Artificial man and spontaneous generation in Ibn Waḥshiyya’s al-Filāḥa an-Nabatīyya

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In Jewish tradition there are several stories about the creation of an artificial man, and after the sixteenth century one of these stories became well known as the Golem of Prague. In Jewish sources also often mention the creation of a calf by different Rabbits.

The creation of an artificial man obviously has at least some Ancient pagan parallels, such as the drawing down of spirituality onto statues, yet creating an artificial man obviously differs from drawing down spirituality. Likewise, the animation of statues by various tricks, a favourite theme in Christian literature laying bare the schemes of idolators, may have contributed to the theme of the artificial man, but is again clearly distinct from the case we shall be studying, as is also the man created out of thin air by Simon

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1 In the following, I am using the word Golem for all Jewish artificial men, irrespective of whether the actual sources call them so. It should be realized that the name Golem is standardized relatively late in Jewish tradition.

2 See in general Moshe Idel: Golem, Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions On the Artificial Anthropoid. Albany 1990 (SUNY Series in Judaica), pp. 3–8. One should in this context note especially the story about Prometheus (Idel: Golem, p. 4) which, to some extent, reminds one of the creation of the first man in Jewish sources. – On the illusory raising of the dead in Mediaeval Western necromancy, see Richard Kieckhefer: Magic in the Middle Ages. Cambridge 2000, p. 158.


4 Modern stories about zombies and, e.g., Frankenstein’s monster, also differ from the creation of an artificial man as they focus on the reanimation of dead bodies. Paracelsus’ homunculus (see Gershom Scholem: “Die Vorstellung vom Golem in ihren tellurischen und magischen Beziehungen.” In: Gershom Scholem: Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik. Frankfurt am Main 1973, pp. 209–259, here p. 226, and Idel: Golem, pp. 185–186) is also too late to be considered here and may furthermore be itself dependent on Jewish tradition.

In Islamic tradition, vivifying dead bodies for a short period is almost a prerogative of Jesus. For stories about Jesus raising the dead, see Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila: Jesus, Allahin profeetta. Tutkimus islamilaisen Jesus-kuvan muotontumisesta [Jesus, the Prophet of Allah. A Study on the Formation of the Islamic Image of Jesus]. Helsinki 1998 (Suomen...
Magus. The early history of Golem is not satisfactorily known. There is, however, an interesting Arabic text which has been ignored in Golem studies, namely Ibn Wahshiyya’s (alive in 318/930) al-Filha an-Nabatiyya. The text was written in Arabic in 291 AH/904 AD and the preface claims that the book is a translation from “Ancient Syriac”. Most of the book would be translated from this Syriac original, itself a multilayered volume, with the latest layer being the redaction by a certain Quthāmā. In addition, the “translator”, Ibn Wahshiyya, adds several comments to the text in his own name. Ibn Wahshiyya’s claim that the work is a translation has been disputed, and the majority of scholars take the text as a 9th/10th-century forgery.

Whether it is a forgery or not, the text fits exactly with what we know of late paganism, and it contains information concerning pagan rites in a more detailed form than found anywhere else in Arabic texts which shows that whatever the textual tradition, the material presented in the book derives largely from real, pagan sources, whether oral or written, contemporary or ancient. The exact dating of the text and its various layers is extremely complicated. For the present, it is enough to place the text generally within the late pagan tradition. Geographically, the text is firmly fixed in the areas around Babylon or later Baghdad, and the geographical details are far too accurate to allow us any doubt as to the geographical milieu of the text.


6 In fact, the text is part of the so-called Nabatean corpus, i.e., texts purported to have been translated from “Ancient Syriac” by Ibn Wahshiyya. The text has been edited by Toufic Fahd: L’agriculture nabatéenne. Traduction en arabe attribuée à Aḥb Bakr Ahmād b. Ḥusayn al-Kasdāni connu sous le nom d’Ibn Wāshīyya (IV/Xe siècle). I–III. Damas 1993–1998. Translated by myself in a forthcoming article (“Mesopotamian National Identity in Early Arabic Sources.” In: WZKM).

7 Most of the names are unrecognizable and it seems that they are coded names, which makes it rather futile, pace Fahd, to try to connect them with similar-sounding names from, e.g., the Gnostic tradition. Only the Biblical names (e.g., Adamā, Ishithā; probably also Dawānāy = Adonay) are recognizable. The unrecognizability of the names makes their vocalization more or less conjectural; I do not in the least claim that the readings adopted here are any better than other possible readings.

8 The Golem passages belong to the purported Syriac original.

9 The editor of the text, Toufic Fahd, is the major exception to this. Fahd’s discussion of the text is, however, not critical and he seems to base his opinions merely on a firm belief.

