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Its Influence and Persistence
in the Writing of
Arab Cultural History

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Meaning and Function of ‘*Ajā’ib* in Writing on Mamluk Historiography and in Mamluk Historical Writing Itself

Syrinx von Hees

The standard narrative of the decline of Arabic culture gives prominence to references to the decline of the rational sciences. In the frame of this book, this topic is dealt with in more detail through the contribution by Sonja Brentjes¹ and is the focus of research on logic by Khaled El-Rouayheb.² Myself, I have treated this topic in the context of my research on Zakariyyā’ al-Qazwīnī and his encyclopedia on natural history, composed in the mid 13th century. This work was used as a prime example of Arab cultural decline as it was argued that it would not deal any longer with science, but only with wonders as its title already would indicate. I was able to show that *‘ajā’ib al-makblūqāt wa-gharā’ib al-marajūdāt* for al-Qazwīnī, as for his contemporaries and readers, did not refer to wonders in the sense of something supernatural or fantastic, but to any “normal” natural phenomenon that was always also seen as part of God’s creation and proof of his grandeur and power. Al-Qazwīnī’s work deals with natural history, and is not about miracles.³

Currently, my research focuses on the Mamluk period, and I realized with astonishment that scholars make similar accusations against Mamluk historiography in general and several historical works of that period in particular: By including *‘ajā’ib wa-gharā’ib* they are therefore regarded as deviants that no longer follow the model of classical, professional historical writing. In his recent overview of “Mamluk History and Historians”, published in 2006 in a volume of the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* covering the “post-classical period”, Robert Irwin once again presents Mamluk historiography according to these untimely standards.⁴ For example, Irwin postulates an opposition between “wholly fantastic” and “sober historians”.⁵ He reproaches the historian al-Jazarī claiming that his work is “burdened with poetry and fragments of *adab* prose” and that he “perhaps chose for literary reasons to include various instances of *al-‘ajā’ib wa-l-gharā’ib* (the strange and the

¹ See Brentjes, “On Four Sciences and their Audiences in Ayyubid and Mamluk Societies”, 139-171.

² See for example Rouayheb, Khaled, *Relational Syllogisms and the History of Arabic Logic, 900-1900*.

³ See von Hees, “Al-Qazwīnī’s *‘Ajā’ib al-Makblūqāt* – An Encyclopaedia of Natural History?”; idem., “The Astonishing: A Critique and Re-reading of ‘Aġā’ib Literature”; idem., *Enzyklopädie als Spiegel des Weltbildes. Qazwīnīs Wunder der Schöpfung – eine Naturkunde des 13. Jahrhunderts*; see also the introduction to *Zakariyyā’ Ibn Muḥammad al-Qazwīnī: Le Meraviglie del Creato e le Stranezze degli Esseri*.

⁴ Irwin, “Mamluk History and Historians”.

⁵ Irwin, “Mamluk History and Historians”, 159.

wonderful”), adding that this had already been mocked by his contemporaries, such as aṣ-Ṣafadī.⁶ In this kind of argument, the use of *al-ʿajāʾib wa-l-gharāʾib* by historians is connected to literature: they would tell such stories mainly for literary reasons, ignoring the “true” art of historical writing. Indeed, Irwin offers as general knowledge that “the literarization of history-writing” was a feature of the Mamluk period.⁷

Aṣ-Ṣafadī himself is presented by Irwin as a biographer who regards biography as morally uplifting instrument and who despite this and “despite the impression made on him by Ibn Taymiyya” was “committed to literature ... and produced, among other things, a *maqāma* on wine, a quantity of pederastic verse and a famous poem on the beauty spot (*khāl*). He also interested himself in occult matters and wrote on alchemy as well as on *malāḥim* (disasters prefiguring the end of the world).⁸ Why does Irwin mention only these topics in his overview of Mamluk historiography if it is not with the intention to depreciate aṣ-Ṣafadī, at least as regards his competence as a historian?

“The strange and the wonderful” is mentioned by Irwin again in connection with the historian Ibn ad-Dawādānī, who is claimed to “betray a taste” for it, “though much more reliable” than others. “His sober annals of political and religious affairs are broken up by records of *mirabilia*”; and he has a “taste for *Arabian Nights* stories, freak meteorological incidents and amazing coincidences”.⁹

There are many more instances of this sort in the short encyclopedic overview offered by Irwin. In the end he portrays Ibn Iyās by saying “he should be considered as primarily a belletrist and poet. His rather dry chronicle is enlivened by reports of marvels and the relation of tales which might have come from *A Thousand and One Nights*.”¹⁰

It is evident, that Irwin understands “the strange and the wonderful” as referring to something fantastic and fabulous, more like a fairy-tale, and that this has nothing to do with “sober” history-writing, but only with literature and that such kinds of literary embellishment – according to this view – should have no place in historiography. Even though Irwin does not use the word decline, his negative, devaluating tone evokes the very idea of decadence.

In my contribution, I would first like to trace these ideas back to their roots. Why did scholars come up with such an idea at all? And, what evidence did they present for their arguments? In a second part, I will try to explain the meaning of words like *ʿajāʾib* in Mamluk historical writing itself. What is actually written there? And what sense does it carry when we look at these reports free from any prefixed definition of *ʿajāʾib* as referring to something fantastic?

⁶ Irwin, “Mamluk History and Historians”, 160.

⁷ Irwin, “Mamluk History and Historians”, 160.

⁸ Irwin, “Mamluk History and Historians”, 162.

⁹ Irwin, “Mamluk History and Historians”, 164.

¹⁰ Irwin, “Mamluk History and Historians”, 170.

Meaning and Function of ʿAjāʾib in Writing on Mamluk Historiography

The first question regarding where these ideas about Mamluk historiography are derived from, can be answered astonishingly precisely, even though Irwin does not provide any footnotes,¹¹ but only includes a bibliography. The thesis that Mamluk historiography “dissolves” the classical forms of Arab historiography through its tendencies of “literarization”, highlighting their use of *ʿajāʾib wa-gharāʾib*, originates from Ulrich Haarmann. In 1969 Haarmann published his *Quellenstudien zur frühen Mamlukenzeit* where he established this thesis analyzing the works by al-Jazari and Ibn ad-Dawādārī, and two years later presented it again pronouncedly in a separate essay.¹²

According to Haarmann, Arab historiography shows a caesura (as he calls it) in the mid 13th century, its feature being the “literarization of the inner form” that would enter the writings from that time on.¹³ Haarmann – like Irwin – does not explicitly use the word ‘decline’, but judges the phenomenon of literarization as “de-historization,”¹⁴ and places it in a wider context that he sees as encyclopedism.¹⁵ For Haarmann, encyclopedism signals “the end of Islamic high culture” referring to von Grunebaum’s words.¹⁶ Here, the topic of decline is addressed more directly. Otherwise, Haarmann uses – like Irwin – degrading formulations like “dissolving”, or “indulging unbridled in the liberties of literary presentation”.¹⁷ Moreover, he postulates an opposition between history as science and *adab* as entertainment.¹⁸ Myself, I do not want to argue that historical writing does not use literary techniques; on the contrary, I would argue that according to the “linguistic turn”, any kind of historical writing is literature. However, since this does not yet seem to be a common place, at least not with regard to Mamluk historiography, I deem it worth scrutinizing in the following the old argument specifically with regard to the use of *ʿajāʾib wa-gharāʾib* in order to show its weakness and meager foundations.

Haarmann gives some criteria for his literarization-theory and lists them in the following sequence: “1. Increasing use of anecdotes (*nukat*), that would have ever been ambivalent historical-literary elements, but are now reevaluated and in their

¹¹ There is actually a single footnote at the beginning, quoting Gibb in order to stress the idea that for Muslim scholars history-writing was secondary to theology.

¹² Haarmann, *Quellenstudien zur frühen Mamlukenzeit*; idem, “Auflösung und Bewahrung der klassischen Formen arabischer Geschichtsschreibung in der Zeit der Mamluken”.

¹³ Haarmann, “Auflösung”, 49.

¹⁴ Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 120.

¹⁵ See on the topic of encyclopedism Muhanna, “Why Was the 14th Century a Century of Arabic Encyclopaedism?”; and Hees, “Al-Qazwini’s *ʿAjāʾib al-Makhlūqāt* – An Encyclopaedia of Natural History?” and idem, *Enzyklopädie als Spiegel des Weltbildes. Qazwinis Wunder der Schöpfung – eine Naturkunde des 13. Jahrhunderts*.

¹⁶ Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 137.

¹⁷ Haarmann, “Auflösung”, 53.

¹⁸ Haarmann, “Auflösung”, 53.

following also the increasing use of mirabilia (*‘ajā’ib wa-gharā’ib*).¹⁹ Both elements could– so he states – be used for purely literary reasons.¹⁹ I will discuss this criterion in more detail by analyzing the examples Haarmann presents for this most important phenomenon of his literarization-theory. First however, I would also like to summarize the other elements supporting his literarization-theory:

2. Use of vulgarities, of poetry and *saj’*; 3. de-historization;²⁰ 4. neglect of the professional ethics for traditional historians like not quoting sources, etc.;²¹ 5. autobiographical reminiscences that Haarmann interprets as being subjective contrary to objective – a phenomenon that can be interpreted very differently as is the case for example in the contribution to this volume by Dana Sajdi²²; 6. use of direct speech and dialogs; 7. use of literary-historical topoi and clichés, describing for example natural catastrophes, which would function “primarily as peripheral-ornamental” therefore having a “literary function”.²³ Haarmann tries to explain his literarization-phenomenon through the fact that since Mamluk times it was not only theologians that were writing history, but other people as well.²⁴

After this short presentation of Haarmann’s thoughts, let us return to his first criterion establishing his literarization-theory: the Mamluk use of anecdotes and more specifically of mirabilia. As evidence for this statement, Haarmann refers to a long anecdote in Ibn ad-Dawādārī’s work for which the author himself would admit that he digressed from concise talk, presenting instead unusual reports (*nawādir*) in order to entertain.²⁵ In his historical work, Ibn ad-Dawādārī reports here about the luxurious wedding celebrations that Sultan an-Nāṣir Muḥammad organized in Cairo for the daughter of his powerful representative in Syria, Tankiz.²⁶ After reporting this contemporary event, Ibn ad-Dawādārī quotes a story from Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih’s literary anthology *al-‘Iqd al-farīd* (860-940) about a famous Abbasid wedding and finally explains why he inserted this story: first, as was pointed out by Haarmann, it was in order to entertain; however, Ibn ad-Dawādārī gives a second reason, namely as a proof that an-Nāṣir Muḥammad followed a known example and that therefore his behavior should not be criticized, as is also

¹⁹ Haarmann, “Auflösung”, 55f.

²⁰ Referring to a dwindling of historiographical elements promoting aesthetic aspects.

²¹ Haarmann, “Auflösung”, 56.

²² Sajdi, “New Voices in History: Nouveau Literacy in the 18th-Century Ottoman Levant”, 193-220.

²³ Haarmann, “Auflösung”, 58.

²⁴ Haarmann, “Auflösung”, 59.

²⁵ “Hier bin ich nun von dem Grundsatz einer gestrafften Rede abgegangen, und mache den Eindruck, als sei ich ein Schwätzer. Indessen haben wir für diesen Exkurs eine Reihe von Gründen gehabt, deren erster folgender ist: Bücher, deren Erzählung nur einem Stil folgt, müssen langweilen. Darum haben wir versucht, die Rede mit ausgefallenen Berichten abwechslungsreicher zu gestalten (*fa-qaṣadnā taṭrīz al-kalām bi-nawādir al-abkām*).”

²⁶ She was married in Cairo to the son of another very influential emir, the emir Baktāmūr as-Sāqī.

mentioned by Haarmann in his *Quellenstudien*.²⁷ We could see this as a “classical case” of how history was used for legitimization, providing good – or else also bad – examples for contemporaries. Haarmann is not totally unaware of this fact, but he is so preoccupied with his literarization-theory that he states: “More important in this context is the first argument”, concluding that “Ibn ad-Dawādārī here presents himself as a real *adīb*.”²⁸ The inclusion of the story about the Abbasid wedding could also be interpreted as proof of the erudition of the author. Ibn ad-Dawādārī, who is presented by Haarmann and Irwin as an uneducated author might have wanted to show off that he knew works like the famous anthology by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih.

This was one example of the use of an anecdote, but, where are those marvelous stories that are always referred to? What examples does Haarmann give of these? In his essay, actually no examples are given at all for the use of *‘ajā’ib wa-gharā’ib* by Mamluk authors. In his study on the sources, Haarmann mentions the following while introducing the historian al-Jazarī and his work: “The vulgar speech and the abundant use of anecdotes and mirabilia were already seen as gravamina by some critical contemporaries of the author”²⁹ – and Irwin picked up this information. Haarmann quotes aṣ-Ṣafadī’s words about al-Jazarī (gest. 739): “*wa-kāna ḥasan al-mudbākara salīm al-bāṭin ṣadūqan wa-fi ta’rikkibi ‘ajā’ib wa-gharā’ib wa-‘ammiyya*”;³⁰ in translation: “He had a good memory, a clean conscience and was sincere. In his history you find *‘ajā’ib wa-gharā’ib* (and the question is, how we should best translate this phrase – what was actually meant by it?) and colloquial speech.” It seems as though aṣ-Ṣafadī would at first praise al-Jazarī as a reliable historian. Then, he mentions the *‘ajā’ib wa-gharā’ib*, followed by the remark about the use of colloquial language. This last remark might indeed be meant negatively, since aṣ-Ṣafadī also quotes a poem by al-Jazarī, criticizing its language qualities. Nonetheless, he reports that he received an *ijāza* for this poem.³¹

Haarmann also refers to as-Sakhāwī as being critical. In his work on the theory of history as-Sakhāwī writes about al-Jazarī: “*ta’rikk kabīr, shabīr bi-kbaṭṭibi fi-l-Maḥmūdiyya, fihi ‘ajā’ib wa-gharā’ib*”.³² Rosenthal translates: he “wrote a great, famous history which contains remarkable and strange information. An autograph copy (of the work) is in the Maḥmūdiyya”.³³ Yet, it remains unclear, what exactly aṣ-Ṣafadī and as-Sakhāwī meant by the phrase “*‘ajā’ib wa-gharā’ib*”.

