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

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THREE TRAGIC RULERS

In this chapter, I will argue that Tabari not only uses dreams to indirectly pass judgment on his characters, but also to add suspense, irony and tragedy to the presentation of events in his Tārīkh.¹ That dreams can have such a function in Arabic literature, is argued by Giovanni Canova, in a study on their role in the Arabic popular epics, where he states that dreams constitute:

...uno degli argomenti preferiti dal poeta-cantore epico (ša‘īr); egli desidera coinvolgere il suo ascoltatore con l’evocazione di un fenomeno dai contorni misteriosi e affascinanti e, al tempo stesso, si fa interprete di una radicata sensazione di impotenza davanti all’ineluttabilità del destino umano.²...

Senza il sogno, l’impatto del destino sulle vicende umane perderebbe gran parte della sua drammaticità...Il Fato non solo colpisce implacabilmente l’eroe-vittima, ma si beffa di lui, annunziandogli attraverso il sogno quale

sará la sua sorte, quasi per godere dei suoi vani sforzi per sottrarvisi. Ed è questo sordo logorio, questa folle ribellione...a portare al massimo grado la tensione epica della narrazione.\footnote{Canova, p. 112.}

[...one of the preferred topics of the epic poet-singer: he wants to get his audience involved by way of the evocation of a mysterious and fascinating phenomenon, and, at the same time, he gives voice to a deep-rooted feeling of impotence vis-à-vis the unavoidability of human destiny.

Without the dream, the impact of destiny on human life loses a large part of its drama. Fate not only implacably strikes the hero-victim, but also tricks him, announcing him by way of the dream what his destiny will be, almost in order to get pleasure from his vain efforts to save himself from it. And it is this deaf attrition, this crazy rebellion, which brings to its highest degree the epic tension of the narrative.\footnote{See also Shoshan, pp. 75-6.}]

One could object that Canova’s remarks on the function of dreams in the popular epics do not apply to Tabari’s chronicle, as these epics are narrative texts in the full sense of the word, while Tabari’s Tārīkh does not appear as such a continuous narrative. As we argued in chapter two, Tabari’s text seems to be nothing more than a chronological list of fragments of works by others, a list of parts which do not make up a meaningful whole that constitutes a complete narrative. Here I will argue, however, that although the Tārīkh might have the outward appearance of a dry list of events, it contains elements which are generally associated with full narrative, such as suspense and tragedy. After a definition of these terms, I will analyse the two previous dreams by al-Mahdī and Hārūn al-Rashīd from this perspective, and compare them with a third dream by al-Amīn.

**Foreshadowing, Dramatic Irony and Tragedy**

Suspense is created when there is a difference in knowledge between reader, narrator and characters. The most common form of suspense is when the reader wonders: what will happen next? To maintain the reader’s interest in this question and to gradually build up suspense, the narrator can drop subtle hints that suggest what might possibly happen later in the story, a process which is called foreshadowing.\footnote{Canova, p. 112.}

In the case of predictions such as predictive dreams, both reader and character are given a hint of what might happen later. Such a prediction raises the following questions:

-What does the prediction mean (if it is encoded and needs interpretation)?
- Will it come true? Is it false? Should one believe in predictions at all? If it should be believed, can this predicted future be avoided, or is it inescapable?
- How will the character react to these questions? Will he believe and understand the prediction? Will he accept his destiny or try to escape it?

Such a prediction, and all the questions which are raised by it, start an arch of suspense that ends when the prediction is fulfilled and these questions are answered. When the prediction is given in a dream, an additional element of foreshadowing may occur. In the case of most predictions, the omen is a pattern, for example a certain constellation of heavenly bodies in the case of astrology, or a pattern in the flight of birds in the case of ornithomancy. The relation between this specific pattern and its meaning is, in general, random, just like the relation between words and their meanings in language: these meaning have to be learned and are only known to the skilled interpreter.

In the case of dreams, however, the omen is made up of a series of images. In classical Arabic narrative, the relation between these images and their meaning is not random but metaphorical: dream image and meaning share a comparable element. The fact that the dream images are metaphors means that they contain a hint as to their interpretation. Even the reader unskilled in dream interpretation can try his hand at suggesting possible interpretations. According to Canova, this intensifies the reader’s involvement in the story.

Il significato di questi sogni è relativamente trasparente. Questo è dovuto forse al desiderio del poeta di suscitare curiosità e partecipazione nell’ascoltatore (o nel lettore), stimolandolo a tentare un’interpretazione prima di illustrare e far conoscere il risultato della divinazione.1 [The meaning of these dreams is relatively transparent. This is perhaps due to the wish of the poet to incite curiosity and participation in the listener (or reader), by stimulating him to try to interpret them himself, before the poet divulges the explanation by the official interpreter.]

One could say that the dream’s images, being metaphors, constitute a foreshadowing of their own interpretation.

A specific type of suspense is created through dramatic irony: when the reader knows more than the character. In the case of predictions, dramatic irony occurs when the reader understands the prediction better than the character, or when the reader knows already how things will end and how the prediction will come true.

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1 Canova, p. 118.
It is hard to give an exact definition of ‘tragedy’, as the meaning of this concept has changed several times over the ages. We can list here a number of elements that are seen to contribute to the tragic aspect of a story:

1. The hero is a ruler who meets his downfall: he dies or otherwise loses his elevated position.
2. This end is not completely deserved: the hero is not an evil tyrant but a noble character, who has, however, a tragic flaw, which prevents him from understanding the truth, or which leads him to take wrong actions.
3. At a point in the story, anagnorisis occurs, a ‘moment of truth’. The hero recognizes the true identity of another character, and/or recognizes his own tragic flaw that had prevented him from seeing the truth earlier.
4. The hero’s destiny, his downfall, is inescapable. Everything he does to escape it is in vain. The actions he takes to escape or postpone his destiny in fact accelerate his ruin.

With these definitions of foreshadowing, dramatic irony, and tragedy in mind, I will now analyse three dreams dealing with the decease of the caliphs al-Hādī, al-Rashīd and al-Amīn, found in three consecutive obituary entries from the Tārīkh. As these obituary entries each open with the heading ‘In this year, the caliph X died’, the reader knows from the start that the hero will die, but remains, for the moment, unaware of the exact circumstances of the caliph’s death or of his succession.

AL-MAHĪ DREAMS OF TWO STAFFS THAT GROW LEAVES

At a certain moment in the story of the confrontation between Mūsā al-Hādī and Hārūn, the reader is told their father al-Mahdī had dreamt that the staff of power he gave to Hārūn grew more leaves than the staff he had given to his son Mūsā. The official oneirocritic who is summoned explains this to mean that Hārūn will rule longer than his older brother Mūsā.

The attentive reader understands here that the oneirocritic’s interpretation is incomplete. As the word used for staff, qaḍīḥ, also means branch, the reader understands that Hārūn’s branch of the Abbasid

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6 On anagnorisis in Arabic literature see the works by Philip Kennedy.
7 See also Vogt, pp. 272-3.
family tree will bear more fruit. This is a hint that Hārūn will not only rule longer than his older brother, but that he will also be the progenitor of all the following caliphs.

At the moment the reader is told the contents of al-Mahdī’s dream, he realizes that Mūsā had known all along that he was doomed from the outset, that his rule would be cut short and that the caliphate would not remain among his own children. The reader realizes that Mūsā had tried frantically to prevent his father’s dream from coming true and to escape his destiny. However, the actions Mūsā has undertaken to prevent this dream from coming true—obliterating Hārūn from the succession arrangements and transmitting the caliphate directly to his own son Ja’far—only accelerate the fulfilment of his destiny, as it are these actions against Hārūn and in favour of Ja’far, that force Hārūn’s advocates to kill Mūsā.

At the moment the reader knows the contents of al-Mahdī’s dream, the irony of an earlier remark by Mūsā becomes apparent. Mūsā had told his brother that their father’s dream coming true was as likely as the possibility that the branches of the tragacanth bush could be stripped of all their thousands of spiny little leaves.

“Oh Hārūn, it appears to me that you are dwelling to lengthily on the fulfilment of the dream...but before that can come to pass, you will have to strip the spiny leaves from the tragacanth bush’s branches!”

In this expression, the leaves of the tragacanth symbolise the impossibility of Hārūn becoming caliph, whereas in the dream leaves symbolise exactly the opposite: Hārūn becoming caliph as well as his descendants. Expanding on this argument, it is possible to suggest that ‘stripping the branches of the tragacanth’ is exactly what Hārūn does: by stripping Mūsā’s branch of its leaves (having Mūsā killed, preventing Ja’far b. Mūsā from becoming caliph), Hārūn himself attains the caliphate.