10 I have studied the remarkable case of the cult of Tammuz in another paper (“Continuity of pagan religious traditions in tenth-century Iraq”, a paper read at the Third International Melammu Conference, Chicago, October 2000, forthcoming).
The author of the text discusses the creation of an artificial man in the context of spontaneous generation, especially on pp. 1318 ff. Belief in spontaneous generation as such was, of course, the rather widely accepted "scientific" view of the day; Aristotle readily accepts the concept of spontaneous generation and, moreover, provides examples of it in his *De Generatione Animalium*. Aristotle's examples are, of course, from the simplest forms of animal life, like oysters (763b), but the principle of spontaneous generation was a truth for Aristotelians and could easily be widened to include all generation without seed, including the creation of artificial beings.

In the *Filāba*, the author shows a strong interest in crossbreeding and grafting. In a separate chapter (beginning on p. 1312), he proceeds to discuss cases of spontaneous generation of plants, which he attributes to the effect of nature (*tabī'a*) (p. 1313). Once the principle of spontaneous generation is proven to his satisfaction, he continues (p. 1313):

That power which we call "the nature of Nature" (*tabī'a at--tabī'a*) is the effective cause (*fa'ila*) which causes spontaneous (*li-nafsībi*) growth without an origin (*ašl*). It is what we have taken on ourselves to study and to explain its manner (*kayfiyya*) so that whosoever wishes to generate (*takwīn*) a nonexistent thing may act upon it by following the traces of Nature in its action.

It is within our abilities (*quwā*) to emulate (*natasbābāb*) some of the actions of Nature, not all of them, because the gods (*al-āliha*) have given this ability to human beings (*abnā' al-bashar*) but not in excess, as this would lead them to be able to emulate Nature in all of its actions (...).

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14 Note that the names of Greek scholars, including Aristotle, are not mentioned in the *Filāba*, even though the whole work rests on Greek science. This is at least partly due to the agenda of the author or the "translator," which is to glorify the Nabateans, i.e., the rural population speaking Aramaic whose ancestors once ruled the country as Assyrians and Babylonians.

15 There are also elsewhere many brief references to spontaneous generation, crossbreeding and the generation of new plants, e.g., pp. 1070–1071, 1094, etc.

16 For the terminology of generation, see, e.g., *Filāba*, p. 1317 (tawli'd, ta'fin, takwīn).

17 Emulating nature is the basis of most magical operations described in the text. To a great extent, the magic of the *Filāba* is natural magic, based on the hidden properties of things.
The main aim of this chapter is practical; the author gives many recipes as to how the farmer may generate plants which he is lacking. As is usually the case, the recipes alternate between natural and magical ones; the author himself is aware of the clear distinction between the two categories (see, e.g., *Filāba*, pp. 1351, 1385–1386).

In all cases of generation, the author believes in the generation of something out of something else, not *ex nihilo*. On p. 1317, he clarifies this point:

It is not within human power (*qudrat bashari*) to originate (*ikhtirā*) something or to bring something into existence out of nothing (*tijād ... min al-ʿadam ilā l-wujūd*). Nay, these *takwins* and *tawlids* are cases where we add something to something else and put them together and let Nature take care of the rest (*nukballihā maʿa t-tabiʿa*) until it has had its effect on them (the ingredients) and by this the generation (*kawn*) becomes complete. The real act (*ʿamal*) in this belongs to the nature of the thing (to be generated); our part in this is (merely) joining similars or dissimilars together (…)

Up to this point, the author has concentrated on plant generation — after all, despite the enormous quantity of other materials, the work is a manual on agriculture. On p. 1318, he proceeds to discuss the generation of animals. After having briefly stated the possibility of generating animals as well, he continues with an intriguing passage (p. 1318):

The magician (as-ṣābir) ʿAnkabūthā even generated (*kawwana*) a man (*insān*) and he described in his book on generation (*tawlid*) how he generated him and what he did so that he could complete the being (*kawn*) of that man. He did admit, though, that what he generated was not a complete example of the species of man (*insān tāmm an-naw*) and that it did not speak nor understand. It was in a complete outer form (*mustawī ṣ-ṣūrā tāmmahā*) in all its limbs, yet

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18 In general, the *Filāba* is remarkably similar in tenor to the so-called *Wolfsburn handbook* (see KIECKHEFER Magic in the Middle Ages, pp. 2–3), combining magic with down-to-earth practicality.

19 Like all names in the book, this, too, seems opaque. The name is probably connected with the word “spider”, either in Aramaic or in the pseudo-Aramaic used by the “translator”; some of the plant names seem to have been construed by adding a final -ā to an Arabic name. It seems unlikely that ʿAnkabūthā can be identified with any better-known person. ʿAnkabūthā is mentioned half a dozen times in the *Filāba* (pp. 1312, 1318, 1394, 1418, 1447, 1465-1466) as an ancient magician who wrote a book on agriculture from the viewpoint of magicians (*ʿalā tāʿ as-sabara*, p. 1394) and was interested in astral magic (pp. 1418, 1465).

20 This is also a very central point in most Jewish stories concerning the creation of an artificial being, see, e.g., SCHOLEM: *Die Vorstellung vom Golem*, pp. 246–247. We do, however, find occasional references to speaking Golems, see, e.g., SCHOLEM: *Die Vorstellung vom Golem*, pp. 233, and IDEL: *Golem*, pp. 64, 67. The inability to speak is connected with a lack of higher mental faculties (*nesbamah, ruḥāb*) in contrast to simple vitality (*biyyūth*), see SCHOLEM: *Die Vorstellung vom Golem*, pp. 246–249.
it was like a perplexed and dazed (man) (ka-l-hāʾir ad-dabish) who neither spoke nor understood.

This is because the generation (takwīn) of animals and especially human beings from among animals is much more difficult than the generation of plants, because the one who generates them (i.e., animals or men) must exert himself in an action which we only partially grasp and the major part of which we do not grasp. This is why we (usually) are not able to generate animals and especially human beings and we are not able to do with them what we can do with plants.

‘Ankabūtā acquired the (recipe for) generating a man from the book of the Secrets of the Sun (Asrār ash-Shams) in which Aṣqūlūbiyā, the messenger of the Sun, had mentioned how the Sun had generated the Generated Man (al-insān al-kawni) who was not born (mawlūd) according to the normal pattern (‘al-l-āda al-jāriya).

The name is one of the few non-Biblical names which one might consider recognizable. Asklepios was a popular god in late paganism (see, e.g., Trombley: Hellenic Religion and Christianization, I: 290, 308, and passim) and it is within the realms of possibility that his name lies behind, the admittedly rather corrupt, form ‘SQWLWBY’. On p. 1483, moreover, ‘SQWLWBYN’, the messenger of the Sun is mentioned as a great doctor whose medicines never fail to work, which would speak for his identification with Asklepios.

Otherwise, there also seems to be a trend to demote pagan gods to wise and ancient human beings in the Filāba. We find a similar case in the stories of Tammūz and Yabūshādh (discussed by me in Continuity of pagan religious traditions) and, even more prominently, in Dāwānāy, the Lord of Mankind (sayyid al-bashar), who is explicitly dated to an earlier period than Ādāmā and his son Ishīthā. This would make it possible to identify him with Ādānāy, building a nice series Dāwānāy – Ādāmā – Ishīthā, which coincides with Biblical history. – For the vacillation between gods and philosophers in the Hermetic corpus, see also Kieckhefer: Magic in the Middle Ages, p. 26. Cf. also the Christian demonizing of pagan gods to daîmones – with the obvious difference that for Christians these were evil powers.

On the other hand, the wildly corrupted parallel forms QWLWSWSh (p. 992) and SQWRÝTH (p. 187), both of whom are credited with the book Asrār ash-Shams (see pp. 191 and 992) and are called “the messenger of the Sun”, make one somewhat hesitant and uneasy with the identification.

On pp. 187 and 191, the book Asrār ash-Shams is described as containing al-bihyāl an-nāmūsiyya, i.e., ways of making use of the hidden natural properties of different things. Ibn Wahshiyā (speaking in Qūthāma’s voice) quotes among these recipes (bihyal) one which is of particular interest in the present context, viz. the generation (p. 190) of an animal in the form of a fish but with two wings such as those of a bat (khuffāsh), the eyes of a crayfish (sanatān) and two hands, each with five fingers.

The recipe contains several plant ingredients in a certain ratio, which are put together in a pure (muṭāshara) earthenware pot made of the black soil of Bābil. Over this, one pours four arṭal of cow’s buttermilk (makhbīd mūhammad) together with some drops of pitch (gatān). The pot is then buried and the soil above it is soaked with camel’s urine. The pot is left underground for 49 days, after which the creature is found alive in the pot. This creature is, though, left to die and its body is used for further magical preparations. – Obviously, the recipe for the generation of the artificial man would have been similar in structure to this recipe.