²⁷ Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 168.

²⁸ Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 169.

²⁹ Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 25.

³⁰ See aṣ-Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi*, vol. 2, 22.

³¹ Aṣ-Ṣafadī gives a precise date, the year 730, in which he attained this permission to teach that poem, hinting at the eagerness of aṣ-Ṣafadī to show his connectedness with his contemporaries.

³² See as-Sakhāwī, *al-Flān*, 307.

³³ Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 493. In a footnote to his translation, Rosenthal does interpret this statement as being meant in a negative sense, like Haarmann. However,

In order to try to better understand what they are referring to by this phrase, let us turn to the theoretical work on history-writing by as-Sakhāwī (831-902 / 1427-1497) himself. He presents at the beginning of his work a definition for history: first of all, it is about indicating the time, especially of birth- and death-dates, that is, giving biographical information. Second – and here I follow the translation of Rosenthal:

“Important events and occurrences (*ḥawādith jalīla*) that happen to take place are added to this. Such events are the appearance of a religion, ... events concerning caliphs and wazirs, raids, battles, and wars, ... *Tārīkh* also often includes the beginning of creation, the stories of the prophets, ... It may also be extended to minor matters such as the construction of mosques, schools, bridges, ... or obscure happenings (*khafiy*), celestial ones, such as the appearance of locusts and eclipses of the sun and moon, or terrestrial ones, such as earthquakes, conflagrations, inundations, floods, droughts, pestilences, epidemics, and similar great signs and big marvels (*wa-ghayribā mina l-āyāt al-‘izām wa-l-‘ajā’ib al-jisām*).”³⁴

Here, the meaning of *‘ajā’ib* becomes a little clearer: for as-Sakhāwī, natural catastrophes in particular and similar events that might not be explicable at first are counted among the *‘ajā’ib*; most probably this is meant in the sense as it was used by al-Qazwīnī, namely, as signs of God’s omnipotence that serves as a lesson for mankind as is the case with other historical events. According to as-Sakhāwī then history deals, next to biographies, with important events (*ḥawādith jalīla*), *‘ajā’ib* included.

A contemporary of as-Sakhāwī is the less well known al-Kāfiyaji (d. 1474), who composed a short essay on the theory of history-writing in 867/1463. His definition of history runs as follows, as translated by Rosenthal:

“The object (of history-writing) is remarkable happenings (*ḥāditha gharība*) which are of interest, ... The condition is that those happenings are clearly defined, their time established and that they are then carefully set down for a sound purpose. Happenings of this kind are the occurrences experienced by the prophets, ... and other celestial and terrestrial events, such as the new formation of a religion, the appearance of a dynasty, an earthquake, deluge, pestilence, and other important and terrifying events (*ilā ghayri dbālika mina l-ḥawādith aṣ-ṣā’ila al-‘izām wa-l-umūr al-ḥā’ila al-jisām*).”³⁵

It is evident that as-Sakhāwī and al-Kāfiyaji aim at the same: history-writing is dedicated to noteworthy events, and here the expressions *ḥawādith jalīla* and *ḥāditha gharība* are synonymous. *Jalīl*, *gharīb* and in this context also *‘ajīb* as well as *mashhūr* or *nawādir*, all refer to something special, noteworthy of being recounted, and in this sense of any event that will end up in a historical work. Definitely, these expressions have nothing to do with something fantastic or fairy-tale-like.

Rosenthal feels obliged to add that this work – according to him – has special value because of its inclusion of authentic stories by travelers. It seems as if Rosenthal in this instance equates *‘ajā’ib wa-gharā’ib* with oral reports.

³⁴ Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 273; as-Sakhāwī, *al-Fīlān*, 17.

³⁵ Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 251f.; Arabic text, 553.

Events are described as astonishing, outstanding, marvelous in the sense of being noteworthy; and it is clear, that it is only such events that should be reported at all.

The statements from aṣ-Ṣafadī and as-Sakhāwī about al-Jazarī are the first pieces of evidence that Haarmann gives to support his statement that stories about 'ajā'ib and gharā'ib arise in Mamluk historiography. Taking into consideration that as-Sakhāwī, and aṣ-Ṣafadī as well, might not have intended to depreciate al-Jazarī by indicating that his work is about 'ajā'ib wa-gharā'ib, but rather stressing that it includes noteworthy reports, these statements cannot be used to support a theory of a decline in Mamluk historiography. Above all, these statements alone are not sufficient evidence that al-Jazarī really did use the expression 'ajā'ib in his work. No attempt by Haarmann to check this is discernible and if necessary to try to understand its special usage and meaning.

In his book Haarmann states: "With the anecdote in the strict sense are intimately connected the mirabilia, the 'ajā'ib wa-gharā'ib that in Arabic-Islamic literature developed into a distinct genre."³⁶ He does not explain what he intends by the phrase "anecdote in the strict sense", nor how anecdotes may be connected to mirabilia, while I have already discussed the problematic view of a distinct literary genre of 'ajā'ib wa-gharā'ib in a different context.³⁷ Therefore, the whole statement is problematic. What it does make clear, once again, is the fact that Haarmann judges the use of mirabilia negatively, stating that von Grunebaum had already hinted at the negative effects of the Arabs' taste for such strange occurrences.

As further evidence for the use of 'ajā'ib, Haarmann informs us that Ibn ad-Dawādārī used books about "Egypt's Wonders" and about "hidden treasures" in his recounting of Egypt's Fatimid history and that: "Marvelous stories can be found even in the contemporary parts of his work." The only example Haarmann provides is a report about an earthquake in the year 702 in which Ibn ad-Dawādārī "quotes at length from al-Qazwini's famous cosmography 'Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt wa-badā'ī' (sic.) al-marjūdāt that promises already in its title the miraculous!"³⁸

Let us have a closer look at this passage. First, Ibn ad-Dawādārī indicates in great detail the destruction caused by this earthquake in Cairo. He continues that it was followed by a disastrous flood that reached as far as Constantinople. He gives details about the flooded parts in North Egypt and the destruction caused there. These events must have impressed the people, or at least Ibn ad-Dawādārī, as following his report, he quotes a sermon that he had given on this occasion as well as parts from al-Qazwini's work – as Haarmann indicates. The disastrous event itself is nowhere characterized by Ibn ad-Dawādārī as being 'ajā'ib. Introducing the event he states: "It was a very strong earthquake. Something similar had never occurred in Egypt."³⁹

³⁶ Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 170.

