A handful of red earth: dreams of rulers in Tabari's history of prophets and kings

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A Handful of Red Earth

A l-Mahdī’s dream of the flowering staff that foretells Hārūn’s greatness is included in the obituary entry of Mūsā al-Hādī, the very last entry before the start of the regnal chapter devoted to the caliphate of Hārūn al-Rashīd. At the end of that regnal chapter, in Hārūn’s own obituary entry, we find another dream, but this one predicts Hārūn’s demise. This dream is included in a khabar put in the mouth of Jibrīl b. Bukhtīshū’, the caliph’s personal physician.

Jibrīl b. Bukhtīshū’ relates the following. One morning, when he is with Hārūn at his residence al-Raqqa, the caliph tells him about a terrifying dream he has had: He was sitting on his sofa, when from under it appeared a hand and a forearm which looked strangely familiar (dhīrā’ a rifūhā wa-kaff a rifuhā la’ afhamu ʾism ṣāḥībahā). The hand was filled with red earth. Then a voice spoke: “This is the earth in which you will be buried”. “Where is this earth?” the caliph asked. “In Ẓūs” (a city in Khurasān, the eastern part of the Islamic empire). Then the voice fell silent, the hand disappeared, and Hārūn woke up. Jibrīl declares he attaches no importance to dreams, and advices the caliph to do the same. As the days go by, both the caliph and his physician forget about the dream. Hārūn decides to travel to Khurasān to deal with the rebellion there of a man called Rāfī’. On the way, however, he falls ill and they have to halt
at Ṭūs. Lying sick there, Hārūn suddenly remembers the dream. He asks his eunuch Masrūr to fetch some earth from the garden. The eunuch comes back with a handful of earth, having pulled his sleeve back from his forearm. Hārūn shouts: “By God, this is the forearm which I saw in my dream; by God, this is the very same hand; and by God, this is the red earth, you haven’t omitted anything!” Within three days, the caliph dies and is buried in the garden.1

THE PLACE OF HĀRŪN’S DREAM WITHIN THE STRUCTURE OF TABARI’S TĀRĪKH

Let us consider how Jibrīl’s report of the caliph’s dream is embedded in the larger structure of Tabari’s Tārīkh. When we analyse the place of the report on Hārūn’s dream within the structure of Tabari’s historical catalogue, we notice that it has been located at an important structural junction. The dream is embedded in the entry on Hārūn’s death, which is the final and concluding entry on Hārūn’s life and reign. This entry is Hārūn’s obituary entry, which could be said to be the most important of all the entries dealing with a caliph and his reign. It is also the last entry before a new cycle or reign begins, in Hārūn’s case the caliphate of his son al-Amīn, which will end with Amīn being murdered by his brother al-Ma’mūn.

As we can see in Table II, the dream report, khabar 193.5.1, is preceded by the words ‘In this year, Hārūn al-Rashīd died’ and the heading ‘Mentioning of the reportage on the cause of his death and the place where he died.’ Consequently, when starting to read this report, the reader already knows that Hārūn will die. This, however, is not the only announcement that prepares the reader of Tabari’s Tārīkh for Hārūn’s impending death.

When the user of Tabari’s historical catalogue reads this work as if it were a text to be read from beginning to end, that is, if he reads all the entries in the order in which they are presented in the Tārīkh, he is presented with a chronologically arranged list of events. The key events are arranged in the order in which they have happened in the world the text refers to.

Events referred to in the dream report (the caliph’s stay at al-Raqqa, his decision to travel to Khurasan when Rāfi’ starts a rebellion there, etc.) are presented to the reader in earlier entries. Hārūn’s decision to

1 Tab. III, 735-7.
travel to Khurasān, for example, is presented in the second entry of the year 192:

In this year, al-Rashīd arrived from al-Raqqa by boat at the City of Peace, intending to set out for Khurāsān and attack Rāfī.²

The sequence in which these bits of information are presented to the reader allows him to reconstruct a sequence of events which took place in the world the text refers to:

- In Khurasān, a certain Rāfī starts a rebellion against the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd;
- Hārūn decides to travel from al-Raqqa to Khurasān to deal with this rebellion;
- al-Ma'mūn asks to accompany his father Hārūn because the latter is ill;
- On the way to Khurasān, Hārūn reveals to a servant—by showing his bandaged abdomen—that his condition is fatal;
- Al-Fadl, one of Hārūn’s advisors, dies five months before Hārūn’s death, predicting that his fate is linked to that of Hārūn (khabar 193.1.1);
- Hārūn halts at Ţūs because of his illness (khabar 193.3.1);
- During his stay at Ţūs, Hārūn orders the execution of Bashīr, the brother of the rebel Rāfī (khabar 193.4.1).

These events are presented to the reader in the same order as they happened in the world the text refers to. When we come to the dream report, however, the chronological sequence of events is abandoned. The narrator Jibrīl b. Bukhtishū starts this report with the words: ‘I was with al-Rashīd in al-Raqqa’, thereby taking the reader back at least a year, to the time before Hārūn decided to travel to Khurasān and probably before he knew he was ill.

Jibrīl’s report can be divided into three parts:
1. An account of the discussion between Jibrīl and the caliph which took place on the morning after Hārūn’s dream, when he was still in his residence al-Raqqa. Compared to the preceding entry which deals with Hārūn’s execution of Bashīr at Ţūs, this is a flashback or retroversion which takes the reader back at least one year in time.
2. A shortened account of the time that has passed since Hārūn’s dream at al-Raqqa until his halting at Ţūs.
3. An account of Hārūn’s last days at Ţūs: the caliph remembers his dream and dies three days later. This third part is a chronological sequel to the event treated in the preceding entry, i.e. the execution of Bashīr.

² Tab. III, 730.
An effect of the flashback is this: it connects Rāfi’’s rebellion to the death of Ḥārūn, for this rebellion causes him to travel to Khurasān despite of his illness; his illness causes him to halt there at Tūs; Tūs was the city where Ḥārūn was destined to be buried. The flashback provides a common background to all the entries treated in between the entry on Ḥārūn’s decision to travel to Khurasān and the entry on the caliph’s dead. It suggests a retrospective causal link between a number of events from intermediate entries.

THE DISMEMBERMENT OF BASHĪR

In the analysis of the structure of Tabari’s Tārīkh 1 stated that the primary narrator of this chronicle never establishes a relation between events from different entries in an explicit way. Such a relation, however, can be suggested by the secondary narrators or the characters. Jibrīl’s flashback to Ḥārūn’s decision to travel to Khurasān, raises the suggestion that all the intermediate entries are somehow related to the entry on Ḥārūn’s death.

Moreover, secondary narrators and characters can also link information from different entries or different reports in a more explicit way. This way, Ḥārūn’s death is explicitly linked to an event from another entry (193.4), dealing with the capture of Bashīr. In this entry, the character Ḥārūn is quoted as linking his own death to the death of Bashīr: “I don’t want death to come upon me whilst two of his members remain on his body.”3 This entry immediately precedes the entry on Ḥārūn’s death and deals in fact with a battle between al-Rashīd’s general and the supporters of Rāfi’, the man who had rebelled in Khurasān. During this battle, the general captures Rāfi’’s brother Bashīr and sends him to the caliph who has halted at Tūs. This information is illustrated by a single khabar (193.4.1), told by one of the men who brought Bashīr to Ḥārūn. He relates how the captive was received by the caliph:

I was one of those who brought Rāfi’’s brother to al-Rashīd...Bashīr went into al-Rashīd’s presence, when the Caliph was lying on a bed, elevated above the ground by the length of the bone of the forearm [ażm al-dhirā].4

Ḥārūn decides to execute Bashīr in a gruesome way:

3 Tab. III, 734.
4 Tab. III, 734, my italics.
He summoned a butcher and told him, “Don’t sharpen your knives, leave them as they are, dismember this evildoer son of an evildoer and be quick about it. I don’t want death to come upon me whilst two of his members remain on his body [wa-i’dāwūn min a’dā’ī fī jismihī].” So the butcher dismembered him until he left him a pile of severed members [ḥatta jā’alahu ashlā’.]