This, of course, would seem to mirror also the Jewish/Christian story of the Creation. In general, the Filāba exhibits strong influences from either Judaism or Christianity, but
We have read this book and have found that passage in it but we have been unable to do the same. However, 'Ankabûtä was able to do that because of his excessive dexterity in talismanic and magical operations (al-а’mal at-tilasmıyaya wa’s-sibriyya) because the way (tariq) of generating is quite similar to the way of producing talismans and magical (objects). Whosoever is able to make talismans may easily perform all kinds of tawlids and takwins.

'Ankabûtä was able to generate a man, as we have already described, that is to say that it was not able to understand, or speak, or eat, but it is said that he managed to keep him (alive) (baqa’) for one year. He attached (awsala) to his body (something) that made it survive for one year, which it did.

The text continues in the repetitive and slightly numbing way of the author, who often repeats himself. He says (p. 1318) that 'Ankabûtä added many interesting details to what was in the Secrets of the Sun, but the author refrains from repeating them. 'Ankabûtä also mentioned (p. 1318) that he had generated a goat (šā’tan min al-mi‘zā) which had come up all white but which was like the generated man: it could neither bleat nor eat, although it did open and close its eyes. In this connection, the author mentions a chapter on closing and opening eyes (bāb taghmīd al-‘ayn wa-fathīhā).

Later, says the author (pp. 1318–1319), Sabyāthä would have wanted to repeat the feat of 'Ankabûtä but the king commanded him to commit himself to making talismans because that was more beneficial for people and the generation of an artificial man was of no use — obviously, the technique of often in an intentionally distorted form. Thus, the wise man Dawānāy seems to represent Adōnāy (see the previous note), and Abraham is represented in a quite different light from his Biblical counterpart. In a Mediaeval Jewish text, quoted and translated by Idel: Golem, p. 32, Enosh likewise creates a Golem, following God’s procedures in creating Adam.

23 The speaking voice is here Qūthämä, the purported author of the last “Syriac” redaction.

24 Either 'Ankabûtä attached something to the body of the artificial man or the verb might also refer to some kind of nourishment. This is reminiscent of the highest name of God which, written on parchment, was inserted into the mouth of the Golem (see Scholem: Die Vorstellung vom Golem, pp. 236–237), or, in some versions, the word emeth was inscribed on the forehead of the Golem. Also the period of one year reminds one of the similar periodicity of the Golem; the famous Prague Golem was made lifeless each Sabbath. Golems “a rather lasting existence” (Idel: Golem, p. 60) are rare but possibly not quite non-existent in Jewish literature, see Idel: Golem, pp. 59–60. For a time-limit of 40 days, see Scholem: Die Vorstellung vom Golem, pp. 256–257 (a text dating from 1682). The talismans mentioned in various parts of the Filába are not described as containing God’s name. Thus, the reference to them does not parallel the Jewish practice.

25 For the creation of a calf by Rava and Rabbi Zeira, see Idel: Golem, p. 19; see also Scholem: Die Vorstellung vom Golem, pp. 218–219.

26 Sabyāthä is described (p. 1447) as closer to "our" (i.e., of the purported author's) time than to the time of 'Ankabûtä (this time written 'Ankabütä). Sabyāthä also postdates Adamā by a long time.
'Ankabūthā must have been less sophisticated than that of the high Rabbi Löw of Prague, who could make his Golem do his daily chores. The author adds that, according to his opinion, the king was acting according to common interests as the artificial man had been used for bewildering and startling works (li-Anna ḥādhā l-insān wa-ghayrahu min al-bayawān qad yu'mal bibā a'-mālan muhaawisatan li-n-nās mud'hisban lahum), which had been a cause of sedition (fitna). Unfortunately, the author does not clarify what he means by this. Yet this does again bring the story closer to the Golem legends.

The first to generate animals was (p. 1319) the messenger of the Sun, i.e., Asqūlūbiyā, whom the author dates before Ādamā. He also dates 'Ankabūthā himself, whom he calls the leader (imām) of the magicians (sahara) long before Ādamā (p. 1447). Here one is reminded of the Demi-urge in Gnostic myth, who created the body of Adam but was unable to make him fully alive. One wonders what Gnostic ideas might ultimately lie behind this story.

He further states (p. 1319) that, afterward, people successfully repeated the generation of both animals and plants, but then he adds a somewhat enigmatic sentence:

But do not think that any of those who claim wisdom and sagacity (al-hikam wa-l-fitān) have ever been able to do this. It has never even crossed their minds (lā khatāra lahum 'alā bāl).

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27 Cf. Scholem: Die Vorstellung vom Golem, p. 231, on the lack of any practical use of the artificial call. Scholem, though, wished to see the original Golem as a "mystische Erfahrung" (e.g., p. 239) and he accordingly minimized any function the artificial creatures could have had in real life. His comments must thus be taken critically.

