Changing Narrativity in an Changing Society: the Dichotomy Between the "early" and the" later"lat
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Stories in Tanukhi’s "Relief After Hardship"

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An example from one of the most interesting narrative genres in medieval Arabic literature is that of "Tales With a Good Ending" or "Relief after Adversity" [al-Faraj ba‘da al-Shidda] by Abū ‘Alī al-Muḥassin al-Tanūkhī (938-995; Iraq). Born in Basra, Tanūkhī several times held the office of qādi in al-Iraq before his death in 995. Among his works - or rather, compilations - we find Nishwār al-muhādara ("Table Talks of a Mesopotamian Judge"), which is arranged in no particular order, and Al-Faraj ba‘da al-Shidda ("Relief After Adversity") which is arranged into chapters according to subjects.

The latter type of story dates back to the religious writer Ibn Abl d-Dunya (d. 894). But Tanūkhī is an improvement when compared with his predecessor, because he compiled not only simple and primitive religious stories, but also stories about contemporary officials and colleagues in office. Of course, the Faraj stories generally have a happy ending. But the beginning of the stories often provides an insight into the dangers faced by officials at court and elsewhere who were subject to the whims of the caliphs. In the urban stories of al-Tanūkhī, we learn a great deal about customs and institutions, as well as public and private life in the tenth century. In contrast with this, the stories of 1001 Nights, for instance, are imprecise, even when historical.

personalities such as Harūn al-Rashīd play a role in them; they are not related to daily reality, and refer, even deliberately, to an unrealistic world.

Francesco Gabrieli identified the difference between Tanūkhī’s “realistic urban” stories and the “unrealistic” tales of the 1001 Nights in his Storia della letteratura araba in the following manner (my translation):² “Pages of this kind, tranches de vie shown with directness and conscious realism, are abundant in the two best known books by al-Qāḍī al-Tanūkhī. [...] In this manner you are served with many appetizing anecdotes about high caliphal society, which are far more pleasant and perhaps far more authentic than the scenes portrayed in the manner of the 1001 Nights.” [...] The Nights - although already partly existing in ‘Abbasid times, with its cyclus devoted to Harūn al-Rashīd and his Baghdad surroundings - is far less colourful in its presentation of details, and contains many anachronisms such that it cannot compare with the urban stories compiled and selected by al-Tanūkhī. And he adds: “For whoever passes from the true ‘Abbasid authors of the first centuries, from al-Jāḥîẓ, al-Ṣūlī and al-Tanūkhī to the so-called ‘Abbasid tales of 1001 Nights, immediately feels the divarication between a vivid contemporary testimony and a pale stylization deprived of any documentary value and also often of modest artistic value. [...] From a literary point of view, it is certainly not a great thing, and does not elevate us above childish curiosity to more refined aesthetic desires.”

A similar dichotomy such as we have seen between the stories of 1001 Nights and Tanūkhī’s urban stories, is also to be found in Tanūkhī’s work itself. Here we can clearly see the dichotomy between the earlier stories set in a desert landscape, or religious scenes set in timeless, not too elaborate surroundings, and the urban stories of a later date which are set in the surroundings of officials and merchants. To illustrate this dichotomy, I shall give some examples of what I consider to be religious stories and wonder stories, as opposed to the urban stories I will discuss afterwards.

One of the earlier stories inspired by religion is that of an ascetic who saved a snake.⁴ Even though there are some historically based names mentioned in it, this story is not set in a very detailed, recognizable location as is the case with the stories in urban surroundings. The snake story (about a saint-snake relationship) obviously belongs to

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² Francesco Gabrieli, La letteratura araba, Milano 1967, pp. 175-176.
³ al-Shālīji, 1, no. 70.
the stories of pious men of Jewish or other monotheistic origin. It is a kind of wonder story. To quote Antonella Ghersetti: “In general terms the plot of the story is the following: a man saves a snake from death. When the animal is out of danger, it tries to kill its benefactor, who is saved by God from death. The literary sources that report this story, more or less extensively, can be placed within a period of seven centuries, and are distributed over a geographical area covering at least Egypt in the west and Isfahan in the east.”

One of the four versions of the snake story mentioned by al-Tanūkhī goes as follows: “It is said that a snake asked a pious man to give it refuge from someone who wanted to kill it. The man lifted the hem of his cloak and said to the snake, ‘Come in,’ and the snake curled itself around the man’s belly. Then another man approached with a sword and said, ‘O man, a snake I wanted to kill has escaped. Do you see it?’ The pious man replied, ‘I do not see anything’. After the man who wanted to kill it had gone away, the snake said, ‘Now I have to kill you.’ ‘Must you do it?’ asked the man. ‘Yes,’ replied the snake. So the man said, ‘Then allow me to go to the foot of the mountain and say a prayer of two rakʾāt to invoke God the Highest, and to dig myself a grave. When I return, you may do what you want to do’. The snake said he could go. When the man had said his prayer and had invoked God, God said to him, ‘I have compassion for you. Take the snake and it will die in your hand, without doing you any harm.’ So the man did what God had told him, and then he went back to the foot of the mountain and devoted himself to praying to his Lord.”

The most remarkable feature of this story is that the snake compensates for good by being evil. It should be pointed out, however, that in two of the four versions (the third and the fourth) given by al-Tanūkhī, the snake gives a reason for its ungrateful behaviour. Or in the words of Antonella Ghersetti: “A new element with regard to the first two versions is the justification the snake gives for its ungratefulness: the snake is compelled by nature to repay received benefit with malignant deeds.” This element of this kind of snake story also seems to have been widespread in the Classical world. In the fourth version, this motif is further elaborated: the snake even says, ‘You know very well the ancient enmity between me and your father Adam’.

Usually, most of the wonder stories have a scheme based upon reward for good and revenge for evil, as is the case with the following story from al-Tanūkhī’s Faraj. This story does not give us a detailed picture of the surroundings in which it is set, in spite of the fact that the protagonist is a merchant from Basra who after being shipwrecked and arriving on a deserted island, saves a girl from a devil. This story looks very much like a travesty of the tale in folk literature, where the princess is
kidnapped by a dragon and subsequently liberated by a knight whose reward is to marry her.

The structuralist Claude Bremond analysed this kind of wonder story. He calls a sequence of episodes as in this story an *enchainement*. Tanūkhī’s story about the merchant who survived the shipwreck because he listened to a *hātif* (‘cry ghost’) can also be decoded into two sequences [4.22] in the first episode of the story. The merchant’s merit consists in throwing a sack containing a thousand golden coins into the sea, as ordered by the *hātif*; he is the only person who survives a subsequent shipwreck by reciting a Quranic verse communicated to him by the *hātif*, which he now uses as a kind of magic formula of redemption. On the island on which he is cast ashore after the shipwreck, he meets a girl who every seventh day is abused by a devil, without being violated. When this devil returns on the seventh day, the merchant uses the same formula which he had used to escape from the shipwreck to destroy the devil, and when he gets back to Basra he receives as a reward the hand of the girl he saved; the jewels he obtained from the castle of the devil on the island become their dowry and the capital for their marriage. He then lives a long and happy life, enjoying many children and much riches. So much for the first part of the dichotomy: the stories where pious religious tales and fairy tales are concerned.

In the second kind of story - the “urban stories” - merchants and civil servants play a considerable role. The merchants as protagonists of the stories are different from the civil servants, because they are not mentioned by name and not considered to be historical persons. We see in the “urban stories” many allusions to what may be
considered the daily reality of urban life of that period. The stories apparently identify
the reader directly with the protagonists, which is not the case in most of the tales from
1001 Nights or most fairy tales, where the reader encounters a fantastic reality. The
reader of al-Tanūkhī’s urban stories is presumed to suffer in his daily life from Fate in
much the same way as the officials and merchants do in the stories. The comfort
Tanūkhī’s book provides lies in the familiarity of the situation for the reader, as
contrasted with, for instance, the Judeo-Arabic religious comfort stories entitled Al-
Faraj ba’da al-Shidda, whose wondrous contents offer the reader a kind of moral
support, without making the pretext of painting real daily life.

We will now look at some features which characterize the realistic settings of
Tanūkhī’s stories of the second type, i.e. those dealing with the representation of
caliphs, women and merchants, as well as with the local ambience in which the stories
take place, and the logic of the actions of the protagonists of the stories. We are not
interested so much in the inner complexity of the urban stories and the development of
their plot, but in certain outer features, certain representations of urban life. This also
means that in some cases, we focus more on certain scenes in the stories than on the
stories in their totality and complexity.

1. The caliphs

Although the caliphs seems to represent in most cases the injustice of power, they
sometimes repent and regret their iniquitous and sinful actions, which means that
officials, courtiers and other persons can foster the hope or illusion that there is a way
out of the distress caused by the iniquity of Power and Fate.

The caliph al-Mahdi (775-785) plays a role in a story about the well-known poet
Abū l-‘Atahiya, who was immediately imprisoned when he ceased to make poetry. Abū l-‘Atahiya (748-826) tells us:

When I stopped saying poetry, and abandoned it, the caliph al-Mahdi ordered me to be
imprisoned in the prison of serious criminals, and I was taken from his presence
immediately to prison. When I was brought into it, I was astonished and frightened, and I
saw a spectacle which disturbed me. And I looked around for a place to take refuge and
for a kindly man to keep me company. And behold, there was a man of middle years with
good manners and clean attire, about whom there was clear indication of goodness. I went

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8 Cf. William M. Brinner, An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief after Adversity by
to him and sat with him without greeting him or asking him anything about his case, because I myself felt miserable and confused.

There I stayed disgusted, with my head bowed, and thinking about my situation. The man recited:

'I became accustomed to the touch of damage so much that I have become used to it; and it has brought me from consolation to steadfastness.

My despair at people has made me trust in God’s good deeds [which come] from I do not know where.'

I approved these two lines and felt myself blessed by them, and as my spirit came back to me, so I approached the man and said: ‘Please repeat the two lines - may God bless you’, but he answered:

‘Woe unto you Ismā’īl (and he did not call me by my kunya)! How bad are your manners, how mean your mind and your manly virtues. You entered without even greeting me as a Muslim, and you did not feel compassion for me such as one who is in trouble feels for his fellow.’

[...] Then he was summoned and I was summoned by the caliph. When we stood there, I said to him, ‘Who are you? May God bless you!’ He answered: ‘I am Ḥādir, the companion of ‘Īsā ibn Zayd.11’ So we were brought into to al-Mahdī. And when we stood before him, the caliph said to him: ‘Where is ‘Īsā ibn Zayd?’ He said: ‘How should I know where ‘Īsā ibn Zayd is? You sought him and therefore you frightened him and he fled away from you to the countryside. And you took me and imprisoned me. How can I discover the hiding place of a fugitive from you, when I am in prison?’ He said to him: ‘Where is he hidden, when did you encounter him for the last time, with whom did you meet him? [...] By God, you shall show me where he is, otherwise I will cut off your head immediately.’ He answered: ‘Do as you consider right.

This is part of the account of the story which Abū Ḥātahiyā relates in his own words. In this kind of story-telling there is no omniscient storyteller as there is in 1001 Nights; everything has to be told by someone who was part of the events himself. This is also the raison d’être of the - often somewhat weak - isnād of Tanūkhī’s stories.

After the execution of Ḥādir, Abū-l-Ḥātahiyā tells us that the caliph said to him: ‘Will you say poetry or do you wish to join him?’ The poet answers quickly: ‘No, I shall say poetry.’ Thereupon the caliph says: ‘Set him free’.

Not only the caliph’s violent behaviour, but also the caliph’s feelings of pleasure can put his subordinate in a difficult situation, as we will see in the following story.

In the story of the bādhahānī or “ventilation shaft”12, the caliph al-Muqtadir (908-

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11 Cf. al-Shālījī, I, II, 117: ‘Īsā ibn Zayd participated in the revolution against al-Manṣūr (754-758) and died 784.

932) plays a conspicuous role. A drunken supervisor of a team of men whose turn it is to dampen the canvas hangings of the apartments of the caliph’s harem wants to sleep off his drunkenness in one of the apartments, but his men forget to tell him when they leave. The arrival of women, who sweep the canvas of the apartment, makes him hide himself inside the ventilation shaft in one of the walls of the apartment. The cleaning supervisor describes the caliph’s debauchery which then takes place:

A drinking session was prepared and it did not take long before the caliph al-Muqtadir arrived with a number of slave girls. He sat down and they sat down; and when the slave girls began to sing, I heard everything. And my fear was such that my soul nearly left my body...[...]. It occurred to al-Muqtadir to attract towards himself the concubine to whom that very apartment belonged. Then the rest of the slave girls went away. The place was left deserted, and the caliph al-Muqtadir had sexual intercourse with the slave girl, while I heard all their movements and words, then they fell asleep in that very place. For me, however, there was no way to sleep even for one second, because of the fear I was suffering from.

This story is one of a pair that al-Tanükhi put together. In each story, the protagonist’s/narrator’s hair has turned grey in just one night because of his terrible fear.

Some caliphs, like al-Mansur (754-775) and al-Mu’tamid (870-892), have a dream in which they trace some injustice, and which they repair afterwards. Al-Mu’tamid, however, is so drunk that he no longer remembers what happened to him during such a night. His drinking habits are recorded by Ahmad ibn Yazid al-Muhallabi:

One night we were in the presence of al-Mu’tamid, and drunkenness came over him and he began nodding his head from drowsiness. He said: ‘No-one shall leave,’ and then slept for half an hour and when he woke up it was as if he had drunk nothing.

A few lines further on, in another version of the same story, the drinking habits and the whimsical behaviour of this caliph are described as follows:

In spite of his tolerant habits, and his extreme generosity and liberality, al-Mu’tamid was very quarrelsome with his boon companions when he was drunk. One day he craved to have his morning drink upon [a bed of] lemons, and there were brought to him a large

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13 Cf. ibidem, nos. 220 and 206.
14 Many members of the Muhallabi family were poets and courtiers at the caliph’s court.
amount, an exaggerated number, and some of them were arrayed and bundled and he drank his morning draught upon them. He gave ample honorary cloaks, presents and rewards to his boon companions that day, and he was especially generous to me, and drank copiously. And his sign that he wanted his companions to stand up and go away was that he turned himself towards an elegant little throne, and, when he then sat down leaning against it and then lifted his legs as if he wanted to mount, his companions rose up. When he wanted to sleep, he mounted it and slept. When he did not want to sleep, he withdrew his feet when we rose up, and completed his drink with some servant or woman of his family. On that day, when we had sat in his presence the whole day and a part of the night, he turned his feet to the throne at the beginning of the night, and we rose up the companions went to a room which was ordered for them and I went to a room destined for me among those rooms.

That night the caliph has a dream in which the Prophet summons him to free a prisoner who has been unjustly punished, which he does in the presence of al-Muhallabi. The next day, al-Muhallabi wants to remember the beneficence of al-Mu'tamid in his presence because he knows that the caliph likes to be reminded of his good deeds, but the caliph does not remember anything, except that he drank too much.

So much for the whims of the caliphs, who certainly had their good and their bad qualities, but the very nature of their office was such that they had to be feared. Let us now look at how women are portrayed in some of the urban stories.

2. The position of women.

In this section I want to show how women of all levels of society who play a role in Tanūkhi’s stories, have been able to develop a certain power which has to be reckoned with. There are also situations in which women are powerless, but even then a certain amount of justice is done to them.

In the story about the maiden who desecrates the graves of the nobles at Ramla, there is a conspiracy between a daughter and her mother against the father, a qādi. The daughter is harmed by a stranger, who surprises her in the graveyard outside the town, where she usually strips buried corpses of their shrouds, and cuts off her hand. The mother has put a bandage on her daughter’s arm to conceal this; she wants to prevent the discovery of her daughter’s crimes. The stranger managed to find the maiden’s

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15 Cf. al-Shālji’s notes on the tortures practiced by al- Mansūr (see note after story no. 318) and the drinking habits of the caliphs (after story no. 206).
father by following her to her house the night he arrived and marking the route with signs, so that he was able to find his way back the following morning. The father of the girl happens to be the *qādi* of the town and subsequently invites him to his home. The women do not want to appear before the stranger. The episode is told by the stranger as follows:

The *qādi* took me to his house, shut the door, and ordered a great dish which was brought. He also invited his wife. The servant said to her:

'Will you come out of your room?' But she answered: 'Say to him, how can I come out, when there is a stranger with you?' The servant came out and let him know what she had said. The judge said: 'She must come out in order to eat with us. Here is someone of whom I am not ashamed.' But she kept refusing. Then he swore on penalty of divorce that she should come out. Thereupon she came out weeping and sat down at the table with us. Then he said to her: 'And now let your daughter also come out.' She answered: 'What is this? Are you mad? What has entered into you? You dishonour me, but I am a middle-aged woman. How could you dishonour an unmarried young girl!' The judge, however, demanded on penalty of divorce that she should come out. So she came out. Then he said: 'Eat with us.' I saw a girl as beautiful as a gold coin. Never had my eyes seen a woman more beautiful than her.

This story focuses on the independent behaviour of women: at the beginning we see a female grave robber; in the middle we see a recalcitrant mother and daughter who try to cover up the grave robbery, and the fact that the daughter's hand was cut off by a stranger on one of her expeditions; and at the end - after the daughter has married the stranger to cover the shame of her crimes - we see her in her new role as wife, forcing her husband to divorce her and threatening to cut his throat with a knife.

But the will of women is not always respected. In another story a drunken Turkish soldier rapes a woman in the street and takes her home. A tailor-cum-Koran teacher in a mosque saves her by calling for prayer in the middle of the night. He thereby focuses the attention of the authorities upon the rape. He also hopes to force the soldier to let the woman go, because if she returns to her husband's house before dawn there will be no ignominy, as long as her husband does not perceive the shame; when not perceived, there is no ignominy. At the instigation of the tailor, the Turkish soldier is arrested and put to death by order of the caliph al-Mu'tadid (892-902) himself. Before the execution the caliph wonders how a soldier who had received so many gifts from him, as well as a high salary and large numbers of slave girls, could do such a
brutal thing. Here several things in relation to women are mentioned: the brutal rape, the ignominy, and the fact that the drunken Turkish soldier possessed many slave girls. In a love story, women from the entourage of caliph al-Muqtadir (908-932) are spoken about. The most interesting point is that the story enlightens us about the position of the princesses of the court and their influence on the caliph. In the end, the mother of the caliph, bearing the title sayyida, appears to be considered the mightiest woman at court, mightier even than the most prominent wife of the caliph. One of the officials has a brief love affair with a slave girl. Her mistress offers to sell her to him, but he refuses, thinking that the affair will soon end. This not being the case, he gets into trouble because in the meantime her mistress has to sell the slave girl to the caliph.

One day the girl disappeared from me, because the caliph al-Muqtadir had ordered the purchase of singing girls without my knowledge. The slave girl was handsome and an excellent singer, so she was brought to the caliph in the midst of other slave girls. He ordered that all should be bought, and she was bought amongst them.

So the lover is too late, and asks one of the caliph’s wives - the mother of the caliph's son al-Muttaqi, whose vizier he was - to intervene with the mother of al-Muqtadir, who says: “I am amazed by this man, the love which is in his heart must blind him from reason, I am even amazed at you, how did the thought come to you that anyone is allowed to ask the caliph to abandon his slave girl because of a man who loves her?”

But when the caliph finally comes to hear of his servant’s case, he sends him two slave girls, one of whom is the beloved. The caliph has heard about it from the singing slave girl herself and now shows his magnanimity.

In another love story about a merchant and a qahramāna (‘provider of the court’), it is also the sayyida (the mother of the caliph) who is portrayed as fulfilling a kind of powerful intermediary role.

3. The position of merchants
The position of merchants is depicted as uncertain because of the travelling they do, often without knowledge of where their journey will end or what dangers they will encounter en route. One of these lonely travellers arrived at Ramla at night:

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18 Ibidem, no. 468.
19 Ibidem, no. 478.
20 Ibidem, no. 362.
I arrived when the people were already asleep and night had fallen. So I turned into the graveyard where I entered beneath some of the cupolas which were there above the graves. I threw the shield which I had with me on the ground and laid my back on it and embraced my sword and lay down to sleep so that I could enter the town next day.

Travel is central in the stories of many merchants: sometimes there are robbers, or even officials such as the sāhib al-barid, who deprive them of their property, confiscate their camels, or arrest them in the place of thieves and robbers who have fled. Sometimes they end up in a khān (a kind of hotel) in which they have to be alert for all kinds of crimes. Sometimes they arrive at a major fountain or well on the outskirts of a town where many people are around.

4. Description of places
As far as places are concerned, we often find realistic detailed descriptions of the functions of palaces or mosques. We are told how the palace is provided with goods; how the mosque can be a place of learning, but also a place where people can find a grave digger and hire a bier for a funeral procession. At several points we find toilet pits, in which people can throw heads that have been cut off, and which have to be got rid of; bathhouses in whose ovens a man can take nightly refuge, because the fires have not yet been lit; graveyards whose cupolas are there to offer refuge to at night. We learn a lot about town life, e.g. the role of the night watch, whom ordinary people fear a lot. This depicting of the environment is what Gabrieli so appreciated in Tanūkhī’s stories and what made him prefer them to the stories of 1001 Nights.

5. Logic of action.
Throughout the whole collection of Tanūkhī there are descriptions of sins and the lack of shame of the people who are affected by the consequences of these sins, such as

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21 Cf. ibidem, no. 206.
22 Cf. ibidem, no. 413.
23 Cf. ibidem, no. 269.
24 Cf. ibidem, no. 478.
25 Cf. ibidem, no. 249.
26 Cf. ibidem, no. 269.
27 Cf. ibidem, no. 268.
28 Cf. ibidem, no. 269.
29 Cf. ibidem, no. 362.
30 Cf. ibidem, nos. 250 and 269.

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killings as a result of drunkenness or homosexuality (which was considered a sin in the Arabic Middle Ages). We should not forget that torture, murder, debauchery and intoxication were favourite sins with certain caliphs. We are also struck by the shameless logic of action as presented in Tanūkhi’s stories. If confronted with someone’s sudden death, flight is often the immediate option31: “The knife fell into the heart of the young boy who died on the spot. So we arose in order to flee. But the lord of the house said: ‘This is not very brave behaviour!’”.

Or in another story:32

He planted the knife in his heart and held back his mouth; the man tried to resist, but perished. [The killer] took his young boy, opened the door, and went away. This was a difficult case for me [as a witness]. I said to myself: ‘I am a stranger, if the lord of the house wakes up, and he does not know me, he will not doubt that I committed the crime and I will be killed.’ I left my luggage, took my mantle, looked for the door, [went out], and kept walking without knowing where to go, since it was midnight and I feared the nightwatch.

In the same story the same person is witness to several other deaths. When he takes refuge in the oven of a hammâm, he is witness to a lady being killed by a man. “[The killer] left her [body] and went away. I saw the glitter of the silver anklets on her feet, took them from her, and went away.” For our protagonist it is apparently quite normal immediately to take away the ornaments of a dead lady he is suddenly confronted with. Tanūkhi does not explain the protagonist’s motives; apparently these actions followed on normally from the situation.

6. Conclusions
In Tanūkhi’s later urban stories, many details are given about daily life in early 'Abbasid times. The stories of this kind have to sound probable to the ears of the listeners. Here, there is no omniscient narrator. Ultimately these stories should be told by the men who actually participated in them. The reality of the urban stories are in clear contrast with the early stories of the religious genre or the orally transmitted wondrous stories of 1001 Nights, which were considered improbable and are not taken seriously by such Arab men of letters as Ibn Nadim33 and such modern scholars as Gabrieli.

31 Cf. ibidem, no. 268.
32 Cf. ibidem, no. 269.
Today one does not like to think in terms of hierarchies, and so the more primitive religious stories and the orally transmitted genres are taken as seriously as Tanūkhi’s urban stories. As far as the urban stories are concerned, it seems me useful to collect all these small, descriptive fragments of realia in order to provide us with us realistic pictures of daily life in the middle ages, particularly as these stories were intended by their narrators to be realistic, and were seen as representing reality by their original readers.

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SUMMARY

This article deals with the difference between “earlier” and “later” stories in Tanūkhi’s Relief after Adversity. Some features which characterize the realistic settings of Tanūkhi’s stories of the second type are discussed such as those dealing with the representation of caliphs, women and merchants, as well as with the local ambience in which the stories take place, and the logic of the actions of the protagonists of the stories.