At the end of this khabar, the reader is told that al-Hādī died, and that he was, in fact, succeeded not by his son Ja’far b. Mūsā, but by his brother Hārūn. Later in the chronicle, the reader learns that Hārūn ruled for thirteen years as ‘al-Rashīd’, and that the caliphate remained in his line of the family. Al-Rashīd was succeeded by his three sons al-Amin, al-Ma’mūn, and al-Mu’tasim. From the loins of this third son would spring all the later Abbasid caliphs.

\(^{8}\) Tab. III, 576.
AL-RASHĪD DREAMS OF A HANDFUL OF RED EARTH

At the moment the reader of Tabari’s Ṭārīkh is presented with Hārūn al-Rashīd’s obituary entry, he already knows that the caliph has travelled to Khurasān and caught an illness that became so serious that he had to halt at the city of Tūs. When the reader is taken back by Jibrīl b. Bukhtīshū’ī to the time the caliph was still at al-Raqqa, and learns that Hārūn had already been told then and there in a dream that he would be buried at Tūs, this results in dramatic irony: the reader knows more than the characters. Contrary to Hārūn and Jibrīl, the reader understands that Hārūn’s dream is a true dream and that Jibrīl’s suggestion that dreams are meaningless is wildly off the hook. To the reader, the fact that Jibrīl advises Hārūn to forget this dream ‘lest worrying about it should make him ill’, becomes highly ironic.

The moment when Hārūn, lying sick at Tūs, does remember his dream, recognizes the hand he had seen in it as belonging to his own eunuch, and when he understands the full impact of the prediction, is an example of anagnorisis in the full sense of the word. The hero not only recognizes the true identity of a person—he realizes now that the familiar arm from his dream was the arm of somebody who had been in his company all along—but he also understands the nature of his own tragic flaw: not having paid attention to his dream.

At the same time that the character understands he has allowed himself to be led in the wrong direction, the reader understands he has been led in the wrong direction as well. Because most dreams in Tabari’s chronicle that contain fantastic imagery later appear to have a symbolical meaning, the reader is likely to search for a symbolical interpretation of the strange image of the handful of red earth. In this case, however, such a search is in vain. When confronted with its fulfilment, the reader understands that this dream was not symbolical, but literal: exactly what was shown in the dream later happened in reality.

Moreover, such literal fulfilment was seen as a sign of the truthfulness of dreams that could convince even the most stubborn of sceptics. This is shown by the following anecdote: Like Hārūn’s physician, the caliph al-Maʾmūn used to think that all dreams were nonsense. One day, however, he dreamt something that later took place in exactly the same fashion in reality. From that day on, al-Maʾmūn no longer doubted the truth of dreams.9 The literal fulfilment of Hārūn’s dream is therefore an

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9 Bayhaqī, al-Maḥāsīn wa-l-masāʾīl, ed. F. Schwally (Giesen, 1902), p. 343; also quoted by Fahd, pp. 354-55, and El-Hibri, p. 110, n. 42.
additional, unquestionable token of its truthfulness: another rebuke of the physician’s bad advice and Hārūn’s bad judgement in accepting it.

At the same time, Hārūn’s dream resembles Muhammad’s dream of red earth, which dealt with the murder and decapitation of his grandson. By way of this resemblance, Hārūn’s dream foreshadows events treated in later entries: the civil war between Hārūn’s two sons that would break out after the caliph’s death and would result in the decapitation of Hārūn’s son al-Amīn by his own brother. Just as al-Mahdī’s dream not only foreshadows what will happen after al-Hādī’s death but also foretells what will happen after al-Raschīd’s death, so al-Raschīd’s dream not only predicts where he himself will die, but also foreshadows how the next caliph al-Amīn will die.

**AL-AMĪN DREAMS HIS HAT FALLS OFF**

Hārūn, who wanted to prevent his sons from quarrelling about the succession as he himself had quarrelled with his brother Mūsā, had decided to divide the empire between his two sons. Hārūn appointed his son by a free Arab Hashimite woman as caliph in Baghdād, where this son ruled as ‘al-Amīn’. Al-Amīn’s older half-brother, ‘Abdallāh, who was Hārūn’s son by a Persian slave woman and who would later become known as al-Ma’amūn, was appointed as ruler over Khurāsān.

These arrangements, however, were in vain, for after Hārūn’s death a full-scale civil war broke out between the two sons. Al-Amīn was besieged in Baghdād by the generals of his brother, Ṭāhir and Harthama. The Abbasid capital was bombarded with siege engines, until al-Amīn was not able to defend his position anymore. In al-Amīn’s obituary entry, we are presented with a report told by the son of one of al-Amīn’s advisors, who had been accompanying his father and thus witnessed the caliph’s last days. This eyewitness tells us that al-Amīn was advised to break through the encirclement, to escape to Syria and to raise a new army there.

When the enemy general Ṭāhir heard of this escape plan, he bribed some of al-Amīn’s advisors to convince the caliph to abandon the escape plan and to surrender himself officially to one of the two generals. Al-Amīn lets himself be convinced, upon which discussion broke out as to which general the caliph should officially surrender: Ṭāhir or Harthama. Some advisors preferred Ṭāhir, but al-Amīn said he felt uneasy

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10 See also Vogt, pp. 273-6.
11 Tabari, III, p. 913.
about Tāhir because of a dream. Al-Amīn had dreamt he was standing
on top of a very thick and high brick wall, wearing his official black
clothes and his qalansuwa, a tall conical hat. Suddenly, Tāhir started to
pound the base of the wall: al-Amīn tumbled down and his hat fell off
his head.

Al-Amīn fails to summon an interpreter and have his dream ex-
plained. This is unwise, for apparently, the caliph does not fully grasp
the meaning of the falling qalansuwa, for he only says that he feels ‘un-
easy’ about Tāhir. A well-informed reader, however, would have under-
stood that a qalansuwa falling off somebody’s head means that person
is about to die. Elsewhere in Tabari’s chronicle, this tall hat falling off
signifies impending death: Prior to the battle of Ṣifīn, Ali’s cavalry
crosses a bridge over the Euphrates. In the jostling that results, the
qalansuwas of two men fall off their heads. The men dismount to pick
them up, whereupon one recites to the other: ‘If, as is said, the augur’s
idea is true / I shall be killed shortly and so will you.’ A little while later,
both men die in battle, fighting for Ali at Ṣifīn. The caliph al-Amīn,
not as insightful as these two cavalrymen, does not grasp that his dream
predicts that he will be killed. The dream has, however, made him feel
somewhat uneasy about Tāhir, so he decides to surrender to the other
general Harthama.

After al-Amīn’s account of his dream as related by the son of his
advisor, a report by another narrator is introduced, which allows the
perspective to change from the camp of al-Amīn to that of Tāhir. This
second reporter relates that when Tāhir got the news that al-Amīn had
decided to deliver himself with his officers to Harthama, he became jea-
lous. Tāhir was apparently of the opinion that the honour of the caliph
officially surrendering to his victor, should befall him, and not his rival
Harthama. Tāhir lays an ambush. At night, Harthama sends a boat to
pick up al-Amīn. The caliph and his officers embark the ship, but Tāhir’s
men bombard it with stones. The boat sinks and al-Amīn falls over-
board, but he swims to the wrong bank of the river where he is cap-
tured, all alone and soaking wet, by Tāhir’s men who kill him and cut off
his head.

Al-Amīn’s tragic flaw consists of listening to bad advisors, failing to
have his dream interpreted, not understanding the full impact of the

12 Qalansuwas were high hats which, due to fashion, became so tall in the course of time,
that the caliph al-Musta’in decreed some fifty years after al-Amīn that they should not
exceed an official maximum height. Suyūṭī, History of the Caliphs, trans. H.S. Jarrett
13 Tabari, I, p. 3260, translation G.R. Hawting. See also Shoshan, p. 70.
dream and trying to escape his predicted destiny. His decision to surrender to Harthama in order to escape from Ṭāhir drives him directly into the latter’s arms: instead of an official surrender in the company of his officers, al-Amīn is captured all alone and executed on the spot. The tall qalansuwa falling off now proves to have been a graphic preview of his decapitation.

**Three Tragic Rulers**

Concluding, we can say that the dreams in these three obituary entries have the following effect: they turn the deaths of three Abbasid caliphs into the downfall of tragic heroes. All three caliphs die prematurely: al-Hādī, according to the rumours, is murdered at an early age; al-Rashīd dies as the result of an illness caught while travelling; and al-Amīn is decapitated. al-Hādī and al-Amīn, the two caliphs who die violent deaths, not only lose their lives but also fail to bequeath the caliphate to their own children. These Abbasid rulers, however, are not as evil as heathen tyrants, such as Pharaoh or the Umayyads, who meet their well-deserved punishment after a reign of idolatry and oppression. al-Hādī, al-Rashīd and al-Amīn have just one tragic flaw, which in all three cases comes down to the same defect: not being able to deal with the revealed truth that is exposed to them in dreams.