³⁷ Hees, "The Astonishing: A Critique and Re-reading of 'Ajā'ib Literature".

³⁸ Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 170.

³⁹ Ibn ad-Dawādārī, *Kanz ad-durar*, vol. 9, 100f..

The quotation from al-Qazwini's encyclopedia on natural history – as this work should more precisely be labeled rather than cosmography – is information that al-Qazwini gathered from relevant sources on matters of natural history, in this specific case mainly from Ibn Sinā, to explain how earthquakes come into being, namely through steam and smoke that under pressure can break the surface of the earth. Furthermore it explains the transformation of plains into mountains and of land into sea and vice versa, for example through flooding. As evidence of this, the fossils of mussels are mentioned. Ibn ad-Dawādārī also quotes the passage about the usefulness of mountains, for example, stating that without them the surface of the earth would be completely covered with water. The whole passage does not include a hint of anything that to our modern ears could sound fantastic, such as for example the myth that the movements of a whale carrying the earth cause earthquakes or that a flood is caused by an angel putting his foot into the sea, stories that do exist in Arabic literature. Such would be the stories that modern listeners would associate with mirabilia.

We have to admit, that Ibn ad-Dawādārī introduces a rather long general explanation about the natural causes of earthquakes and floods that makes sense in connection to the very strong earthquake of 702 followed by a flood disaster. But, of course, it would not be possible to insert such an explanation each time an earthquake happens. Still, Ibn ad-Dawādārī obviously does not narrate any fantastic, marvelous stories in the sense intended by Haarmann here, and he does not use the word *ʿajīb* or something similar apart from the title of al-Qazwini's work, that he is giving where he is mentioning it in order to indicate his source. Once again, Ibn ad-Dawādārī also demonstrates with such a quotation his own erudition, by noting his familiarity with this famous encyclopedia of natural history.

Where then, are all those mirabilia that seem so important in Haarmann's argument for his literarization-theory? The one example that he does provide clearly does not fit at all. Instead, what this example shows is the conspicuous connection between the discourse on decline with special reference to the natural sciences and the literarization-theory presented to us as the "dissolving of classical forms" with regard to Mamluk historiography.

Haarmann insists on applying negative connotations to stories.⁴⁰ He explains that mirabilia exist with a certain religious background.⁴¹ He gives two examples: a dream that is reported on the occasion of the birth of Sultan an-Nāṣir Muḥammad⁴² and the story about the discovery in the desert of a city built from green glass,⁴³ both of which in the Arabic text are not characterized with the word

⁴⁰ Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 171: "Among the *gharāʾib* in the work of Ibn ad-Dawādārī kabbalistic observations are playing an important role".

⁴¹ Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 173.

⁴² Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 173.

⁴³ Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 174f..

ʿajīb or any similar word.⁴⁴ The problem with Haarmann’s argument here is that he himself is talking about ʿajāʾib and gharāʾib – using these Arabic words – without any evidence from his source! He is applying these Arabic words to stories that to him seem fabulous.

Haarmann finally asks whether Ibn ad-Dawādārī could have been conscious of the legendary character of such reports, arguing yes, otherwise the contemporary criticism by aṣ-Ṣafadī, for example, directed against al-Jazarī would not make sense.⁴⁵ Haarmann concludes: “The critical sense distinguishing reality from legend was alive; ʿajāʾib wa-gharāʾib – according to orthodox consent – did not belong to the writing of history.”⁴⁶

We have tried to demonstrate that this conclusion does not make sense: 1. Dream and legend (if this is how we want to classify the report about the glass-city), in the Arabic historical work are not in any way associated with the expression ʿajāʾib; 2. aṣ-Ṣafadī may not have accused al-Jazarī when stating that his history includes ʿajāʾib wa-gharāʾib; because 3. in the Mamluk works on the theory of history-writing, ʿajāʾib are seen as an essential and natural part of history, even in the view of a religious scholar like as-Sakhāwī. The point is, that ʿajāʾib and similar expressions do not refer to anything fantastic, but simply to something special, unusual and therefore worthy of being reported.

It is rather astonishing to note how weak the foundation is for the idea Haarmann presents concerning the bad use made of marvelous stories by Mamluk historians. Yet, I do not want to blame Haarmann too much as he wrote his literarization-theory almost fifty years ago. He can still be praised as one of the first historians of the Middle East who cared about this “later period” and to promote research in Mamluk historiography. It is more astonishing to note how this talk about literarization highlighting the use of ʿajāʾib wa-gharāʾib is picked up again and again and presented as standard knowledge about Mamluk historiography without its being scrutinized anew.

Irwin’s overview-article for the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* from 2006 is just a recent example, and not the only one.⁴⁷ The persistence of these ideas is most probably only possible because they fit so perfectly into the general narrative about Arab culture concerning its very long period of decline that is still prevalent in many minds. Such ideas are convincing because they respond to established expectations. On the other side, this persistence is also strange, as many voices since the writings of Haarmann in 1969 and 1971 have argued against the

⁴⁴ Ibn ad-Dawādārī, *Kanz ad-durar*, vol. 8, 274 and vol. 8, 26-28.

⁴⁵ Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 175.

⁴⁶ Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 175.

⁴⁷ Even Donald P. Little in his overview about Ayyubid and Mamluk historiography written in 1998 for the *Cambridge History of Egypt* who’s overall tone is very different and his presentation much more careful does not do without mentioning the literarization-theory in his presentations of Ibn ad-Dawādārī, al-Jazarī, as well as Ibn Iyās, quoting Haarmann. See Little, “Historiography of the Ayyūbid and Mamlūk epochs”.

general decline-narrative; and against the interpretation of *ʿajāʾib* as something fantastic or unscientific; as well as specifically against the literarization-theory of Mamluk historiography as carried out for example by Bernd Radtke, or Ottfried Weintritt.⁴⁸ This special issue, the question of whether it makes sense to talk about a “breakdown” (*Auflösung* in Haarmann’s words), has even been highlighted as an important issue for further study in another overview-article on “Mamluk Historiographic Studies: The State of the Art” written in 1997 by Li Guo.⁴⁹ Besides, other scholars have adopted very different ways of approaching such topics, such as for example Tarif Khalidi in his book on *Arabic historical thought*. His discussion of Mamluk historiography indeed almost completely ignores the talk about mirabilia and literarization, but instead focuses on the secular tendency of politicization.⁵⁰ I can thus only affirm that given this context, the contribution on Mamluk historiography in the volume of the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* on the “post-classical period” remains an annoyance.

However, I do not want to end this article with a complaint. Instead, I will now come to my second part. Since the use of *ʿajāʾib* or mirabilia by Mamluk authors is highlighted as one major piece of evidence showing their fondness for fantastic stories belonging to literary elements that determines their history writing as declining history writing, I would now like to analyze the ways in which words like *ʿajāʾib* are actually used in Mamluk historical writing itself.

Meaning and Function of ʿAjāʾib in Mamluk Historical Writing Itself

As an example, I have chosen the historiographical work *al-Bidāya wa-n-nihāya* by Ibn Kathīr because this Mamluk author is presented by Ulrich Haarmann as “being less susceptible to this kind of literatization in form and content since he is consciously tying up with the tradition of classical history-writing”.⁵¹ Consequently, Robert Irwin also does not link Ibn Kathīr to the phenomenon of *ʿajāʾib wa-gharāʾib*. On the other hand, while toiling through the historiographical work by Ibn Kathīr, large headings stand out that use these signal words in order to attract the reader’s attention, as for example: *gharīb min al-gharāʾib wa-ʿajīb min al-ʿajāʾib*, or: *kāʾina ʿajiba jiddan* and: *kāʾina ghariba jiddan* and similar formulations.

Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) lived in Damascus and belonged to a damascene group of shāfiʿite traditionalists among them al-Mizzī (d. 742), al-Birzālī (d. 739)

⁴⁸ Radtke, *Weltgeschichte und Weltbeschreibung im mittelalterlichen Isalm*; Weintritt, *Formen spätmittelalterlicher islamischer Geschichtsdarstellung*.

⁴⁹ Guo, “Mamluk Historiographic Studies: The State of the Art”, especially 33-37.

⁵⁰ Khalidi, *Arab Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, Chapter 5: History and Siyāsa, 182-231. Little begins his overview by presenting these new ideas; Irwin, however, does not even mention this book in his bibliography.

⁵¹ Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 154.

and adh-Dhahabī (d. 748).⁵² He married the daughter of his teacher al-Mizzī. Though he was a supporter of the controversial ḥanbalite jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328 in Damascus), he was diplomatic enough to be on good terms with the Mamluk governors of Damascus who asked him time and again for advice.

I draw on the last volume of Ibn Kathīr’s historical work in which he reports about contemporary events, covering the years 701 until 768,⁵³ and choose as consistently as possible all locations where the terms ‘*ajā’ib*’ or *gharā’ib* and their variants appear. In this way I gathered 45 occurrences.

Among these are 19 locations where Ibn Kathīr used ‘*ajiba*’ as a verb in its varying forms. In seven of these cases we can best translate this verb as “pleasing” or “liking”, because a positive form of amazed astonishment is being expressed. This is for example the case, when Ibn Kathīr on the occasion of his father’s death in 703 notes that his family has lineage records that his teacher al-Mizzī saw and “was pleased and happy about it (*fa-a‘jabahū dhālika wa-ibtahaja bi-hi*)” and because of it he started to add to Ibn Kathīr’s name the *nisba* al-Qurashī.⁵⁴ In the year 736 Ibn Kathīr reports how he taught at the Madrasa an-Najibiyya while the judges and notables were present praising his instruction and “admiring its wealth and arrangement (*wa-ta‘ajjabū min jam‘ihī wa-tartibihī*)”.⁵⁵ Equally proudly, he relates how his argument against the confiscation of property from damascene Christians after the attack of 767 on Alexandria pleased the governor of Damascus (*yu‘jibuhū hādihā jiddan*).⁵⁶ When in the year 727 the marble sheathing of the North wall of the Umayyad mosque was completed and the governor Tankiz came to inspect it, “he liked it (*fa-a‘jabahū dhālika*)” and thanked the mosque’s supervisor Ibn Marājīl.⁵⁷ Another governor also liked the constructions that he was inspecting (*fa-a‘jabahū mā shāhadahū mina l-‘imārati*).⁵⁸ In the year 724 Ibn Kathīr quotes from a letter that states that an emir refused to drink wine and was even willing to pay for not drinking and on top of it to pay interest on that money; this pleased the emir who had tried to force him (*fa-a‘jabahū dhālika minhū*) and consequently made him his confidant.⁵⁹

The verb ‘*ajiba*’ and its derivatives forms can in many cases also be translated as “wondering” when it expresses a shocking or surprising, disbelieving astonishment. Now, about what kind of events did one wonder according to Ibn Kathīr? He re-

⁵² Mirza, “Was Ibn Kathīr the ‘Spokesperson’ for Ibn Taymiyya? Jonah as a Prophet of Obedience”.

⁵³ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-n-nihāya*, vol. 16 (701-768), edited by Ḥasan Ismā‘īl Marwah, 2nd edition. Damascus and Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2010; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-n-nihāya*, vol. 18 (701-768), edited by ‘Abdallāh bn ‘Abd al-Ḥasan at-Turki. Gizeh: Dār Hajar, 1998.

⁵⁴ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 35; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 40.

⁵⁵ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 269; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 383.

⁵⁶ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 460f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 705-707.

⁵⁷ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 201; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 282.

⁵⁸ Im Jahr 764, Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 437f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 669.

⁵⁹ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 175f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 244.

ports, for example, in the year 703 about Mongol-Mamluk fights over the fortress Shaqḥab and how “the people (*an-nās*)” looked out and feared that the Tatars could be arriving and “they were shocked by the reports of this army with its great numbers and provisions wherever they were going (*yataʿajjabūna min khabari l-jaysbi maʿa kutbratibim wa-wijūdati ʿuddatibim ayna dbababū*)” whereupon the people lost all their hopes.⁶⁰ In the year 742 the people wonder much (*fa-taʿajjaba an-nāsu min bādhibi l-kāʿinati kathīran*) that Ṭashtamur al-Ḥummuṣ al-Akhḍar was arrested,⁶¹ even though he had successfully established an-Nāṣir Aḥmad as the new sultan. On a Monday in the year 759, the Ḥājjib al-Ḥujjāb was released from prison at Ṣarkhad whereupon many were happy and he gave alms generously because he and “the people” were sure that he would be promoted to Cairo; however, already on Thursday he was put back in chains and therefore “the people wondered at this sadness after that joy (*fa-taʿajjaba an-nāsu min bādhibi t-tarḥati min tilka l-farḥati*)”.⁶² When after two weeks this man was released once again and was really summoned to Cairo, Ibn Kathīr comments “this is the most curious event that has been dated in history writing (*wa-bādhā aghrabu mā urrikha*)” because the prison-release-prison-release followed each other in such a short time.⁶³ After the emir Manjak, the governor of Damascus, had fled; in 760, he was allegedly captured clothed like a poor man and taken to the sultan “whereupon many people wondered (*wa-ʿajjaba kathīrun mina n-nāsi min dbālika*)”, whether this had in fact really just been a poor man resembling him.⁶⁴ When in the following year it came out that Manjak had remained hidden all the time in a damascene house where he was then captured, the people were very astonished about this fact as well (*wa-taʿajjaba n-nāsu min bādhibi l-qaḍīyyati jūdān*), since they had thought that he would already have died or at least would be far away, but instead he had been staying among them supposedly even joining the Friday prayer at the Umayyad mosque in inconspicuous clothing.⁶⁵ The people were also astonished in 764 when on the day after the deposing of al-Manṣūr, al-Ashraf was placed on the sultan’s throne and it thundered and rained a lot until streets became rivers (*fa-taʿajjaba n-nāsu min dbālika*); and even plague broke out.⁶⁶ Primarily, then, according to Ibn Kathīr it was the strokes of fate of the Mamluk military elite that made the people wonder time and time again.

Yet, Ibn Kathīr also reports how in the year 709 a courageous rebuke by Ibn Taymiyya against the sultan, in which he told him that he would be responsible for the actions of his deputies, made the sultan wonder (*fa-aʿjaba s-sultāna dbālika*) and reflect on it, whereupon the sultan put Ibn Taymiyya to the test.⁶⁷ A preacher can

⁶⁰ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 23f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 24f.

⁶¹ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 307; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 444f.

⁶² Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 387f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 584f.

⁶³ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 388; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 585.

⁶⁴ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 396; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 598.

⁶⁵ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 399; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 602f..

⁶⁶ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 443; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 676f..

⁶⁷ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 75f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 93f..

be appalled by his raucous audience (*wa-aʿjababum al-khaṭīb*) as was the case in 764 with Tāj ad-Dīn as-Subkī.⁶⁸ All the cases presented so far in which Ibn Kathīr used a verbal form of ʿajība have nothing to do with fantastic or superstitious or legendary stories or fairy-tales.

There are three reports in which Ibn Kathīr used a verbal form of ʿajība that he additionally highlighted by the use of a heading.⁶⁹ For instance Ibn Kathīr sets apart a report of the year 762 from the other events using the headline: “*tambībun ʿalā wāqiʿatin gharibatin wa-ttifāqin ʿajibin* (attention-getter for a curious incident and a whimsical coincidence)”; it is about a cause of antagonism between the emirs Baydamur, governor of Damascus and Yalbughā, Atabek of the Egyptian provinces, and that when Baydamur was threatened, a happy coincidence for him occurred, namely that the governor of the fortress of Damascus died, so that he could gain it without battle, combining now in one fell swoop control over city and fortress, with the result that “the people were astonished about the coincidence in this situation (*wa-taʿajjaba n-nāsu min hādihā l-ittifāqi fī hādihā l-ḥāl*)”.⁷⁰ In the year 758 Ibn Kathīr writes about an “extremely curious event (*kāʾinātun gharibatun jiddan*)”, that in fact a group from the neighborhood of the Umayyad mosque had destroyed wine and hashish at places known for the selling of these products, whereupon they were attacked by the riffraff resulting in fierce skirmishes in which the emirs started to interfere; however, at the end of the day the people from the neighborhood of the Umayyad mosque were punished because their actions were unauthorized and “this fact made the people wonder and they disapproved it (*fa-taʿajjaba n-nāsu min dhālika wa-ankarūhu*)”.⁷¹ The third report from the year 763 once again is about a positive astonishment expressing a liking, headed by “something especially wonderful (*uʿjūbatun mina l-ʿajāʾib*)”; it is about a young Persian who knew several ḥadīth-collections and other texts by heart, proving this at the Umayyad mosque where Ibn Kathīr in person appraised him positively; people gathered “and the large crowd liked it/was impressed (*fa-aʿjaba dhālika jamāʿatan kathīrin*)”; Ibn Kathīr adds the information that this wonderful talent had come to Damascus because of him!⁷² In all of these cases as well, the events that are highlighted as ʿajīb or *gharib* are not fairy-tales. We also see that the use of a verbal form of ʿajība is connected to the nominal or adjective use of this root.

In 18 locations Ibn Kathīr uses in the course of a report a nominal or adjective form of ʿajība. What kind of things or events does Ibn Kathīr characterize as wonderful or curious? He reports for example in 720 about a heavy battle in the West between Muslims and Franks in which a very small number of Muslim horsemen

⁶⁸ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 446; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 681.

⁶⁹ As far as I can tell from the editions, these headings seem to be present in the manuscripts.

⁷⁰ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 415; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 629.

⁷¹ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 383f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 577f..

⁷² Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 432f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 658f..

defeated with great success the much larger Frankish army, and comments: “This belongs to the most curious thing that has ever happened and to the most wonderful ever heard (*wa-hādhā min gharibi mā waqaʿa wa-ʿajibi mā sumiʿa*).”⁷³ In the year 768 the marble sheathing of the Qibla-wall of the Umayyad mosque became loose and after a demolition permit arrived from Cairo, the rebuilding was able to start and was already completed after two months “on the grounds of the eagerness” of the supervisor of the mosque Ibn Marājil, for which reason Ibn Kathīr writes: “This belongs to the wonderful (*wa-hādhā min al-ʿajab*).”⁷⁴ Also belonging to the wonderful (*wa-min al-ʿajab*), according to Ibn Kathīr, is the fact that Ibn Marājil did not forget any of the mosque’s employees during that time.⁷⁵ A splendid public appearance on the part of the military elite is also described as wonderful; as for example when Ibn Kathīr depicts the deployment of the household of Ṭuquzdamur in 746 as “very magnificent (*ubbatun jiddan*)”, in “wonderful glory (*fi haybatin ʿajibatun*).”⁷⁶ And the emir Arghūn as well moved into Damascus in 752 with great magnificence (*fi ubbatin ʿazīmatin*) so that Ibn Kathīr says: “And on this day, wonders occurred like one did not see for ages (*wa-jarā fi hādhā al-yawm ʿajāʾibu lam tura min dubūrin*).”⁷⁷ Likewise, the rich provisions of the Iraqi pilgrims in the year 720 are highlighted as “an astonishing matter (*wa-hādhā amrun ʿajib*).”⁷⁸ In a poem that Ibn Kathīr quotes on the occasion of the death of Ibn Taymiyya in 728, Ibn Taymiyya is praised as “the marvel of the age (*uʿjūbatu d-dabri*).”⁷⁹ Besides, shortly after his death, Ibn Taymiyya was seen in “splendid, pious and wonderful dreams (*manāmātun bābiratun ṣāliḥatun ʿajibatun*).”⁸⁰ As can be confirmed from this context, such dreams are not characterized as *ʿajib* because people might have regarded them as fantastic in the sense of unbelievable or invented. “Strange things (*ashyāʾ ʿajiba*)” happened according to Ibn Kathīr in the year 751 when a legal quarrel over an endowment broke out involving all the judges from the four law schools that went on for a long period.⁸¹ Similarly, Ibn Kathīr describes as strange (*fi niyyatin ʿajibatun*) the intention that was behind a legal opinion written against Tāj ad-Dīn as-Subkī that he himself did not subscribe to.⁸² Again in a clearly positive sense, Ibn Kathīr describes the fact as “the most wonderful of wonders and the most curious of curiosities (*wa-hādhā min ʿajabi l-ʿajāʾib wa-ablaghi l-igbrāl*)”, that the son of the scholar ash-Sharīshī, in whose garden Ibn Kathīr had been invited in 763 together with other scholars, passed successfully the exam that they were undertaking

⁷³ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 148; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 202.