28 The Golem as a magical servant appears for the first time among the German Hasidim of the Late Middle Ages, see Scholem: Die Vorstellung vom Golem, p. 253.

29 In Jewish texts, the creation of a Golem by Enosh resulted in idolatry, see Idel: Golem, p. 32–33.

30 Ādamā, on the other hand, was the first to generate plants (p. 1319). He wrote the results down in his book The Mysteries of the Moon (Asrār al-Qamar), which is preserved by the Sethians (shī'at Ishithā ibn Ādam) and others (pp. 1325–1326). For Māsā as-Sūrāni and his recension of Adam's Kitāb at-Tawlidāt, see Filāha, pp. 1333–1334.

31 The whole religious system of the work (which I shall discuss in another article) is a curious mixture of local (Hellenic or Mesopotamian) paganism with strong Biblical elements in an astrological framework. For references to the Gnostic story of the lower beings trying to create a man, see Idel: Golem, p. 30 and note 17. According to Midrash Avkin quoted and translated by Idel, Golem, p. 35, God himself made Adam first to the stage of Golem but postponed blowing a soul into him until everything else was created, thus avoiding the danger that it could be said that Adam was His companion in the work of Creation. Also according to Leviticus Rabbi, quoted and translated by Idel, Golem, p. 34, God first made Adam into a Golem before blowing a soul into him.
The text is often polemical against various subgroups, including magicians (sahara) and the Sethians (shī‘at Isbīthā), but whether this refers to either of these groups or is a veiled allusion to some other groups, like Greek philosophers, remains unclear. In any case, the “people” who successfully generated both plants and animals refers to “us”, i.e., the Nabateans (or the ancient Nabateans, qudamā‘ an-Nabat) who are, with the exception of the Copts (al-Qibt) the originators of all talismanic and magical wisdom (p. 1319).

The author (p. 1319) proceeds by repeating his assertion that the generation of animals imitates the work of Nature (innamā huwa ka-‘amal at-tabī‘a), which does not contradict the repeated assurance that ‘Ankabūthā and the others had a good knowledge of the talismanic and magical arts, as in general the magic of the text is natural magic.

The author now continues by explaining the transformations involved in generating plants and animals from other substances through natural processes, which are ultimately caused by the four primary qualities and their combinations in the four elements (tābā‘i‘, ‘anāṣir; p. 1321), i.e., they are firmly anchored to the Aristotelian Elementenlehre. Ultimately, generation (takwīn, tawlid) is a cognate of change (akh li-ma‘na naqāl al-asbā‘ ba‘dihā ilā ba‘d), which he further explains by taking up the case of the generation of wasps, scorpions, snakes and other creeping animals (p. 1322).

The author seems, however, to be somewhat on the defensive when it comes to the generation of man. He is keen to show that the generation of man is ultimately similar to the generation of plants and lower animals (p. 1322) and later (pp. 1323–1324) he mentions legendary stories concerning the spontaneous generation of men in distant lands. In the Sea of India (Bahār al-Hind), close to Ceylon (Sarandib) every spring a hand (yad) comes out of the water. This event has been reliably reported by an eyewitness for many years, the hand being each year of a different colour, which proves that the spontaneous generation each year occurs anew; the hand is not the same each time. There are also in the (same?) sea, fish which either have the shape of a woman (which is the more usual case) or a man, and the fishermen

32 One of the most interesting passages containing criticism of the Sethians is Filāḥa, p. 1338.
33 The identification of the various groups mentioned in the text is, again, very problematic and great caution should be exerted not to haphazardly identify them on the basis of superficial similarities.
34 Later, p. 1324, the author refers to the generation as happening through change and transformation (bi-l-istībāl wa-l-inqīlāb min shay‘ ilā shay‘ ākbar).
35 Note that the word used is yad, not kaff; the latter lends itself easily to a wordplay in Persian with kaf “foam” (e.g., in B. Furuzanfar [ed.]: Kulliyāt-i Shams yā Divān-i kābir. Vol. 6 [repr.] Tihrān 1363 A.H.Sh., verse 32529), which might create such a legend.
periodically catch these with their nets. This is also well known, and the bearded ones are called “the doctor of the sea” (tabib al-bahr).

In China (pp. 1323–1324), there is a mountain and a lake from where shouts may be heard in the spring. The mountain itself produces balls of clay which, when cut in half, reveal a man and a woman inside. The mountain-men are otherwise perfect, except that they do not move, or speak or feel anything. They simply fall out like dead bodies. The local people tend to take some clay from this mountain and let it putrefy (yu'āfīnūnahu) until it becomes a complete man, alive and moving. After he begins to move, the artificial man will live for a day, sometimes a little longer, sometimes a little less, after which he will “die” (yatfa, for yatfa’) instantaneously.

The author also (pp. 1322–1323) deflects any questions of disbelief because this miraculous event does not take place every day: what has not been seen, should not be rejected out of hand. When an intelligent man hears something being described which he has never seen, he should pause to consider the matter without either immediately accepting or denying the veracity of the thing described.

It may be that the story of generating an artificial man owes at least something to an extrapolation of the general theory. If plants and lower animals may be generated and if the ultimate reason for this possibility lies in the four primary qualities and the elements, then the same should be possible in the case of higher animals, including man himself, as is rather explicitly stated on p. 1322, where the author explains why it is possible to generate men, too, as well as other higher animals, such as cows, camels, donkeys and predatory animals.36

After this, the author returns to the generation of plants and reformulates several times his basic idea of the four primary qualities and the elements, these being the ultimate cause of these changes.

What is interesting is that the generation of man is not described as a magical act, despite the reference to 'Ankabūthā’s abilities as a talisman maker and magician. We are, strictly speaking, within the limits of Naturwissenschaft. In the case of generating plants, the author does make passing reference to astrology and the effects of the celestial bodies, as in the case of talismans (p. 1331). But even this stays within the limits of Naturwissenschaft, as the effects of the celestial bodies are natural and they are not invoked as deities, as they are in magical actions. They merely have an effect because of their location in the sky.

36 In his Kitāb as-Sumūm, Ibn Wahshiyya, again speaking through the purported original sources, gives a magical recipe for creating a calf, the sight of which is fatal, see HAMEEN-ANTTILA: Ibn Wahshiyya and magic, p. 44.
The stories of artificial men and animals in the work of Ibn Wahshiyya and the Rabbinic sources seem similar enough to warrant serious consideration of their possible genetic links.\(^{37}\) Whereas the dating of the Filäba is extremely problematic, its geographic setting is more than clear. The author is remarkably consistent in naming places in the area extending from around ancient Nineveh\(^{38}\) to Southern Iraq. Sûrâ, the seat of a Rabbinic academy, features prominently in the text, especially in the form of personal names (Mâsâ as-Sûrâni is the most often quoted Sûrânian name). Thus, it is clear that the book comes from an area where Jewish literary activities also took place.

The obvious similarities and the possible channel of transmission being indicated, there remains to ask in which direction might the possible influences have travelled. This, though, is not easy to answer, and it needs a brief discussion of the dating of the Filäba.

First of all, there are more than a few indications that the work might be a forgery. The ninth century was a century of 'asâbiyya, national spirit, in Iraq. By the eighth century the Iranians had asserted themselves and drawn attention to their glorious past, but now the indigenous population of Iraq and Syria did the same. Interest in the older, Hellenic civilization started to manifest itself as the Abbasid Caliphs grew interested in Greek philosophy, astrology and other, non-Islamic fields of knowledge.

Harran and its Sabians\(^{39}\) came into vogue when the translation movement\(^{40}\) took off. The work of Ibn Wahshiyya accorded all too well this new

\(^{37}\) IDEL: Golem, p. xxii, sees Golem as “one more example of the different results of the various encounters of ancient Jewish traditions and alien types of thought”. The opinion of this leading authority on the Kabbalah is worth keeping in mind when discussing the possible influences between our text and the Jewish sources, although IDEL obviously had Hellenistic sources in mind. Scholem, on the other hand, tends to see Jewish mysticism as a much more intra-Jewish phenomenon but, as later research has shown, external contacts with other Near Eastern patterns of thought should not be underestimated.

\(^{38}\) Incidentally, the author knew two cities called Nineveh, one close to Mosul (the ancient Nineveh), the other in the southern parts of Iraq, see my Mesopotamian National Identity (forthcoming).

\(^{39}\) The term Sabian is, of course, a name adopted by the pagans of Harran on account of the Qur'ânic prestige inherent in the term as well as the legal status it provided them as dâmmâs. The Harranians have lately received some long overdue attention, see, e.g., SINASI GÜNDÜZ: The Knowledge of Life. The Origins and Early History of the Mandaeans and their Relation to the Sabians of the Qur'ân and to the Harranians. Oxford 1994 (Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement 3) and TAMARA GREEN: The City of the Moon God. Religious Traditions of Harran. Leiden/New York/Köln 1992 (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World. 114).

interest. Furthermore, there is little that would speak for the existence of books like the Filāha in Syriac.\textsuperscript{41} It is also obvious that now and then the purported original contains material that hardly fits a pre-Islamic period. Few signs of translation are visible, and the text could hardly be a word-to-word translation; at most it is a paraphrase of the original. A large number of purported books are mentioned in the text, none of which can be identified with any known Syriac book. And finally, the coded names\textsuperscript{42} and other fictitious elements do not encourage a belief in the authenticity of the text. None of these elements actually say anything about the date and the original language of the text: the purported author, Qūthāmā, could equally well have coded both his name and the other names.

On the other hand, the paganism and the general picture of the society described in the book is astonishingly close to what we know from other, independent sources. Thus, e.g., Trombley (1993) paints a picture of the fifth-century Eastern Roman Empire which fits extremely well with what we know from the Filāha. Details such as an agricultural system with landed magnates living on their estates, these magnates being very much in charge of the religious affiliation of the population;\textsuperscript{43} the great awe in which magicians are held,\textsuperscript{44} and so on, would be quite plausible in, let us say, the fifth or the sixth century.

These factors would make an earlier date entirely possible, although they can also be interpreted in another way. As we know from Harrān, paganism carried on into the Islamic period and continued to thrive until at least the late ninth century. As the ancient area of the Sasanian Empire was less actively Christianized than the areas of the Eastern Roman Empire, it would only be natural that paganism lasted longer there, and there is no reason to suggest that paganism had died out when the Arabs conquered the area.\textsuperscript{45}

As the continued existence of Mandaeans shows, the Islamic government did not wipe out the earlier, local religions. The Arabs were more interested in cities than in the rural area, and there is no reason to doubt the existence of

\textsuperscript{41} In Greek and Latin we have the Geoponica and other similar books. The Syriac Geoponica (Geoponica in sermonem syriacum versorum quae supersunt. P. Lagardius edidit. 1860, repr. Osnabrück/Wiesbaden 1967) is an interesting parallel but is still a far cry from the Filāha.

\textsuperscript{42} For coded names, see also Trombley: Hellenic Religion and Christianization, I: 266.

\textsuperscript{43} Cf., e.g., Trombley: Hellenic Religion and Christianization, I: 204; II: 72, 149.

\textsuperscript{44} Cf., e.g., Trombley: Hellenic Religion and Christianization, I: 198; II: 41-42, 88.

\textsuperscript{45} A further proof of this is the description of the Tammūz cult, discussed by me in Continuity of pagan religious traditions in tenth-century Iraq (forthcoming). Note that in this passage, Ibn Wahshiyīya speaks as himself, the translator, and the passage is thus firmly anchored to the late 9\textsuperscript{th}, early 10\textsuperscript{th} century.
pagan communities in remote regions, especially as long as the pagans lay low and did not very openly practice their religion.\(^{46}\) This, in fact, is what the text says on a number of occasions. In the preface to the *Filâha*,\(^{47}\) Ibn Wahshiyâya says that the anonymous person from whom he got the original manuscripts was of the opinion that all Nabatean wisdom should be kept hidden.

Thus, I would tentatively suggest that although the book is probably not an exact translation of any one original, there is no reason to argue against the possibility that sources, both oral and written, did exist from which Ibn Wahshiyâya translated passages into Arabic.\(^{48}\)

Even so, the dating of the texts still remains rather vague, as there is no compelling reason to suggest that these sources would have been necessarily pre-Islamic (of course they may have been). It has been noted that there is no reference to Islam and the Muslims,\(^{49}\) but this hardly enables us to date the text to pre-Islamic times, since we would then merely run into a similar problem because Christians or the Zarathuštrian Persian rulers are not mentioned in the text either. It is enough to state that whoever the rulers of Iraq were at the time of the writing of the *Filâha*, the author gave them next to no attention and focussed strictly on the rural communities and the pagans. Whoever the author and whatever the date, the text clearly avoids references to rulers, except for the enigmatic and not easily decoded Kanaanites and the South Arabian kings.\(^{50}\)

\(^{46}\) Likewise, the Sufis were at the same time given considerable freedom of thought as long as they did not, like al-Hallâj, promulgate their opinions too widely and too publicly. See, e.g., GERHARD BÖWERING: “Early Sufism between persecution and heresy.” In: FREDERICK DE JONG/BERND RADTKE (eds.): Islamic Mysticism Contested. Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics. Leiden/Boston/Köln 1999 (Islamic History and Civilization, Studies and Texts, 29), pp. 45–67, here pp. 58–59. Incidentally, the opinion sometimes heard that Ibn Wahshiyâya could not have had anything to do with the Nabatean corpus because he is elsewhere called a Sufi and thus should have been a pious Muslim, is of course invalid. Being called a Sufi is hardly proof of one’s orthodoxy in the late ninth century.