All three characters misunderstand the dreams that concern them.

- al-Hādī refuses to believe his father’s dream will come true;
- al-Rashīd lets himself be convinced that his dream is false and consequently forgets it;
- al-Amīn refrains from having his dream fully explained by an interpreter, and consequently does not grasp its full impact.

Moreover, all three characters fail to accept the destiny announced to them in these dreams, thereby demonstrating their failure to live up to the standards of such men as al-Ḥusayn b. Abī Ṭālib, who accepted his foretold death with almost superhuman resignation. In addition, the actions these three caliphs undertake in order to postpone, avert, or completely ignore their destiny, have opposite effects: instead of lengthening their lives, these actions shorten it and make it more miserable.

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14 See also Shoshan, p. 233 ff.
- al-Hādi’s efforts to prevent his brother from becoming caliph and to put his own son on the throne, contrary to what had been announced in the dream, force Ḥārūn and his supporters to put an end to these efforts by prematurely terminating al-Hādi’s caliphate;
- al-Rashīd lets himself be convinced that he should forget his dream lest worrying about it would make him sick, but because he has forgotten his dream, he blindly embarks on a journey during which he contracts the fatal illness that causes his demise;
- al-Amīn, by surrendering to Harthama in order to escape from being humiliated by Tāhir—as announced in his dream—provokes Tāhir’s jealousy which leads to his immediate decapitation.

Although meeting his end prematurely, the one ruler who does not die a violent death and who is able to bequeath the caliphate to his own children, is Ḥārūn al-Rashīd. It is also this caliph who is blessed with a moment of anagnorisis, where he recognizes his own tragic flaw and the full meaning of his dream.

Just as dreams are central in revealing the tragic flaws and in provoking the tragic behaviour of these characters, dreams are instrumental in creating the particular discrepancy in knowledge between reader and character that results in dramatic irony. In the case of al-Hādi and al-Amīn, the attentive reader has a more complete understanding of the dream’s meaning than the characters, and in the case of al-Rashīd, the reader knows that the caliph should not ignore and forget his dream.

- In the case of al-Hādi, the reader understands that the leaf-covered branch not only means that Ḥārūn will rule longer, but also that the caliphate will remain exclusively among the latter’s offspring;
- In the case of al-Amīn, the reader understands that the falling qalansuwa means that the caliph will be killed, and that the latter should therefore feel more than a little uneasy about Tāhir;
- In the case of al-Rashīd, the reader knows from the previous entry that the caliph will fall sick at the eastern city of Tūs. With this knowledge in mind, the reader has to watch the characters stumble in the dark and accumulate bad decision upon bad decision: from the advice to ignore the dream, lest worry-
ing about it would make the caliph sick, to the subsequent de-
cision to travel east.

In their obituary entries, meant to present a final verdict on their life,
three Abbasid caliphs are presented as tragically flawed rulers, blind to
the prophetic revelations that are bestowed on them. One might argue
that the image of the flawed behaviour of al-Hādī and al-Amin was the
result of propaganda in favour of their rivals within the dynasty itself,
i.e. propaganda in favour of their brothers al-Rashīd and al-Mā'mūn.15
Al-Rashīd himself, however, is also depicted as a ruler with all too hu-
man flaws. Propaganda, therefore, can never have been the sole pur-
pose of the reports on these caliphs. These reports were created, and
consequently selected by Tabari for his chronicle, in order to captivate
readers by the use of time-honoured literary devices: suspense, a cer-
tain amount of irony, and a strong element of tragedy.

To a superficial beholder, Tabari’s chronicle has the appearance of a
catalogue, a list of unrelated events. However, the analysis of the nar-
ratological function of the three dreams treated in this chapter, has
shown that dreams were used to surpass this list-structure, by creating
links to other entries and, more importantly, by providing them with a
background of suspense and tragedy. Dream reports are used in Tabari’s
chronicle to tell a story, as captivating and dramatic as possible.

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15 That dreams by Abbasid caliphs were originally created as propaganda material is