⁷⁴ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 207f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 291f.

⁷⁵ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 208; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 292.

⁷⁶ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 330; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 481.

⁷⁷ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 361; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 536.

⁷⁸ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 149; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 204.

⁷⁹ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 212; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 298.

⁸⁰ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 214; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 302.

⁸¹ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 353; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 522.

⁸² Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 312f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 454.

in which he was asked about any poem from the 40 volumes of a work on linguistics, and he knew them very well.⁸³ First and foremost, Ibn Kathir talks about people that arouse positive or negative astonishment, admiration or wonderment through their behavior.

In rare cases only, is it a natural catastrophe that prompts astonishment. For example Ibn Kathir writes that it belonged to the astonishing (*wa-l-‘ajab*) that in the year 757 a letter came into his hands reporting a fire that destroyed the whole Kisrawān from Tripolis to Beirut and because of which many wild animals died, many olive trees were burned and the people fled to the coast, and that it was extinguished by rain after three days; the letter writer is cited as relating that it belonged to the realm of the astonishing (*wa min al-‘ajab*) that a leaf entered a house through the chimney and then all the furniture, cloth and much silk was burned; in closing Ibn Kathir exclaims once again: “By God, how astonishing (*fa-yillāb li-l-‘ajab*)!”⁸⁴ When in the year 725 the Tigris was rising so much that, according to Ibn Kathir, the land around Baghdad became submerged and the townsfolk remained locked-in, not being able to open the city-gates. After six days they started to bid farewell to each-other and some carried Qur’an-codices over their heads. He comments: “This was an astonishing time (*wa-kāna waqtan ‘ajiban*)”.⁸⁵ In this case it seems instead that human behavior rather than the natural disaster provoked Ibn Kathir to write this commentary.

In the year 764, Ibn Kathir counts among the strange (*wa-mina l-gharīb*) that a dream-report spread among the women and many of the ordinary people (*bayna n-nisā’i wa-kathīrin mina l-‘awwām*) about a vision of the prophet at a mulberry tree next to the Dīrār mosque, whereupon they sought out that tree and picked its leaves in order to be cured from the black death, although that dream turned out to be false.⁸⁶ Ibn Kathir expresses his astonishment about the behavior of women and ordinary people. Among the reports of the year 751 Ibn Kathir counts among “the astonishing and strange things (*wa-mina l-‘ajā’ib wa-l-gharā’ib*)” that after two-hundred years the fuel for the candles of the Umayyad mosque ran out without being refilled and that by the command of Sultan Ḥasan, who is explicitly praised for this since he abolished a damnable innovation (*al-bid‘atu sh-shanī‘a*) that had been a foolishness (*al-jabla*) based only on illusion and fantasy (*al-wahm wa-l-kbayāl*), namely the belief that the sultan would die immediately when all the candles ran out.⁸⁷ The astonishing aspect for Ibn Kathir here is the laudable fact that Sultan Ḥasan dared to put an end to that old foolishness. On the other hand we note that something like this old belief that was, in Ibn Kathir’s own words, “based only on illusion and fantasy (*al-wahm wa-l-kbayāl*)” is identified by him as

⁸³ Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 434; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 661f.

⁸⁴ Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 382f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 575.

⁸⁵ Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 182; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 254f..

⁸⁶ Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 445f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 681.

⁸⁷ Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 354f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 524f..

foolishness, not as ‘mirabilia’ as some researchers would like to have it! The catch-words ‘*ajā’ib wa-gharā’ib*’ used here by Ibn Kathīr cannot be equated as referring to something fantastic; on the contrary, they express a highlighted amazement, a positive astonishment about the courageous behavior of the sultan in breaking the old superstition.

In the year 744 Ibn Kathīr reports that those responsible for the treasury together with the supervisor of the mosque upon someone’s advice began to dig under a stone in the mosque for money and the people came in order to watch this excavation and “out of astonishment at this matter (*wa-t-ta’ajjubi min amrihi*)”, even though nothing was found.⁸⁸ When Ibn Kathīr describes how, in the year 753, the East gate of the Umayyad mosque, also known as Bāb Jayrūn, was destroyed during that year by a fire, he characterizes it as “one of the wonders of the world (*min ‘ajā’ib ad-dunyā*)”, built many a thousand years ago, maybe by a king named Jayrūn, or by a giant Jayrūn for Salomon. In this case Ibn Kathīr is talking about a wonder of the world in the sense of the antique ‘mirabilia’.⁸⁹ It is for him an impressive, magnificent construction of legendary origin.

Two reports that use ‘*ajīb*’ and ‘*gharīb*’ respectively as adjectives are additionally highlighted by a corresponding heading. This is the case with the report about “one of the wonders of the sea (*‘ajība min ‘ajā’ib al-baḥr*)” for which Ibn Kathīr quotes the historian al-Birzālī, who in 702 read in a letter from Cairo that “a sea animal with an astonishing form (*dābbatun mina l-baḥri ‘ajibatu l-kbalqa*)” appeared from the Nile and that is described in detail in comparison to known animals and finally was stuffed and presented to the sultan at the citadel.⁹⁰ Such an account corresponds most probably to what authors in the twentieth century would consider to be a fantastic narration, a report of wonder. In this case, Ibn Kathīr makes a point of indicating his source, al-Birzālī, who for his part indicates his own source as well, namely a letter from Cairo that is dated. Indicating their source for this special report seems important to both historians, supporting the claim that this report was not invented; the animal was closely examined, dissected, tested and transported to the sultan; according to the description this animal could have been a hippopotamus. In the year 754 Ibn Kathīr highlights “a very strange matter (*dhikru amrin gharibin jiddan*)” and narrates that he was told at Baalbek about a man who previously had been a woman, for which Ibn Kathīr receives a confirmation through a personal conversation with this man who reports to him in detail how “a strange condition (*ḥālun gharīb*)” overcame him, his breasts became smaller and he had to sleep a lot until slowly a penis and two testicles grew. This change was finally acknowledged by his family and the governor of Damascus so that he received a man’s name.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 319f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 465.

⁸⁹ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 362ff.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 539ff.

⁹⁰ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 21; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 19f.

⁹¹ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 371f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 555-557.

There are nine cases where Ibn Kathīr highlights a report by way of a heading without using in the report itself any form of ‘*ajība*, the majority of them again concerning affairs of the Mamluk military elite. For example, Ibn Kathīr characterizes it as “a very strange incidence (*kā’ina ghariba jiddan*)”, when in the year 742, al-Manṣūr was disposed as sultan and al-Ashraf Kuçuk was appointed in his place.⁹² In the same year according to Ibn Kathīr another “very strange incidence (*kā’ina ghariba jiddan*)” occurred, namely when the emir Quṭlūbughā paid homage to al-Ashraf Kuçuk’s brother at al-Karak, instead of arresting him.⁹³ Further on, in that year Ibn Kathīr calls it “a wonder of destiny (‘*ajība min ‘ajā’ib ad-dabr*)”, when the emir Quṭlūbughā wins over the emir Altunbughā without a battle and at the end is even able to forgive him generously.⁹⁴ In the year 750 Ibn Kathīr highlights “a very astonishing, strange incident (*kā’ina ‘ajība ghariba jiddan*)” when the emir Uljaybughā, governor of Tripolis, independently attacks Damascus, killing the governor there; however, he is then attacked himself and killed.⁹⁵ Similarly highlighted by Ibn Kathīr as “a very astonishing incident (*kā’ina ‘ajība jiddan*)” is the confiscation of goods of the guild master Ibn Hilāl in 761 directly following his release from prison against a high sum of money, which the people considered to be “a tremendous misfortune (*al-muṣība al-‘azīma*)”.⁹⁶

Other reports that are highlighted in that manner deal with a special religious behavior. For example, Ibn Kathīr highlights, in the year 752, as “a very strange incident (*kā’ina ghariba jiddan*)” the conversion of a group of Jews through the efforts of a ḥanbalite judge, whereupon the Muslims rejoiced and cheered at them.⁹⁷ Ibn Kathīr calls it “a rarity among the curiosities (*nādira min al-gharā’ib*)” that in 755 a Rāfiḍite disturbed the prayer in the Umayyad mosque, cursing loudly the first who wronged Muḥammad’s family, and on inquiry by Ibn Kathīr he clearly states that he meant Abū Bakr. And even when he was imprisoned, he continued with his curse, whereupon he was condemned to death in a trial by the mālikite judge.⁹⁸ In 763 Ibn Kathīr reports that he himself had “a very strange dream (*manām gharib jiddan*)” in which he interrogated an-Nawawī about his attitude towards Ibn Ḥazm.⁹⁹

Another occurrence that is characterized as “one of the curiosities and wonders (*ghariba mina l-gharā’ib wa-‘ajība mina l-‘ajā’ib*)” deals again with a natural disaster: under this heading Ibn Kathīr reports about the flooding of the horse market at Damascus in the year 764, that was such that the place known as procession square became submerged and boatmen charged for ferry services; Ibn

⁹² Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 297f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 429.

⁹³ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 300f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 433ff.

⁹⁴ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 302f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 437ff.

⁹⁵ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 349; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 513f.

⁹⁶ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 401; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 606f.

⁹⁷ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 360; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 534.

⁹⁸ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 374; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 560f.

⁹⁹ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 427f.; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 650.

Kathir comments that “in all his born days he had not seen anything like it (*wa-lā raʾaytubū qaṭṭu fi muddati ʿumri*)”.¹⁰⁰

These examples were gathered as systematically and completely as possible from the volume on contemporary events from Ibn Kathir’s work on history in order to provide a base for our analysis on a representative number of cases, and clearly show that the notions *ʿajāʿib wa-gharāʿib* as used by Ibn Kathir cannot be equated with fantasy stories, fairy-tales, wonder reports or ‘mirabilia’ that would make Mamluk history writing ahistorical. The majority of all the presented cases deal with affairs of the Mamluk military elite, that is to say with the sort of stories that are customarily understood as belonging to what typically would be called political history. According to Ibn Kathir these strokes of fate among the Mamluk military elite made the people wonder time and again, and for that reason he deems them worthy of note in his work on history.

The examples also show that the notion of *ʿajība* can express different kinds of feelings, a positive liking, an amazing astonishment, as well as a shocking or surprising, disbelieving astonishment. It is interesting to note that Ibn Kathir talks first and foremost about people that arouse through their behavior positive or negative astonishment, admiration or wonderment. In rare cases only it is a natural catastrophe or a splendid building that prompts astonishment.

With regard to stories that would provoke the suspicion of modern scholars as belonging to the realm of fantasy, such as reports about dreams, their treatment at least by Ibn Kathir shows plainly that dreams during this period of time ‘even for a religious scholar like Ibn Kathir’ belong to the realm of reality and sometimes such dreams can be so powerful that they are deemed worthy of noting in a work on history. On the other hand we note that Ibn Kathir himself is suspicious of several forms of behavior, not only by womenfolk, but also and very explicitly relating to the old superstition concerning the belief that the sultan would die immediately if all the candles were to go out at the Umayyad mosque. As we were able to see, this kind of superstition in the eyes of Ibn Kathir is regarded as “a foolishness (*al-jabla*) based only on illusion and fantasy (*al-wahm wa-l-khayāl*)”. For such a fantasy Ibn Kathir does not employ the notion of *ʿajāʿib wa-gharāʿib*. Once again, it is evident that the notions of *ʿajāʿib wa-gharāʿib* do not refer to anything like fantastic or superstitious or legendary stories or fairy-tales. First and foremost, these notions of *ʿajāʿib wa-gharāʿib* refer to anything worthy of note due to their amazing effect. As we were able to show in the first part of this essay, according to Mamluk scholars who wrote on history writing, *ʿajāʿib wa-gharāʿib* in this sense constitutes an integral part of historical writing. Of course, as I have already remarked, all kinds of historical writing have to use literary devices, and in this sense historical writing is literature. Ibn Kathir clearly employs the notions of *ʿajāʿib wa-gharāʿib* as catch-words to highlight some events as being especially noteworthy, especially astonishing, es-

¹⁰⁰ Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 16 (ed. Marwah), 440; vol. 18 (ed. at-Turki), 673.

pecially impressive among all the other noteworthy, astonishing events. His use of headings for some of his reports indicates this function of highlighting in a very distinct form. In this sense ‘even the conservative, religious scholar’ Ibn Kathir uses the catch-words ‘*ajā’ib wa-gharā’ib*’ as a literary device in his historical narrative. However, the reports highlighted in this way are not fantasy-based ‘literary’ inventions; they form a central part of his historical writing.

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