“Will You Not Teach *ruqyat al-namla* to This (Woman) ...?": Notes on a Hadith's Historical Uncertainties and Its Role in Translations of Muḥammad

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In the course of his biographical entry for Ḥaḥṣa bt. ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. ca. 45AH/665 CE), Ibn Sa’d (d. 230/845) recounts a number of traditions. Many of these deal with her father ‘Umar’s efforts to find her a husband after she had become widowed, and aspects of her apparently rather tumultuous marriage to Muḥammad. Among the ḥadīths that Ibn Sa’d relates is the following: “... The Messenger of God visited Ḥaḥṣa, and with her was a woman—she was called al-Shifā’—performing an incantation against *namla*.¹ He said, ‘Teach it to Ḥaḥṣa.’”² Another version of this hadith appears in the *Muṣannaf* ‘Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/826) with the following wording: “... The Prophet said to a woman, ‘Will you not teach *ruqyat al-namla*³ to this (woman)’—he meant Ḥaḥṣa, his wife—‘just as you taught her writing?’”⁴

What does this tradition (henceforth, “the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition”) “mean”? It can be fairly described as both reasonably well known today, yet at the same time quite obscure. This hadith has been quoted or alluded to fairly often in conservative Sunni Muslim discourses about women’s roles since the nineteenth century CE until the present. When the point at issue in such discourses relates in some way to women’s education, it is often employed as a proof-text testifying to Ḥaḥṣa’s literacy, and the Prophet’s approval of that.⁵ In

1 On the meaning of *namla*, see below.

2 Muḥammad b. Sa’d, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, eds. Ḥamza al-Nashratī et al. (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Qayyima, n.d.), 8:95.

3 I.e. an incantation against *namla*.

4 ‘Abd al-Razzāq b. Hammām al-Ṣan‘ānī, *Al-Muṣannaf*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A‘zamī (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1970–1972), 11:16 (*Kitāb al-Jāmi‘*).

5 For the use of this tradition by the late nineteenth century Sunni scholar Shams al-Ḥaqq al-‘Azīmābādī in order to argue in favour of women being taught how to write, see Asma Sayeed, “Muslim Women’s Religious Education in Early and Classical Islam,” *Religion Compass* 5, no. 3 (2011): 96. For a recent reference to this tradition as part of a larger (theological rather than

academic historical scholarship, this tradition is sometimes treated as evidence that al-Shifā' was literate.⁶ While this situation might give the impression that the import of this hadith is quite straightforward, one does not have to delve far into either its history of interpretation or its transmission history to discover that if anything, the opposite is the case.

For example, the word "*ruqya*" denotes an incantation for healing or protection that involves reciting words over people, with or without blowing one's breath on them, and sometimes also using certain materials, such as spit, water or dust.⁷ What type of healing or other benefit that the particular type of *ruqya* known as *ruqyat al-namla* is intended to produce was, however, a matter of some debate from at least the early third/ninth century on. Also, while some versions of this hadith mention writing, others do not, which raises questions about its "original" form, as well as why the presumably oral practice of *ruqya* would at times be associated with writing.

In what follows, we will examine the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition from two main angles: Employing some typical approaches to the study of hadiths, Part I discusses this tradition's cast of characters, as well as its provenance and early transmission as presented in its *isnāds*. The question of what it might—and most likely does not—indicate about literacy in Muḥammad's community will also be briefly addressed. The results are rather inconclusive for several reasons, as we will see. Part II analyses the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition as an example of what I term the process of "imperial translations" of Muḥammad.⁸ A vital

historical) argument that in pre-modern "mainstream" Sunni Islam, women's access to religious study—including their learning to write—and teaching of others were uncontroversial from the beginning, see Muḥammad Akram Nadvi, *Al-Muḥaddithāt: The Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford and London: Interface, 2007), 54.

- 6 E.g. "Al-Shifā' ... was literate This can be inferred from the Prophet's order to her, 'Teach Ḥafṣa ...'" (Michael Lecker, "The Preservation of Muḥammad's Letters," in *People, Tribes and Society in Arabia Around the Time of Muḥammad*, ed. Michael Lecker (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2005), 6).
- 7 Abū Bakr 'Abdallāh b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. Abī Shayba, *Al-Muṣannaḡ*, eds. Ḥamad b. 'Abdallāh al-Jum'a and Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Laḥidān (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2004), 8:33, 35–36 (*Kitāb al-Ṭibb*); Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān al-Ash'ath al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, ed. Ṣidqī Muḥammad Jamīl (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1994), 3:395 (*Kitāb al-Ṭibb*). For the use of this and related methods of healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf during the early twentieth century, see Eleanor Abdella Doumato, *Getting God's Ear: Women, Islam, and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 136–146.
- 8 My thinking about this process began when I learned of Peter Brown's work on the translation of Christian saints' relics—meaning the transfer of relics from the place(s) where a given saint lived and died to sacred sites in other locales, which then become places where believers can encounter the holy person; see his *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 88–105. His analysis of this phe-

and multifaceted function of hadiths down through the centuries has been to provide imperial translations of him (and to varying extents, also of his Companions and other leading early figures). By this I mean that while they recount sayings or anecdotes which are set in first/seventh century north-west Arabia, these are also represented and utilised in such a way that these words or lived examples can be made to seem to transcend the limitations of time and space. As such, they can address later generations of believers who live under very different political, economic, social and cultural conditions which are increasingly distant from the first/seventh century north-west Arabia. This process of translation was (and still is) ongoing, and its momentum depends on various factors that are open to historical analysis.

As we will see, the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition presents an anecdote set in Medina that depicts Muḥammad providing a directive to an early Muslim female figure which can be and is made to address significantly different contexts and sets of circumstances: post-conquest Muslim imperial anxieties about identity, communal boundaries, and social as well as cosmic order. In this particular case, these anxieties are expressed through legal and theological debates during the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries and later regarding the acceptability of certain healing and protective practices. By the fourth/tenth century, they are also voiced in the use of this tradition as a proof-text in debates as to whether women should be taught how to write.

1 Part I: Key Aspects of the Content and Transmission of the *ruqyat al-namla* Tradition

1.1 *The Cast of Characters: Who Was al-Shifā'?*

In the version of the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition found in 'Abd al-Razzāq's *Muṣ-annaḡ*, both the woman who is directed by Muḥammad to teach the incantation against *namla* as well as the woman who is to be taught this appear to have been "originally" nameless. A transmitter's comment identifies the latter as Ḥaḥṣa, one of the wives of the Prophet. The version given by Ibn Sa'd states (again, in what is seemingly a transmitter's interjection) that the former woman was called "al-Shifā'," though as his biographical dictionary has entries for two dif-

nomenon led me to ask questions about the ritual, social, and theological functions of Sunni compilations of hadiths from various regions in the Muslim empire from the second/eighth to the fourth/tenth centuries. For hadiths as a type of relic of the prophet Muḥammad, see Brannon Wheeler, *Mecca and Eden: Ritual, Relics, and Territory in Islam* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 12, 75–78.

ferent women with this name, this does not clearly identify her.⁹ However, the version provided in ‘Abdallāh b. Wahb’s (d. 197/812) *Jāmi’* renders it as “the Messenger of God said to al-Shifā’ bt. ‘Abd Allāh—and she was the grandmother of Abū Bakr b. Sulaymān b. Abī Ḥathma—‘Why do you not teach this one—he meant Ḥafṣa, his wife—*ruqyat al-namla* ...?’”¹⁰ Such transmitters’ comments suggest a trend over time to render this tradition more concrete and thus memorable to audiences/readers, as well as to enhance its usefulness as a legal proof-text by giving names to its cast of characters.

While the prophet Muḥammad as well as his wife Ḥafṣa require little introduction,¹¹ the third figure, al-Shifā’, is comparatively less well-known. Nonetheless, brief entries exist for al-Shifā’ in some of the earliest biographical sources that have come down to us, as well as in a number of later medieval works. In the short biographical entry provided in Ibn Sa’d’s *Ṭabaqāt*, her paternal and maternal lineages are given, indicating that she is from the same clan as Ḥafṣa, as well as ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. It is stated that her conversion took place well before the *hijra*,¹² that she was among those women who pledged allegiance to the Prophet, and also, that she made the *hijra* to Medina. That she married Abū Ḥathma b. Ḥudhayfa and bore him a son, Sulaymān, is noted, along with her bearing another son, Abū Ḥakīm, in a different relationship.¹³ In his even briefer entry for al-Shifā’, Ibn Khayyāt (d. 240/854) only gives her name, and information about her lineage which diverges somewhat from that provided by Ibn Sa’d, but presents the same general impression of her ancestry and clan membership.¹⁴

Over time, this rather shadowy female figure seemingly acquires more solidity with respect to two aspects of her biography: (1) information that would be of particular interest to ḥadīth critics, and (2) details about her status within Muḥammad’s community following her migration to Medina. With regard to the first type of material, Ibn Ḥibbān (d. 354/965) asserts that her name was in fact Laylā¹⁵ (though some later biographical works seem doubtful about

9 I.e. al-Shifā’ bt. ‘Awf (Ibn Sa’d, *Ṭabaqāt*, 8:287), as well as al-Shifā’ bt. ‘Abdallāh (Ibn Sa’d, *Ṭabaqāt*, 8:310).

10 ‘Abdallāh b. Wahb b. Muslim al-Qurashī, *Al-Jāmi’ fi l-ḥadīth*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥasan Muḥammad Abū al-Khayr (Dammam: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1996), 2:789–790 (*Fi al-ruqya*).

11 For Ḥafṣa, see for example Ibn Sa’d, *Ṭabaqāt*, 8:91–97.

12 “*aslamat al-Shifā’a qabla l-hijra qadīm^{an}*”

13 This was with Abū Ḥathma’s brother, Marzūq b. Ḥudhayfa (Ibn Sa’d, *Ṭabaqāt*, 8:310).

14 Khalīfa b. Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1966), 2:868.

15 Abū Ḥātim Muḥammad b. Ḥibbān, *Kitāb al-thiqāt*, eds. Ibrāhīm Shams al-Dīn and Turkī Farḥān al-Muṣṭafā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1998), 1:430.

this),¹⁶ and Ibn 'Abd al-Barr (d. 463/1070) says that al-Shifā' (lit. "cure") was actually her nickname.¹⁷ None of the sources consulted for this study elect to pass on Ibn Sa'd's statement that she bore a son to Marzūq. That al-Shifā' had a married daughter can be inferred from a ḥadīth quoted by al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī (d. 405/1014) in his entry for her in his *Mustadrak*, as well as by 'Izz al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1234) in his *Usd al-ghāba*, and Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1449) in his *Iṣāba*,¹⁸ but none of these entries note this explicitly. It seems that this relative lack of interest in such details stems at least in part from the fact that neither Abū Ḥakīm (the son she reportedly had with Marzūq) nor her daughter appear to have been remembered as having related any ḥadīths from her. However, nearly all compilers note that Sulaymān b. Abī Ḥathma was her son, and from al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī onward two of her grandsons, Abū Bakr and 'Uthmān, both sons of Sulaymān from different mothers,¹⁹ are mentioned. Al-Mizzī (d. 742/1341) and Ibn Ḥajar also state that al-Shifā' had a *mawlā*,²⁰ Abū Ishāq.²¹ These men are all credited with having transmitted ḥadīths on her authority.

While Ibn Sa'd says nothing in his entry for al-Shifā' about her life post-*hijra*, biographers from the fifth/eleventh century onward generally make some statements about it. By focussing on al-Shifā's life following her migration to Medina, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr creates the impression that she was a respected and influential figure there. He describes her as a woman of sound judgment and excellence (*kānat min 'uqalā' al-nisā' wa fuḍalā'ihinna*),²² and states that the

16 'Izz al-Dīn b. al-Athīr Abū l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Jazarī, *Usd al-ghāba fī ma'rīfat al-ṣaḥāba*, eds. 'Alī Muḥammad Mu'awwiḍ et al. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2003), 7162; Aḥmad b. 'Alī b. Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Al-Iṣāba fī tamyiz al-ṣaḥāba*, eds. 'Adil Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mawjūd and 'Alī Muḥammad Mu'awwiḍ (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1995), 8:201.

17 Yūsuf b. 'Abdallāh b. Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Barr, *Al-Istī'āb fī ma'rīfat al-aṣḥāb*, eds. 'Alī Muḥammad Mu'awwiḍ and 'Adil Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mawjūd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1995), 4:423.

18 Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, *Al-Mustadrak 'alā l-Ṣaḥīḥayn*, ed. Ḥamdī al-Dimirdāsh Muḥammad (Mecca and Riyadh: Maktaba Nizār Muṣṭafā al-Bāz, 2000), 7:2463 (*Kitāb Ma'rīfat al-ṣaḥāba*); Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd*, 7162; Ibn Ḥajar, *Iṣāba* 8:202–203. See also: Abū l-Qāsim Sulaymān b. Aḥmad al-Ṭabarānī, *Mu'jam al-kabīr*, ed. Abū Muḥammad al-Asyūṭī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2007), 10:319–320.

19 Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 5:268–270.

20 I.e. an enslaved man whom she had manumitted.

21 Jamāl al-Dīn Abū l-Ḥajjāj Yūsuf al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl fī asmā' al-rijāl*, ed. Bashār 'Awwād Ma'rūf (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1992), 35:207; Aḥmad b. 'Alī b. Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, ed. Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Qādir 'Atā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1994), 12:379.

22 Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Istī'āb*, 4:423. This statement is repeated in most of the later biographical

Prophet granted her a *dār*,²³ where she lived with her son Sulaymān. He also recounts that the Prophet used to take his mid-day siesta at al-Shifā's home, and she kept a mattress and loincloth for him to use while sleeping; her children kept these relics until the later Umayyad caliph Marwān b. al-Ḥakam (d. 65/685)²⁴ confiscated them,²⁵ presumably when he was governor of Medina. Ibn 'Abd al-Barr also relates that when 'Umar was caliph, he consulted her, and occasionally put her in charge of some of the affairs of the market, i.e. apparently in Medina.²⁶ (It should be noted here that Ibn 'Abd al-Barr's entry for Sulaymān b. Abī Ḥathma also states that 'Umar put *him* in charge of the market—more on this presently.)²⁷ Al-Shifā' related hadiths,²⁸ and in Ibn 'Abd al-Barr's entry, the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition is presented as part of her biographical persona, as we will see.

What if any historical information about this female figure might these biographical representations provide? The terms used in Ibn Sa'd's entry (*aslamat ... qadīman*) denote a person who converted early on in the Meccan phase of Muḥammad's preaching.²⁹ The phrase "before the *hijra*" (*qabla l-hijra*) furthermore directs the audience/reader to avoid mistakenly classifying al-Shifā' among the majority of Meccans, who converted after the fall of Mecca once they had little choice in the matter, and there were clear social and material advantages associated with joining Muḥammad's community. Nonetheless, several well-known lists of early Muslims do not contain any reference to her.³⁰

works consulted for this study; see Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd*, 7:162; al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb*, 35:207; Ibn Ḥajar, *Isāba*, 8:201; Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Khalīl b. Ayyub al-Ṣafadī, *Kitāb al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt*, ed. Widad al-Qāḍī (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1982), 16:168.

23 For the possible meanings of this term, as well as other sources that assert this, see below.

24 For him, see Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Istī'āb*, 3:444–446.

25 Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Istī'āb*, 4:423. This also is often repeated in later works; see Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd*, 7:163; al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb*, 35:207; Ibn Ḥajar, *Isāba*, 8:201; al-Ṣafadī, *Wāfi*, 16:168.

26 "*wa rubbamā wallā-hā shay'an min amr al-sūq*" (Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Istī'āb*, 4:424). All of the later biographical sources used here state that 'Umar consulted her (Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd*, 7:162; al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb*, 35:207; Ibn Ḥajar, *Isāba*, 8:202; al-Ṣafadī, *Wāfi*, 16:168), but neither Ibn al-Athīr nor al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363) mention him giving her any role in the market.

27 Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *al-Istī'āb*, 2:210; Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd*, 2:547.

28 That he does not mention that she related hadiths is typical of most of Ibn Sa'd's entries for early Muslim women who are credited in other sources with having done so; see Asma Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 75.

29 Miklos Muranyi, "The First Muslims in Mecca: A Social Basis for a New Religion?" in *The Life of Muḥammad*, ed. Uri Rubin (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 1998), 99.

30 See for example Ibn Hishām's (d. 213/833) lists of early converts (Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-Malik b. Hishām b. Ayyub al-Ma'āfirī, *Al-Sira al-nabawiyya*, eds. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā et

It is difficult to determine what historical basis key features of al-Shifā's biographical entries compiled by Ibn Sa'd and Ibn 'Abd al-Barr might have. The *isnād* given for a pietistic hadith related in the *Musnad ibn Ḥanbal* (d. 241/855) on her authority states that she was "among the women who made the *hijra*."³¹ A tradition related in al-Bukhārī's (d. 256/870) *Adab al-mufrad* recounts that when Abū Bakr b. Sulaymān b. Abī Ḥathma was asked when people began to write the title *amīr al-mu'minīn* (Commander of the Faithful),³² he related that according to his grandmother al-Shifā—"and she was among the first women to make the *hijra*, and whenever 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, may God be pleased with him, would go to the market he would visit her"³³—when 'Umar was caliph, he requested the governor of Iraq to send him two men who could inform him about conditions there. When these two messengers arrived in Medina, they asked to see the *amīr al-mu'minīn*, and from that time onward this title was used in writing.³⁴ It is difficult to escape the suspicion that such transmitters' statements about al-Shifā were intended to identify a rather obscure figure, in order to bolster the authority of the hadith in question—or possibly, to enhance the prestige of Abū Bakr b. Sulaymān b. Abī Ḥathma by presenting his female ancestor as exceptionally meritorious.³⁵

al. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2001), 189–198, 238–243, 265–269; Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1:285–286; 3:139; see also Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Uthmān al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lam al-nubalā'*, eds. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūt and Ḥusayn al-Asad (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 2001), 1:144–145.

31 Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Salām 'Abd al-Shāfi (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1993), 6:403.

32 I.e. presumably primarily in correspondence.

33 "*wa kānat min al-muhājirāt al-uwal, wa kāna 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb raḍiya 'llāhu 'anhu idhā huwa dakhala l-sūq dakhala 'alayhā*." Note however that as this tradition is recounted by al-Ḥākim and Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, this phrase only reads: "*wa kānat min al-muhājirāt al-uwal*" (and she was among the first women to make the *hijra*); see al-Ḥākim, *Mustadrak*, 7:689 (*K. Ma'rifat al-ṣaḥāba*); Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Istī'āb*, 3:239.

34 Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Adab al-mufrad li-l-Imām al-Bukhārī* (Jubail, Saudi Arabia: Dār al-Ṣiddīq, 1994), 390–391. Al-Albānī judges the *isnād* of this tradition to be *ṣaḥīḥ* (al-Albānī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 391).

35 While al-Zuhri reportedly stated that Abū Bakr was among the knowledgeable (*ulamā'*) of the Quraysh, and Ibn Ḥibbān included him among the reliable transmitters (*thiqāt*), he nonetheless does not appear to have been a notably prolific or greatly sought after source of hadiths. Ibn Ḥajar states that he transmitted from seven persons, including his grandmother al-Shifā, and only eight are said to have related hadiths from him (*Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, ed. Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1994), 12:23). He is classified among the Successors; no death date appears to be available for him.

The assertion that the Prophet allocated a *dār* to al-Shifā' where she lived with her son Sulaymān³⁶ is interesting on several counts. In this context, a "*dār*" appears to be a compound, made up of rooms or apartments built around a common courtyard,³⁷ perhaps including some adjacent farmland as well.³⁸ Ibn Shabba (d. 262/875) quotes several traditions that mention this property. According to one:

Al-Shifā' bt. 'Abdallāh b. 'Abd Shams b. Khalaf b. Saddād selected and took possession of her *dār*; (its entrance is) on al-Ḥakkākīn road in the (same) neighbourhood. A portion of it went out of her descendants' possession—and they were the Banū Sulaymān b. Abī Ḥathma al-'Adawī—and it came to be for al-Faḍl b. al-Rabī', and a portion of it remained in their hands.³⁹

Another tradition appears in Ibn Shabba's chapter on places of prayer (*masājīd*) which the Prophet had used in Medina at one time or another. It lists the *dār* of al-Shifā' among several such sites, specifying, "The Prophet performed the ritual prayer in the *dār* of al-Shifā', in the room (*bayt*) to the right of the entrance to the *dār*."⁴⁰ Yet another account asserts that he performed the Eid prayer at her *dār*.⁴¹ However, Ibn Shabba gives the impression that this would have only taken place once, perhaps as a temporary measure soon after the ritual of Eid prayers was established,⁴² while al-Samhūdī (d. 911/1506) says it

36 Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Istī'āb*, 4:423; Ibn al-Athīr, *Uṣd*, 7:162; al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb*, 35:207; Ibn Ḥajar, *Iṣāba*, 8:202.

37 Francis Edward Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 299, no. 21 (following Leone Caetani). In similar traditions, Meir Jacob Kister translates *dār* as "court"; e.g. "Land Property and *Jihād*: A Discussion of Some Early Traditions," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 34, no. 3 (1991): 306.

38 For this possibility, see Isaac Hasson, "Contributions à l'étude des Aws et des Ḥazraḡ," *Arabica* 36 (1989): 7–8.

39 Abū Zayd 'Umar b. Shabba al-Numayrī al-Baṣrī, *Tārīkh al-Madīna al-munawwara*, ed. Fahīm Muḥammad Shaltūt (Beirut: Dār al-Turāth, 1990), 1:248–249; see also: Nūr al-Dīn 'Alī b. Aḥmad al-Miṣrī al-Samhūdī, *Wafā' al-wafā bi-akhbār dār al-Muṣṭafā*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyi al-Dīn 'Abd al-Ḥamīd (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1981), 3:881. I would like to thank Walid Saleh for assistance in translating this passage.

40 Ibn Shabba, *Tārīkh*, 1:73; al-Samhūdī, *Wafā*, 3:880.

41 "*ṣallā Rasūl Allāh ṣalla 'llahu alayhi wa sallam al-'id 'inda dār al-Shifā'*" (Ibn Shabba, *Tārīkh*, 1:133–134).

42 The tradition goes on to say that then he prayed it in the Ḥārrat al-Daws, and finally in the *muṣallā*, where he continued to perform it for the rest of his life (Ibn Shabba, *Tārīkh*, 1:133–134). See also: al-Samhūdī, *Wafā*, 3:781.

means that the Prophet actually led this prayer at the *muṣallā*, i.e. the site typically used for Eid prayers.⁴³ Such apparent efforts to minimise the latter report or to interpret it away may stem in part from its lack of congruence with later ritual practice, or perhaps from puzzlement as to why—if Eid prayers had to be held in a “domestic” space at all—a *dār* belonging to a senior male Companion would not have been selected.

Muḥammad reportedly allocated various pieces of land and property in Medina to certain Companions who had migrated from Mecca, as well as to groups of people, especially after the expulsion of the Banū Naḍīr. Such allotments had several political implications: They gave Muḥammad some leverage over groups attempting to settle in Medina, as well as a way to reward key followers, and strengthened the position of his fledgling community within Medina's economy.⁴⁴ It can also be said that such grants would not only be a way of giving migrants significant material inducement to remain in Medina, but also of maximising their stake in the successful outcome of Muḥammad's community-building venture there.

The statements that the Prophet allocated al-Shifā' a *dār* could be read as implying that in his eyes, she was a follower whose loyalty was worth rewarding as well as continuing to cultivate, possibly because she was a person with some influence. Nonetheless, the traditions related by Ibn Shabba that mention this *dār* are textually embedded within a constellation of broader concerns that arose several generations at least after Muḥammad's death, and need to be read with these factors in mind. These range from ongoing constructions of Medina as sacred through the memorialisation of particular sites as places where certain storied events occurred or rituals were performed by the Prophet, to the assertion of rights to plots of land in the town by the descendants of various Companions.

That Muḥammad is said to have allocated the *dār* to al-Shifā' herself and that she reportedly lived there with her son Sulaymān who had made the *hijra* with her while he was a young boy⁴⁵ could suggest that her husband Abū Ḥathma was not with her in Medina. This might be because he was deceased by that time, or had divorced her, although it seems more likely that his presence goes unmentioned because she was the more prominent of the two.⁴⁶ Whatever the

43 Al-Samhūdī, *Wafā'*, 3:881. He says that this is the case because al-Shifā's *dār* was near both the *muṣallā* and the market. For a tradition that might portray it as having had a similar location, see below.

44 Kister, “Land property and *Jihād*,” 304–305.

45 Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Istī'āb*, 2:210.

46 Abū Ḥathma's full name was 'Abdallāh b. Ḥudhayfa, or possibly 'Adī b. Ka'b b. Ḥudhayfa b.

case, this grant of property gives the impression that she functioned in Medina as the head of her household—at least, as long as her son was a minor.⁴⁷ While one might infer that given the norms of the time as well as the apparent size of the *dār*, relatives, enslaved persons or clients might also have lived there with her, classical biographers do not discuss this. Apparently, what they wished to highlight is her religious merits, as implied by the Prophet's allocation of a *dār* to her, where he moreover is said to have visited her. The assertions that he used to take a siesta at her home and that objects he touched were kept as relics by her children serve to further emphasise her merits, which in turn could be taken to reflect well on her descendants.⁴⁸

While biographical works consulted for this study from Ibn Ḥibbān's *Kitāb al-thiqāt* onwards typically state that al-Shifā' related some hadiths, she does not appear to have been credited with very many. There is no chapter of hadiths attributed to her in the *musnads* of either al-Ṭayālīsī (d. 204/818) or al-Ḥumaydī (d. 219/834). While Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's (d. 241/855) *musnad* provides such a chapter, it only contains two traditions: One is a version of the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition, and the other is a pietistic hadith. Al-Ṭabarānī's (d. 360/971) *Mu'jam al-kabīr* ascribes only seven or eight hadiths to her (excluding repetitions).⁴⁹ Interestingly, her name appears in the *isnāds* of a couple of traditions that deal with written correspondence in the early community. One, which appears in al-Bukhārī's *Adab al-mufrad*, has already been discussed above. Another

Tammām b. Ghānim b. 'Abdallāh b. 'Uwayj b. 'Adī b. Ka'b al-'Adawī al-Madanī (Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb*, 12:23). It seems that he was an obscure figure about whom few details were preserved; Ibn 'Abd al-Barr for example says nothing about when he converted or made *hijra*, nor does he mention his participation in any battles (Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Istī'āb*, 4:195).

47 Interestingly, a tradition recounts that one day at the dawn prayer, 'Umar noticed that Sulaymān was not present; then "Umar went to the market—and Sulaymān's dwelling (*maskan Sulaymān*) was between the market and the Prophet's mosque—and he passed by al-Shifā', mother of Sulaymān. He said to her, 'I did not see Sulaymān in the dawn (prayer) ...'" (Mālik b. Anas, *Muwatta' al-Imām Mālik—riwāyat Yahyā b. Yahyā al-Laythī* (Arabic-English), trans. Muhammad Rahimuddin (Beirut: ʿĪv li-l-Ṭabā'a wa-Nashr, 1985), 132–133 (*Kitāb al-Ṣalāt*)). This could be interpreted variously: "*maskan Sulaymān*" could refer here to a room or apartment where he lives within the *dār* belonging to al-Shifā', or perhaps Sulaymān, evidently no longer a child, is now regarded as the owner of the *dār*, although his mother lives there with him. If the latter is assumed to be the case, then one could infer that she only held the *dār* in trust for him while he was a minor. Nonetheless, Ibn Shabba's reference to *her* descendants retaining possession of part of the property suggests that she remained its recognised owner until she died.

48 It should be noted that these distinctions are presented as unusual, yet not as unique to al-Shifā'; cf. the entry for another female Companion, Umm Sulaym bt. Miḥḥān (Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 8:467–469).

49 al-Ṭabarānī, *Mu'jam*, 10:318–320.

is recounted by Ibn Sa'd in his chapter about the letters that Muḥammad reportedly sent to several rulers calling them to Islam.⁵⁰ It is difficult to know what to make of this association between al-Shifā' and written correspondence⁵¹ (more on this below).

Ibn 'Abd al-Barr's assertion that "Umar sought out her views; he was pleased with her and gave her precedence"⁵² seems to imply that not only did he ask for her advice at times—much as he is said to have occasionally consulted women who had certain kinds of experiential knowledge⁵³—but that he gave her opinions particular weight. Unfortunately, no details are provided, nor is it clear from where Ibn 'Abd al-Barr obtained this information. In the context of this biographical entry, its function seems to be to depict her as a woman with an unusual reputation for intelligence and good judgment. The statement that 'Umar occasionally put her in charge of some of the affairs of the market seems to be intended to further emphasise this.⁵⁴ Presenting al-Shifā' as possessing intellect and discernment bolsters the credibility of the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition by signalling to the reader/audience that al-Shifā' could be expected to have understood the legal ramifications of transmitting a hadith on a much-debated topic.⁵⁵

Ibn 'Abd al-Barr's entry for al-Shifā' recounts two versions of the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition. The first simply states: "The Messenger of God said to her, 'Teach Ḥafṣa *ruqyat al-namla* as you taught her *al-kitāb*.'" This particular

50 Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1:365. This is a combined report, so it is difficult to determine exactly what portions of this lengthy tradition are ascribed to her specifically. For a study on these letters attributed to Muḥammad, see Lecker, "The Preservation of Muḥammad's Letters."
51 al-Balādhurī (d. 279/892) includes al-Shifā' in his list of literate Meccans; see Dmitri V. Frolov, "The Spread of Literacy in Mecca and Medina at the Time of Muḥammad," in *The Humanities in Russia: Soros Laureates. The 1994 All-Russia Competition of Research Projects in the Humanities* (Moscow: [International Science Foundation], 1997), 136. I would like to thank Sebastian Guenther for this source.

52 "wa kāna 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb yuqaddimu-hā bi-l-ra'y wa yardā-hā wa yufaḍḍilu-hā."

53 Mālik, *Muwatta'*, 664 (*Kitāb al-Rahn*).

54 That Ibn 'Abd al-Barr separately asserts that 'Umar put al-Shifā' and her son Sulaymān in charge of some of the affairs of the market can be interpreted in various ways. It is possible that a post "originally" attributed to al-Shifā' came to be mistakenly ascribed to her son (due to scribal error, or perhaps also in part to later compilers' doubts that 'Umar would give such a task to a woman). The reverse is also possible, though it seems less likely that a role "originally" performed by Sulaymān would erroneously be attributed to his mother. One could even speculate that 'Umar was remembered as directing al-Shifā' to fill in for Sulaymān when necessary—or *vice versa*.

55 For the impact of transmitters' reputations for legal discernment on the acceptability of ḥadīths recounted on their authority, see Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission*, 65, 68, 96–97.

wording—“*al-kitāb*” rather than “*al-kitāba*”—also appears in an elaborated version of the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition which is quoted by al-Ḥākim.⁵⁶ This raises the question of what “*al-kitāb*” connotes here, as well as which wording is older.

In this context, “*al-kitāb*” could mean “writing,”⁵⁷ or “the Book,” i.e. the Qur’ān. The *lector difficilior* here appears to be “*al-kitāba*,” as it has an extra letter, and is also more ambiguous. While one can speculate why this tradition would link *ruqya* to writing,⁵⁸ the connection is not readily apparent. A scribe might presume that “*al-kitāba*” is a mistake and “correct” it by writing “*al-kitāb*” (meaning the Qur’ān), which could seem to make better sense in light of well-known hadiths advising that qur’ānic verses be used for healing.⁵⁹ Also, the fact that al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 388/998) states that the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition is evidence in favour of the view that teaching women how to write is not a reprehensible act (*ghayr makrūh*)⁶⁰ could suggest an additional motive for such a scribal emendation—in order to reduce this tradition’s value in this debate by making it unclear whether the Prophet is approvingly mentioning that al-Shifā’ had taught Ḥaḥṣa how to write,⁶¹ or that she instructed her in (some of the contents of) the Qur’ān.⁶² While it seems more likely that “*al-kitāba*” is the older wording, it may never be possible to determine whether this is the case.

56 al-Ḥākim, *Mustadrak*, 7:2462 (*Kitāb Ma’rifat al-ṣaḥāba*).

57 For the primary meaning of “*kitāb*” in the qur’ānic text as “writing,” see Daniel Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam’s Scripture* (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2001), 82.

58 For example, one could speculate that the tradition is intended to imply that much like writing, *ruqya* is a technical skill that some people need to master in order to benefit the community, or that the point is the emphasise *ruqya*’s permissibility by linking it to writing, which has an aura of sacredness due to its association with scriptures. It is also possible that *ruqya* and writing are linked here due to (controversial) healing and protection practices involving writing—more on these presently.

59 See for example Ibn Wahb, *al-Jāmi’*, 2:791–794; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, 3:396–398 (*Kitāb al-Ṭibb*).

60 Abū Sulaymān Ḥamd b. Muḥammad al-Khaṭṭābī, *Ma’ālim al-sunan: sharḥ Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, ed. ‘Abd al-Salām ‘Abd al-Shāfi Muḥammad (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1996), 4:210.

61 While little is known at present about the origins and development of the medieval debate about whether women should be taught to write, available evidence appears to suggest that this was not a question that attracted much concern before the fourth/tenth century; see Aisha Geissinger, *Gender and Muslim Constructions of Exegetical Authority: A Rereading of the Classical Genre of Qur’ān Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 248–255.

62 For a critical examination of a tradition that depicts ‘Umar telling Ḥaḥṣa to verify the “correct” reading of a qur’ānic verse see Aisha Geissinger, “No, a Woman Did Not ‘Edit the Qur’ān’: Towards a Methodologically Coherent Approach to a Tradition Portraying a Woman and Written Qur’ānic Materials,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 2 (June 2017): 416–445.

The second version of the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition recounted by Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr is an elaborated one, which recounts on al-Shifā’s authority that she did incantations in pre-Islamic times; she had also pledged allegiance to Muḥammad prior to his *hijra*. After she had migrated to Medina, she went to the Prophet and said that she “used to perform *ruqya* using the incantations of the *jāhiliyya*,” and asked if she could demonstrate these to him. He assented, and among those that that she demonstrated was the one for *namla*. The Prophet responded:

Perform incantation in the following way, and teach it to Ḥafṣa: “In the name of God. Prayers firm, forceful, seeking refuge from their mouths, that they harm no one. O God, remove the harm, cure the people.” Recite this seven times over a saffron twig, and put it in a clean place; then rub it on a stone along with vinegar made of wine from Thaḳīf, and daub it on the *namla*.⁶³

In this tradition—which al-Ḥākim several decades earlier had already presented as part of her biography⁶⁴—while al-Shifā’s commitment to monotheism dates from well before the *hijra*, she does not initially integrate her knowledge of pre-Islamic healing practices, which presumably involved the invocation of pagan deities or other supernatural beings, with her new beliefs. Following her migration to Medina, however, she decides to do so, and requests Muḥammad’s verdict. His response is to counter her enactment of these practices with a performance of his own, by modelling an incantation that accords with monotheistic sensibilities. Not only this, but the Prophet provides directions as to the preparation of certain ingredients to use when treating *namla*. At this point in the text, any illusion that a contemporary reader might have that Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr is simply presenting reports he received about a woman who lived in north-west Arabia at the dawn of Islam dissipates in the face of step-by-step directions apparently meant to enable readers/audiences of his own time and place to perform a healing incantation in a manner that he deems doctrinally acceptable.

63 Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *Istī‘āb*, 4:424; similarly, Ibn al-Athīr, *Uṣd*, 7:162–163; Ibn Ḥajar, *Iṣāba*, 8:202. Ibn Ḥajar attributes the anecdote and the wording of the incantation to different authorities, which suggests that the latter was a later addition.

64 al-Ḥākim, *Mustadrak*, 7:2462–2463 (*Kitāb Ma‘rifat al-ṣaḥāba*). Several centuries later, al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) stated that one of the transmitters is unknown.

1.2 *Provenance and Early Transmission: The Available Evidence*

At least one version of the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition appears in nine Sunni hadith compilations. In addition to those already mentioned,⁶⁵ these include: the *Muṣannaḡ* of Ibn Abī Shayba (d. 235/849), the *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (d. 275/889), and al-Nasā'ī's (d. 303/915–916) *Sunan al-kubrā*, as well as al-Bayhaqī's (d. 458/1066) collection of the same name. It is also found in the *Sharḥ ma'ānī al-āthār* of al-Ṭahāwī (d. 321/933). Some of these sources provide more than one version of this tradition. In the following analysis of the *isnāds*, which is based on the methodology pioneered by Gautier H.A. Juynboll⁶⁶ as well as its further development by Najam Haider,⁶⁷ I have grouped these versions into two main categories:⁶⁸

- (1) The “*ruqya* only” category, meaning those versions that simply direct an unnamed woman/al-Shifā' to teach another woman (identified as Ḥafṣa, either in the tradition itself or occasionally by a transmitter) her *ruqya*, e.g. “... there was a woman with her [Ḥafṣa]—she was called al-Shifā'—performing an incantation against *namla*. The Prophet said, ‘Teach it to Ḥafṣa.’”⁶⁹ “Teach Ḥafṣa your *ruqya*.”⁷⁰
- (2) The “writing” category, meaning those versions that also mention having taught Ḥafṣa writing (or possibly, the Book), e.g. “... The Messenger of God came in when I was with Ḥafṣa, and he said to me, ‘Won’t you teach her *ruqyat al-namla*, just as you taught her how to write?’”⁷¹

65 I.e. Ibn Wahb's *Jāmi'*, the *Muṣannaḡ* 'Abd al-Razzāq, the *Musnad Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, al-Ṭabarānī's *Mu'jam al-kabīr*, and al-Ḥākim's *Mustadrak*.

66 For a summary of this, see the introduction to his *Encyclopedia of Canonical Ḥadīth* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

67 As demonstrated in his article, “The Geography of the *Isnād*: Possibilities for the Reconstruction of Local Ritual Practice in the 2nd/8th Century,” *Der Islam* 90, no. 2 (2013): 306–346.

68 I have not carried out an *isnād* analysis of versions in the third category—those that discuss al-Shifā'’s *ruqya* in pre-Islamic times, how she asked the Prophet permission to practice it, the words of the incantation, etc., primarily because traditions of this type likely constitute later elaborations upon an earlier core.

69 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 6:318; Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān Aḥmad b. Shu'ayb al-Nasā'ī, *Al-Sunan al-kubrā*, ed. Abū Anas Jādallāh b. Ḥasan al-Khaddāsh (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2006), 2:1167 (*Kitāb al-Ṭibb*); al-Ṭabarānī, *Mu'jam*, 10:320; al-Ḥākim, *Mustadrak*, 8:2938 (*Kitāb al-Ruqya wa l-tamā'im*); similarly, Abū Ja'far Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Salāma b. 'Abd al-Malik al-Azdī al-Miṣrī al-Ṭahāwī, *Sharḥ ma'ānī al-āthār*, ed. Ibrāhīm Shams al-Dīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2006), 4:149 (*Kitāb al-Karāha*).

70 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḡ*, 8:30–31; al-Ṭabarānī, *Mu'jam*, 10:320.

71 Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, 3:393 (*Kitāb al-Ṭibb*); Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 6:403; al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan*, 2:1167 (*Kitāb al-Ṭibb*); al-Ṭahāwī, *Sharḥ*, 4:149 (*Kitāb al-Karāha*); Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. al-

FIGURE 10.1 The “*ruqya* only” category

A comparison of the *isnāds* of figures 1 and 2 suggests several things. First of all, it appears that Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778, Basra), as the common link in most of the *isnāds* of versions belonging to the *ruqya* alone category, seems to

Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī al-Bayhaqī, *Al-Sunan al-kubrā*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2010), 9:587 (*Kitāb al-Ḍaḥāyā*). Similarly, Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣan-naf*, 8:31 (*Kitāb al-Tibb*); al-Ṭabarānī, *Mu‘jam*, 10:318–319.

have played a noteworthy role in their circulation in southern Iraq. But versions belonging to the writing category reportedly go back to one of two Syrian common links—either to ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. after 140/757),⁷² or to Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742). Second, the partial common links of versions from both categories—Muḥammad al-Munkadir (d. ca. 130/747)⁷³ in the case of the *ruqya* alone category, and Ṣāliḥ b. Kaysān (d. ca. 141/758)⁷⁴ for the writing category—are Medinans. Nonetheless, after Abū Bakr b. Sulaymān b. Abī Ḥathma there is no overlap among the *isnāds* of these two categories. If the possibility that these attributions to him have some historical basis is to be entertained, this would suggest that he recounted the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition in different ways. However, given the different regional associations of the two categories, it seems more probable that these distinctions developed once the tradition had made its way to Syria and Iraq.

The phrase, “just as you taught her writing (or perhaps, the Book)” is a subordinate clause in versions of the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition within which it appears. Its function is apparently to rhetorically legitimate the disputed practice of *ruqya* by drawing an implicit link between it and writing (or, in the case of the versions that read “*al-kitāb*,” possibly between *ruqya* and certain qur’ānic verses). Writing is often associated with scriptures and religious knowledge in these texts, and both incantations and writing were used together in certain types of healing practices, such as when qur’ānic verses were written, dissolved in water, and the resulting liquid administered to sick persons or women in labour.⁷⁵ It is possible that the circulation of the “*ruqya* only” category in Iraq in the mid-second/eighth century could be related to two factors: First, early debates about recording any text in writing aside from the Qur’ān were reportedly particularly intense there.⁷⁶ Second, the use of writing in amulets and healing practices is said to have been strongly opposed by a number of

72 He was a son of the Umayyad caliph, ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz. Ḥadīth critics had varying views of his reliability as a transmitter (Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb*, 6:307–308).

73 Muḥammad b. al-Munkadir b. ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ḥudayr b. ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā b. ‘Āmir b. al-Ḥārith b. Ḥāritha b. Sa’d b. Taym b. Murra al-Taymī was a Successor (Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb*, 9:407–409).

74 He was a Successor, one of the *fuqahā’* of Medina who collected hadiths, and was a tutor to the children of the Umayyad caliph, ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (Ibn Ḥibbān, *Thiqāt*, 3:444; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. ‘Uthmān al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām wa-wafayāt al-mashāhīr wa-l-a’lām*, ed. ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadmuri (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 2001), 178 ff., years 141–160 AH).

75 E.g. Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, 8:23–25 (*Kitāb al-Ṭibb*).

76 Gregor Schoeler, “Oral Torah and Ḥadīth: Transmission, Prohibition of Writing, Redaction,” in *Ḥadīth: Origins and Developments*, ed. Harald Motzki (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2004), 73–74.

religious authorities in Iraq as well.⁷⁷ One could infer that in such a context, the phrase “... just as you taught her writing” would not be an effective way to convey the notion that the practice of *ruqyat al-namlā* is uncontroversial, so it was never added—or perhaps, it was dropped. But the reasons for this geographical variation are unclear.

To sum up the findings thus far: This investigation has turned up more questions than answers. The “original” form of the *ruqyat al-namlā* tradition might have been about two unnamed women rather than either al-Shifā’ or Ḥafṣa. The representations of al-Shifā’ in the biographical works consulted for this study have evidently been shaped to varying extents by various and fluctuating concerns, ranging from those of hadith critics, to land claims in Medina made by persons claiming her as their ancestor, as well as by the association of the *ruqyat al-namlā* tradition with her. It was not possible to verify any biographical details about this female figure, as information was either lacking, or it was unclear whether any seemingly corroborating items actually had their origins in the *ruqyat al-namlā* tradition. The *isnād* analysis indicates that in the second/eighth century, two versions of this tradition, one mentioning *ruqya* only, and the other *ruqya* with writing, circulated in Iraq and Syria respectively. The historical origins of the reference to writing—“just as you taught her writing (*al-kitāba*)” (or, in a few instances noted above, possibly “the Book”)—are unclear, though “*al-kitāba*” seems more likely to be the “older” wording.

Can the *ruqyat al-namlā* tradition in and of itself provide evidence that al-Shifā’ was literate—or for that matter, if Ḥafṣa was? In view of all of the problems discussed above relating to the “original” form of this tradition, as well as where the reference to writing came from, the answer appears to be in the negative. It should also be kept in mind that in the hadith compilations arranged by subject as they have come down to us and that contain one or more versions of the *ruqyat al-namlā* tradition, these most often appear in sections or chapters that discuss the subject of *ruqya* and various allied practices meant to provide supernatural healing and protection. Significantly, they do *not* appear in chapters or sections that discuss knowledge (*‘ilm*), writing, or related topics. This suggests that for the compilers (and/or redactors) of these works, the *ruqyat al-namlā* tradition was thought to be primarily relevant to debates about the legal status of incantations; the reference to writing found in some versions would seem to have often been regarded by them as primarily rhetorical.

77 E.g. Ibn Abi Shayba, *Muṣannaḥ*, 8:24–25 (*Kitāb al-Ṭibb*).

Other potentially corroborating evidence has been mentioned above: (1) The presence of al-Shifā' in the *isnāds* of a couple of traditions discussing written correspondence in the early community, which could be interpreted as indicating that she was literate, so that she might credibly be presumed to have been aware of and perhaps interested in the letters sent by the Prophet or the caliph; (2) al-Balādhurī's mention of al-Shifā' in a list of literate Meccans. While these two items could furnish possible starting points for further research into this question, at this point it is unclear whether these *isnāds* and/or al-Balādhurī simply reflect the assumption of her literacy on the basis of the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition.

It would be possible to end our investigation here, with a list of historical uncertainties. But to do so would forgo an opportunity to consider the question—which I would argue is actually more consequential—suggested by the quotation of this tradition in a noteworthy number of classical sources, only some of which have been discussed above: Why would a tradition attended by such ambiguities not only be cited in a number of sources, but discussed repeatedly from various angles, for centuries?

2 Part II: Ongoing Processes of Translation: Shifting Meanings of the *ruqyat al-namla* Tradition

In the various versions of the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition discussed above, Muḥammad (along with the two female figures) is depicted within a first/seventh century Medinan context. Yet, at the same time, the authors of the sources which quote these different versions also position the Prophet's interchange with al-Shifā' as speaking to their own times, places, and concerns.⁷⁸ The histories of reception and interpretation of the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition vividly illustrate some of the mechanisms that enabled such processes of translation, as well as some of the controversies that drove them.

The practice of incantation is arguably endorsed by the last two *sūras* of the qur'ānic text itself; interestingly, they came to be associated with a story in which Muḥammad himself was bewitched by a Jewish man in Medina, Labīd b.

⁷⁸ For the role of hadiths in the construction of the life of Muḥammad (as well as of his Companions) as paradigmatic and pre-eminently authoritative, see for example William Graham, “Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation,” in *Islamic and Comparative Religious Studies: Selected Writings*, ed. William Graham (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 16–26.

al-A'sam, and the spell was finally undone by the recitation of these two *sūras*.⁷⁹ The ways that incantation is often portrayed in hadiths also suggests that it was long-established popular practice in Arabia as well as in the conquered territories in a variety of everyday situations, whether for dealing with fever, snake-bite, scorpion sting, severe pain, or even a mule with a propensity for bolting. It is presented as a way for women to heal sickly children, as well as for aiding mothers in childbirth.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, a number of the hadith collections referenced above indicate that in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries, whether or not incantations (as well as a number of other healing or protective practices) could be deemed religiously acceptable was a topic that occasioned considerable debate among religious scholars. This controversy served as a vehicle for the expression of imperial anxieties about Muslim identity, internal and external communal boundaries, as well as social and cosmic order.

As Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) indicates, different theological factions of his time disputed about the practice of *ruqya* in order to assert broader claims. Some Mu'tazilites reportedly dismissed it as a method of healing on rationalist grounds. They also pointed out that while some of the hadiths on the topic of incantation permit it, others prohibit it, which in their view was just one example among many as to why hadiths could not serve as an authoritative source.⁸¹ Similarly, discussions as to whether the use of incantations would constitute failing to rely on God alone for protection or cure, or an effort to avoid what God has destined⁸² were part of wider disagreements among Sunnis about the emerging doctrine of *qadr* (the divine decree). Utilising the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition as a proof-text in such debates (as Ibn Qutayba for example did) was one way that Muḥammad could be made present, so that he could address theological controversies which took place well after his passing.

79 E.g. Muqātil b. Sulaymān b. Bashīr al-Azdī, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2003), 3:537. For a study of this tradition, see Michael Lecker, "The Bewitching of the Prophet Muḥammad by the Jews: A Note *a propos* 'Abd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb's *Mukhtaṣar fī l-ṭibb*," in *Jews and Arabs in Pre- and Early Islamic Arabia*, ed. Michael Lecker (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Variorum, 1998), 561–569.

80 E.g. Mālik, *Muwattaʿa*, 817–820 (*Kitāb al-Jāmiʿ*); Ibn Wahb, *Jāmiʿ*, 2:779–783 (*Fī l-ruqya*); 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, 11:18, 20 (*Kitāb al-Jāmiʿ*); Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, 8:23 (*Kitāb al-Ṭibb*).

81 Abū Muḥammad 'Abdallāh b. Muslim Ibn Qutayba, *Taʿwīl mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*, ed. Muḥammad Nāfi' al-Muṣṭafā (Amman: Dār al-Bashīr, and Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 2004), 608–614.

82 E.g. 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, 11:18 (*Kitāb al-Jāmiʿ*); al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ*, 4:148–150 (*Kitāb al-Karāha*).

While such theological debates played a role in negotiating boundaries within the community, discourses about incantation were also one way to map distinctions between Muslims and Others. A number of religious authorities in the first few centuries of Muslim history (as well as later) were concerned with differentiating between rituals that they regarded as religiously legitimate, and “magic” (*ṣiḥr*), and vigorously debated which category incantations and other allied healing or protective practices belonged to.⁸³ Some feared that incantation was too reminiscent of practices associated with religious Others—not only Others of the past such as pre-Islamic Arab pagans, who had reportedly performed such rituals, invoking their deities or other supernatural beings,⁸⁴ but monotheistic Others still existing in the present, such as Jews, to whom some Muslims might turn for healing.⁸⁵

Jurists discussed the various hadiths dealing with incantation as well as other healing practices in detail, attempting to carefully distinguish between practices they deemed acceptable and impermissible.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, as a popular practice that seems to have often been carried out in “domestic” contexts, incantation was effectively beyond their supervision or control. As such, discourses about *ruqya* were one way to express anxieties about the stability of “proper” religious and social hierarchies, while also reiterating and affirming the latter.

Gendered figures and symbols served as particularly potent vehicles for such delineations. This dynamic is particularly apparent in traditions regarding spells that bring about impotence—a problem that the Prophet himself is said to have faced⁸⁷—as well as traditions about female slaves bewitching

83 For an overview of some of these debates, see Travis Zadeh, “Magic, Marvel, and Miracle in Early Islamic Thought,” in *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. David Collins (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 235–267; Michael W. Dols, “The Theory of Magic in Healing,” in *Magic and Divination in Early Islam*, ed. Emilie Savage-Smith (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2004), 87–101. As both Zadeh and Dols point out, attempts to differentiate (legitimate) “religion” from “magic” (with the latter identified with heresy, superstition, etc.) are theological and also culturally bound.

84 Ibn Wahb, *Jāmiʿ*, 2:778 (*Fi l-ruqya*); ‘Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, 11:16 (*Kitāb al-Jāmiʿ*); Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, 8:14 (*Kitāb al-Ṭibb*).

85 Mālik, *Muwattaