one of qualitatively undifferentiated space that generalises and homogenises the idea of pre-Islamic Arabia into archetype.

Al-Maydānī's work, a collection of maxims (*amṯāl*), reveals another facet of readerly interest in the Thrust and Dusty War. The direct speech ascribed to the protagonists included a number of pithy sayings, wise quips and a number of obscure maxims that only make sense when read in the context of particular moments of the story. Such sayings, extracted from their original context and quoted as mere expressions were often on the lips of classical Arabic authors who peppered their own writings with the one-liners, quips and famous phrases. Such erudite references to the past were a mark of learning and good Arabic style, and generated a large body of compendiums of the *amṯāl* to facilitate memorisation. Readers of these works needed an account of the Thrust and Dusty War tailored around the expressions with sufficient context to ensure that the right meaning was understood. Once again, this purpose is disinterested in space and setting: the *amṯāl* are text objects to be acquired, the story is a source from which they can be quarried, and readers can dispense with setting as they are not reading al-Maydānī's *Maǧmaʿ* for an evocative tale that conjures visceral sense of the desert tangential to the maxims uttered in it.

## 9 Reader Responses

The writers of the main and most detailed sources for the Thrust and Dusty War during the first five centuries of the Muslim period are consistent in withholding their personal responses to the narrative, and paucity of spatial description is an abiding feature. The interest in developing a moral theme, applicable on a pan-Arabian level, which required raising the warriors of the Thrust and Dusty War into emblematic Arab exemplars, certainly benefited from eliding spatial markers which otherwise would make the story more specific to the ʿAbs and Ġaṭafān lineage at a particular moment in time. Beyond this, it is noteworthy that the narrative did not exhibit change between the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, the period when very real difficulties and dangers in Arabia reached an apex. Narratives of pre-Islam in *adab* seem to have been sealed from contemporary developments, as violence is not more emphasised in recensions contemporary with the Qarāmiṭa threat, nor are characters presented as analogues of the Qarāmiṭa or other contemporaneous Arabian groups – the text of the Thrust and Dusty War is simply too stable to permit that impression. This conservativism shows the writers as keen preservers of "truth," who would not interfere with the received version of the story by

making material additions or descriptive diversions. Readerly interest in collecting "trivia" – facts and pithy sayings – also would have had little need for descriptive passages, and thus not called for narrative expansion.

From the perspective of textual production, therefore, *adab* prose had limited impetus to develop descriptive passages about space, but what of individual readers' response and their reflex to visualise the setting? It is remote to assume from the texts' lack of topographic description that all readers simply consumed the material on an abstract plane – the bare setting actually broadens the scope for readers to fill in *more* from their own emotional and experiential contexts. Entry into fleeting moments of imagination conjured in the minds of many centuries past is a challenge, but not impossible. Our survey of geographical works showed that we can reconstruct their conceptual maps of Arabia, and demonstrate the blinkering of the scope of awareness to the Hajj routes at first, with a growing salience of description of desertscape and lack of water as Iraqi familiarity with Arabia receded during the later third/ninth century. The indicators invite us to uncover more of the construction of a desert archetype in Arabic literature that broadly homogenised Arabia, but as concerns the Thrust and Dusty War specifically, there is one reader who may give us very specific insight.

Our source is the eastern Iranian *adīb* and writer Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamaḏānī (d. 398/1008), and his response to Thrust and Dusty emerges in his *Maqāmāt*. Al-Hamaḏānī wrote each episode of the *Maqāmāt* as his own composition – he was not reporting a received narrative, and he located many chapters in sundry geographical locations – the episode relevant for our purposes is that which is set in Arabia. Al-Ḥamaḏānī named it *al-Maqāma al-Fazāriyya* – after the Fazāra tribe, which, as we have seen, was the primary belligerent party of the Thrust and Dusty War. It was their leader, Ḥuḏayfa ibn Badr, who cheated at the horserace, and the narratives all concur that the *šarr* of the Fazāra pushed the ʿAbs into full-blown conflict. Al-Hamaḏānī's choice of the Fazāra to label his Arabian *Maqāma* is thus not idle. Any remotely-educated reader of his day would readily associate the Fazāra with the Thrust and Dusty War, since while members of Fazāra lineage were present in early Islam,[100] by the fourth/tenth century the clan's fame was restricted to the literary realm, where association with Thrust and Dusty was hegemonic. Given the very specific intertextual

100 Ibn al-Aṯīr refers to the "many" members of the clan, particularly up to the end of the second/eight century (*al-Lubāb fī taḥḏīb al-ansāb*, ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Wāḥid, Cairo, Dār al-Taʾlīf, 1971, II, p. 429). The *nisba* from the Fazāra clan, however, does not appear in the biographical dictionaries (Romanov's computational analysis of al-Ḏahabī's *Tārīḫ al-Islām* does not list any), indicating that their numbers were not great by the time of al-Hamaḏānī's generation, particularly in his eastern Iranian setting.

background, an educated contemporary of al-Hamaḏānī, upon hearing the word "Fazāra", would find his mind in brought to the space of the Thrust and Dusty War. Having elicited this association, the ways in which al-Hamaḏānī constructs the space of Fazāra territory in the *Maqāma* is in express intertexual communication with the setting of the Thrust and Dusty War. The *Maqāma* begins by laying out the scene:

> Once in the region of the Fazāra clan I was riding a magnificent camel, leading a noble steed in tow as we coursed across the land. My concern was to reach home, so no nightly terrors could divert me, nor the vast expanses of deserts turn me from my goal. Travel whittled the hours of the day as one beats leaves off a branch, and riding, I penetrated into the belly of night. I entered a night so dark that the sandgrouse loses its way, too dark for the bat to see; I travelled swiftly, with nothing but predators to the right and hyenas to the left. Suddenly the spectre of a rider appeared before me, fully armed; he passed the tamarisk trees and sped through the desert plain toward me. I felt as terrified as one unarmed would feel in the presence of bristling weapons, but I put on a bold face and challenged him: "Hold your ground you wretch…!"[101]

For the first time, we have a lengthy and visceral spatial description of Fazāra space. Al-Hamaḏānī would not have travelled there himself, but instead conjured the imagery from the topoi of his eastern Iranian imagination, and the tropes are clear. Danger, desert, darkness and dread constitute the scene. It is a stereotyped desert, intriguingly close to what would later form the staple core of European Orientalist imaginings about Arabia, and here we have an Eastern Iranian of the tenth century conjuring the land of the Arabs with the same embellishment of its challenges, particularly the ubiquitous dangers of its vast distances. Given the travails actually experienced by Eastern Iranian Ḥajj goers contemporary with al-Hamaḏānī,[102] it might have seemed rather on point, and from this juncture it brings us to interesting inferences of how the dangers of the cut-off Arabia of the medieval period acted on the minds of readers, and spilled over into the ways they opted to visualise the desert of pre-Islam.

101 al-Ḥamaḏānī, *al-Maqāmāt*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbduh, Bayrūt, Dār al-Mašriq, 1993, p. 68–69 (translation by the author).

102 Violence threatend against Eastern Iranian pilgrims contemporary with al-Hamaḏānī is detailed in al-Musabbiḥī, *Aḫbār Miṣr*, ed. William Millward, Cairo, al-Haya'a al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma, 1980, p. 42–43.

## 10 Conclusion

The question of urbanite Muslim perception of the desert remains open for further critical enquiry, paying due attention to their descriptions within the socio-political and intertextual contexts of their relationships with Arabia. As for the Thrust and Dusty War narratives themselves, on their face they are consistent in their sparse spatial description which, as Arabia became more theoretically apprehended than physically experienced over the course of the third/ninth century lend to interpretation as a Bakhtinian epic chronotype of undifferentiated time and space. That spatial narrative involves generalisation, suggestive that whatever happened in one instance in pre-Islamic Arabia could be imagined as happening anywhere else, at any time before the dawn of Islam. The actual setting is hidden, creating undifferentiated space and promoting character and action as the means to show readers the world of pre-Islam. Given the importance of the stories for imagining Arab identity in this period, and given the stability of the textual corpus thereafter, the particular spatial narrative is a fundament underlying the perceived Bedouin-ness and undifferentiated Arabness that pervades much writing about Arab origins and pre-Islamic history in Middle Eastern and Orientalists circles. By taking space seriously, and by observing how stable and canonical the space became in *adab* literature, it becomes easier to understand how archetypes about Arab identity emerged, fixed upon the Bedouin mould.

By contextualising the Arab archetypes via investigation into the Arabic literary interaction with real Arabian space, we see the funnelling of spatial awareness in Iraqi textual production that overlooked most of Arabian topography as a result the limitations of Abbasid-era Iraqi experience to those few tracks that led from Basra and Kufa to Mecca and Medina. Because those roads did cut through a desert, and because they did become dangerous, Iraqi experience would naturally understand Arabia through the prism of danger and the Bedouin. *Adab* literature about pre-Islamic Arabia does not seem to have exaggerated these impressions, but in leaving the space blank, it left readers full reign to use their own intertextual experience to visualise the space. The way in which al-Hamaḏānī did so is quite instructive for us. We may doubt the realism of desertscapes indulged in our own films, such as David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), and wonder about the effects of fantasy and power on our own imagination of Arabia and the Arabs, but when we do, we should bear in mind that al-Hamāḏānī, a millennium before Lean, seemed to have had quite the same space in mind.