\(^{47}\) Translated by me in Mesopotamian National Identity (forthcoming).

\(^{48}\) Some of the prayers preserved in *Kitâb as-Sumium* are obviously in corrupted Aramaic (and would have been called *suryânî* “Syriac” by Ibn Wahshiyâya). Moreover, the corruption is more probably the effect of the later manuscript tradition than the influence of the author himself as he seems to have been able to translate them into Arabic; his translations appear to coincide with what we might try to reconstruct from the corrupted passages.

\(^{49}\) The Kanaanites, against whom there are many polemics in the *Filâha*, have been identified as Muslims, but this is not very probable and, moreover, could as well be read as a reference to Christians, Jews or even the Hellenists from the area of the Eastern Roman Empire. Even the Mandaens might qualify, since there is much to commend the view that they, or part of them, came from across the Jordan. Thus, unless anything is more clearly proven, the equation of Kanaanites with Muslims is unwarranted.

\(^{50}\) See also TOUFIC FAHD: “Une incursion yéménite en Babylone citée dans l’Agriculture Nabatéenne.” In: TOUFIC FAHD: L’agriculture nabatéenne, III: 327–334.
The oldest passage on artificial man in Jewish literature comes from the Babylonian Talmud, where we are first told that the righteous might create a world and then that Rava did, in fact, create an artificial man whom he sent to Rabbi Zeira. The created man, however, lacked the power of speech, and, implicitly, the higher mental faculty (neshamah) and when Rabbi Zeira noticed this, he turned the Golem back into dust.

Idel (1990, pp. 29-30) argues very coherently for a Palestinian origin for this passage, yet his argumentation is not conclusive. In the light of the Filäha, the question might need serious reconsideration. Yet even if the passage did originate in Palestine, TB, Sanhedrin, fol. 65b, shows that it was well known in Talmudic times in Babylonia, too, and could thus have influenced the sources of Ibn Wahshiyya – or have been influenced by them.

Thus, the links between the Golem and the artificial man of the Filäha have to be left an open question, although one cannot ignore this text in studies of Rabbinic Judaism. With the artificial man and with many other marginal phenomena of Judaism local paganism needs to be taken into account, and the Nabatean corpus is of central importance as one of the extremely few testimonies of paganism of the era, roughly somewhere between the fifth and the late ninth century.

51 TB, Sanhedrin, fol. 65b, quoted and translated by Idel: Golem, p. 38 and note 3.
52 Idel: Golem, p. 27. Incidentally, the translation “magicians” for havrayya, against which Idel: Golem, pp. 27-28, argues in favour of “junior scholars of the Talmudic academy in Tiberias” (p. 28) would fit in well with Ibn Wahshiyya’s work. Unfortunately, though, Idel’s argumentation seems rather convincing.
53 At present I am working on an annotated translation of selected passages from the Nabatean corpus, some parts of which have already appeared as separate studies or are forthcoming, see above.
The *Khalifeh al-kholafa* of the Safavid Sufi Order

By Willem Floor, Bethesda

Introduction

It was the followers of the Safavid order who put their spiritual leader (*pir* or *morsbed-e kamel*) on the throne of Iran. Despite the order's crucial role, hardly anything is known about its organization and its ritual. That the order and its leaders played an important role in the new Safavid state is clear from the fact that the only function that was added to the array of religious offices was that of the *khalifeh al-kholafa*, the administrative head of the order. A second new religious office, that of the *molla-bashi*, signaling the victory of Imamite Shi'ism over Sufism, was added only around 1705. The creation of the former function, the subject of this study, was the result of the changed role of the spiritual leader of the Safavid order, who had become shah of Iran in 1501. The only other study discussing this official's function was published 36 years ago and focused on the conflict between the shah/morsbed and the *khalifeh al-kholafa*, Hoseinqoli Rumli, in 1576. However, as important as that conflict may have been, (and I disagree with Savory's analysis thereof), there is much more to be said about the development of the function of *khalifeh al-kholafa* and the Safavid Sufi order that was in his charge. This function existed from the beginning till the end of the Safavid regime, though with the fading of the Qezelbash rallying call and the rise of Imamite Shi'ite orthopraxis both the Safavid Sufi order and its administrative head gradually lost influence and importance, finally to disappear completely. In view of the mobilizing role of religious groups in Iran in general and of the Safavid order in particular it is of interest to have a more detailed view and better understanding than has hitherto been available of the function of the *khalifeh al-kholafa*.

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