The Caliph said, “Count up his members [a’dā’īhu].” I counted his members, and lo, there were fourteen of them...Then he [the caliph] lost consciousness.5

Not only the fact that Ḥārūn mentions his own impending death in relation to the execution of Bashīr, but also the place of these reports in the structure of the Tārīkh leads the reader to connect Ḥārūn’s death to Bashīr’s execution. As this report about Bashīr’s execution is the only and final report of the entry about Bashīr’s capture, it is immediately followed by an entry that starts with the words ‘In this year, Ḥārūn al-Rashīd died’, continues with the heading ‘Mentioning of the reportage on the cause of his death’, and then presents Jibrīl’s report about Ḥārūn’s dream. As a result, the report of Ḥārūn ordering a man to be dismembered is almost instantly followed by the report of a dream in which the caliph is haunted by a forearm and a hand which look familiar.

Another hint to the reader that the two reports should be related is the remarkable attention to certain details in the story of the execution. Firstly, there is the description of the height of Ḥārūn’s sofa: ‘elevated above the ground by the length of the bone of the forearm.’ This sarīr, Ḥārūn’s throne or sofa, is mentioned several times in the Tārīkh, but this is the only instance that its height is specified. Secondly, there is the strange wish of the caliph that the parts of the executed body be counted (as if he were afraid that during the removal of the corpse some of the severed members would be overlooked). The number of fourteen members apparently refers to the fact that if all the major joints of a human body are cut, the body is divided into fourteen pieces. These remarkable details, combined with the caliph’s expression that he does not want to die as long as there remain two members on Bashīr’s body, highlight two elements of the execution report: Ḥārūn’s sarīr and severed body parts. It are exactly these two elements which also play an essential role in the dream. In the report immediately following that of Ḥārūn’s dream (ḥabar 193.5.2), Bashīr’s execution and Ḥārūn’s death are connected once again. This report, the second report of the entry on Ḥārūn’s death, states that Jibrīl b. Bukhtīshū’ī had made a mistake in the treatment of al-Rashīd and that the caliph had therefore

5 Tab. III, 734-5.
decided ‘to put Jibrîl to death and have his limbs dismembered just as he had Râfî’s brother dismembered.’ Jibrîl only escapes this terrible end because he asks the caliph for one day respite, and that night the caliph dies.\footnote{Tab. III, 737.}

We know from at least one of the Târîkh’s medieval readers that he interpreted these hints and linked the execution of Bashîr to Hârûn’s demise. In 352/963, some forty years after Tabari’s death in 310/923, his Târîkh was translated into Persian by Bal’amî. This translation is a free adaptation of Tabari’s work. Bal’amî omits Hârûn’s dream and moves immediately from the execution of Bashîr to Hârûn’s death: ‘On le coupait ensuite, en présence de Haroun, en quatorze morceaux. Haroun mourut dix jours après cette execution.’\footnote{Bel’ami, Chronique de Abou-Djasfar-Mo‘hammed-ben-Djasir-ben-Yezid Tabari, traduite sur la version persane d’Abou-Ali Mo‘hammed Bel’ami, d’après les manuscrits de Paris, de Londres et de Canterbury, par M. Hermann Zotenberg (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1958), IV, p. 477.}

Moreover, the motif of a ruler being haunted in dreams by images of the last victim he had ordered to be executed, also appears elsewhere in Tabari’s chronicle. When the cruel governor al-Ḥajjâj decapitates the pious Koran reader and traditionist Sa‘îd b. Jubayr, as punishment for the latter’s rebelling against the tyrannical Umayyad caliphs, al-Ḥajjâj is haunted in his dreams by visions of his victim. Just like Hârûn, al-Ḥajjâj dies within so many days after this execution.\footnote{Tab. II, 1265.}

In conclusion we can say that the reader is given five hints to link the report of Hârûn’s dream and death to the report of Bashîr’s execution. That medieval readers were likely to pick up these hints is shown by the example of Tabari’s Persian translator. The five hints are the following:

1) the flashback to the time Hârûn was still at al-Raqqâ raises the suggestion that all intermediate events are somehow related to Hârûn’s death;
2) the character Hârûn explicitly links his death to that of Bashîr;
3) the two reports immediately follow each other;
4) in the execution report two elements are highlighted which also play a prominent role in the dream: severed members in connection with Hârûn’s sarîr;
5) in a third report immediately following the dream report, an anonymous secondary narrator explicitly links Hârûn’s death once more to Bashîr’s execution.
Why would Tabari want his readers to connect these two entries? Indirectly connecting different entries is Tabari’s way to show that the events treated in his chronicle are not random, meaningless and unrelated events, which just happened to take place in the same year, but that they are steps in the unfolding of History, steps of God’s plan with mankind.

THE ARCHANGEL GABRIEL SHOWS THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD
A HANDFUL OF RED EARTH

A connection between the report on Hārūn’s dream of red earth and the report on Bashīr’s execution does not explain all details of the dream report. Several questions are left unanswered: Why does the forearm with the hand hold red earth? Why is Hārūn buried in earth that is red?

A handful of red earth (kaфф fihā turba hāmrā’) is not mentioned elsewhere in Tabari’s chronicle, but it could be a reference to a report contained in another text that was well known to Tabari’s readers. To find such a report, however, is far from easy. Some of the texts known in Tabari’s days were transmitted only orally. Of the handwritten texts, most are lost, and only some have been edited. On the other hand, reports that circulated in Tabari’s time, whether in a spoken or written version, might have found their way into later manuscripts which are known to us. However, as these reports are not dated, we can never be sure whether they really date from Tabari’s time.

Arguably, the texts that were best known to Tabari’s readers, apart from the Koran, were the hadith, the sayings of the Prophet. There is a hadith, preserved in different versions, that mentions a handful of red earth.9 According to this hadith, the Prophet Muhammad woke up crying, after being visited in his sleep by Jibrīl (the archangel Gabriel). Jibrīl had told the Prophet that his grandson al-Ĥusayn would be killed by the community of believers, and had shown him a handful of red earth: the earth of the place where al-Ĥusayn would be murdered. This hadith obviously refers to the battle of Kerbela, where Muhammad’s grandson al-Ĥusayn was killed by other Muslims, decapitated, and then buried on the spot.

In the hadith, the earth from al-Ĥusayn’s grave is probably red because of the blood of martyrs that was shed there. In one version of this hadith the colour of the earth given to Muhammad is left unspecified,

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but the Prophet says: If this earth turns to blood I’ll know my grandson has been killed. Earth, red because of the blood of a martyr, is also mentioned by the famous 12th century voyager Ibn Jubayr. When he describes the mosque of Hamza, Muhammad’s uncle, at the mountain of Uhud in Arabia, where Ḥamza was slain fighting the unbelievers, Ibn Jubayr states: ‘Around [the graves of] the martyrs is red earth (turba ḥamrā). This earth is ascribed to Ḥamza and is venerated by the people.’

The hadith about the death of al-Ḥusayn shares two elements with the report on Hārūn’s dream of red earth. In both stories figures a character named Jibril, and both reports contain the narrative motif of a dream in which a handful of red earth from a grave announces someone’s death. Apparently, the author of the report on Hārūn’s dream of red earth wants his readers to draw a parallel between Hārūn’s death and the death of the Prophet’s grandson al-Ḥusayn.

The murder of the Prophet’s grandson by other Muslims as the result of civil war (the Second Fitna) was a traumatic event in the history of the Islamic community. After Muhammad’s death and the initial success of the conquest of the Persian and Byzantine empires under the first four rightly guided caliphs, the young community of believers was not able to avoid civil war: they started fighting among themselves over their Prophet’s political and religious inheritance. This civil strife eventually led to the murdering of the Prophet’s grandson al-Ḥusayn, and to the rise to power of the Umayyads, a dynasty of caliphs who were not closely related to the Prophet and were considered by many as illegal usurpers.

After a revolution, the Umayyads were replaced by the Abbasids, who were members of the family of the Prophet as descendants of his uncle al-‘Abbās. The Abbasids claimed not only to have restored the

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house of the Prophets to its original supreme power but also to have restored the original unity of the early community of believers. Under Hārūn al-Rashīd, the fifth Abbasid caliph, the Islamic empire seemed to have reached its apogee. Hārūn, however, could not make up his mind who of his sons should succeed him, so he decided to leave the eastern province of Khurasān under the governance of his oldest son al-Ma’mūn and appointed his son al-Amīn as caliph over the rest of the empire. This situation ensued in a new civil war, which ended with a gruesome example of fratricide: the decapitation of al-Amīn by his half-brother al-Ma’mūn, who became the new caliph.

The events following Hārūn’s death are an echo of the events following the death of the Prophet. History repeats itself, and produces similar dreams. By way of a handful of red earth, the Prophet is foretold that after his death his grandson will be decapitated by another Muslim, in a civil war over the supremacy over the community of believers: the Second Fitna. Likewise, by way of a handful of red earth, Hārūn is foretold that he himself will die; a death which will lead to his son being decapitated by his half-brother, in another civil war over the supremacy over the community of believers, a war sometimes called the Fourth Fitna.

The entry on Hārūn’s death being the final entry of his reign, this was an appropriate place to point forward to what was going to happen in the following reign, and how the next caliph, al-Amīn, would come to his end.

HĀRŪN IS BURIED IN EARTH THAT LATER BECOMES
THE GRAVE OF THE EIGHTH SHI’I IMAM ʿALĪ AL-RIDĀ

But if this comparison between the civil wars after the deaths of the Prophet and Hārūn was the sole intention of the author of this report on Hārūn’s dream, why then is the similarity in their dreams only partial? Why isn’t Hārūn, like the Prophet, shown a handful of red earth from the grave of his son, but a handful of earth from his own grave? Why is it the caliph himself who will be buried in blood-red soil? Why is the place where Hārūn was buried of specific importance, as can be concluded from the heading: ‘ Mentioning of the reportage on the cause of his death and the place where he died,’ which immediately precedes the report on the caliph’s dream?

The place where al-Ḥusayn was martyred and buried (in Kerbela in Iraq) became a shrine or martyrium, a mashhād, that was visited by pilgrims and venerated especially by Shiʿi Muslims. The Shiʿites considered al-Ḥusayn to be their Imam, i.e. a spiritual leader from among the des-
cendants of ’Ali b. Abī Ṭālib, who had inherited the right to rule as well as a divine esoteric wisdom that ultimately reached back to the Prophet. Al-Ḥusayn was considered to be the third in line to have inherited such wisdom, after his brother al-Ḥasan and their father ’Ali b. Abī Ṭālib, and therefore to be the third Imam.

Surprisingly, the place where the caliph Hārūn was buried would also become a place of worship for Shi’i Muslims. Some ten years after Hārūn’s burial at Tūs, his son al-Ma’mūn visited this city in the company of his adoptive son and heir apparent ’Alī al-Riḍā. This adoptive son was not an Abbasid but one of the descendants of ’Alī b. Abī Ṭālib; the Shi’ites considered ’Alī al-Riḍā to be their eighth Imam. The adoption, however, was not accepted by the rest of the Abbasid family. When passing at Tūs with al-Ma’mūn, ’Alī suddenly died, and was buried next to his (adoptive) grandfather Hārūn. Some said ’Alī died after eating too many grapes, others rumoured he had been murdered, apparently on the orders of his adoptive brother al-Ma’mūn. Whether or not he died a violent death, ’Alī al-Riḍā’s grave also became a martyrdom that was visited by Shi’i pilgrims. As a mashhad almost as important as that of al-Ḥusayn in Kerbelah, the place of ’Alī al-Riḍā’s grave became the centre of an entire city known as Meshhed, which would later become the new capital of Khurasān. 12

With this knowledge in mind, we can see Hārūn’s dream of red earth in a different light. Red earth apparently stands for the blood-drenched earth from the grave of martyrs. In his dream, Hārūn is foretold that the place where he will be buried will later become the place of a mashhad; he will be buried in red, that is ‘venerated’ ground.

FRATRICIDE AND CIVIL WAR

Hārūn al-Rashīd’s dream of red earth is part of an entry that begins with the words of the primary narrator: ‘In this year Hārūn al-Rashīd died.’ Accordingly, the reader immediately knows that the caliph will die. After this announcement a secondary narrator is introduced, the caliph’s physician, who reports a dream the caliph has had. As the caliph had this dream a considerable time before his death, the report of the dream is a flashback. The flashback has the effect of suggesting a relation between the death of the caliph and events in the past. The relation is strengthened by emphasizing certain details of the dream.

These details are, in the first place, the caliph’s sofa and severed body parts. Both the sofa and body parts occur in an entry in which the story is told of a brutal execution on the orders of the caliph. This entry just precedes the entry in which the death of the caliph is presented. In this way a connection is suggested: the death of the caliph might have been a punishment for the cruel way he had someone executed.

Other details, such as a hand with red earth and the prediction that the caliph will be buried in red earth, do not occur in this story of an execution. However, they can be related to other elements.

As regards the hand with red earth I point out the following: in a story that does not occur in the Tārīkh, but that the readers were likely to have known, it is told that the Prophet Mohammed dreamt that his grandson was murdered—on red earth. As in the caliph’s dream red earth is mentioned as a foreboding of his death, it is not said explicitly that the caliph’s situation is similar to that of the Prophet, but the reader is offered the possibility to make this connection.

Finally there is the prediction that the caliph will be buried in red earth. This can be related to the fact that the place where the Prophet’s grandson has been buried later became a place of worship. The same eventually happens with the place the caliph is buried, it becomes a martyrium as well.

Accordingly, the dream does three things:
1) it provides a (causal) connection between the death of the caliph and a previous cruel execution;
2) it compares the caliph with the Prophet;
3) it indicates that the place in which the caliph is buried later becomes a place of worship.

By using a dream, Tabari is able to compare an Abbasid caliph to the prophet Muhammad while at the same time casting that caliph as a modern equivalent to a biblical tyrant, who is punished for his cruelty towards the innocent. By way of a single dream, Tabari highlights both sides of Hārūn’s ambiguous character: prophet and tyrant in one.

The motif ‘death foretold by a handful of red earth’ is used to link the death of Hārūn to the murder of the Prophet’s grandson. This link serves to compare the tragedy that befell the Prophet (as a result of civil war, his grandson al-Husayn was decapitated by fellow Muslims) with the tragedy that befell Hārūn (as a result of civil war, his son al-Amīn was decapitated by his own brother).

The motif ‘buried in red earth’ strengthens this link with the murder and burial of the Prophet’s grandson, but also provides a new link, to
the murder and burial of Hārūn’s adoptive grandson, ‘Alī al-Riḍā. This second link serves to compare the tragedy that befell the Prophet (his grandson was murdered by fellow Muslims so his grave became a shrine) with a second tragedy that befell Hārūn (his grandson ‘Alī al-Riḍā was murdered by his own brother so his grave became a shrine as well).

Thus, the motif ‘red earth’ is used to highlight the themes of fratricide, civil war, Muslims killing Muslims, and shedding the sacred blood of the descendants of the Prophets. These themes not only apply to the civil war between al-Ma’mūn and al-Amīn, but also to the competition between Hārūn and Müsā. In these power struggles, the members of the Abbasid family are victims as well as perpetrators, murderous tyrants as well as oppressed innocents: brothers who shed the sacred blood of their own kin.

By using a single dream, Tabari places Hārūn’s ambiguous character against the background of the Abbasid family’s internal struggle. What has happened to Hārūn, who had been an underdog redeemer but also a cruel tyrant and who had been oppressed by his own brother but also murdered his own brother, will happen to his children.

By motif repetition and juxtaposition of akhbār, Tabari is able to indirectly pass judgment on the characters of his Tārīkh.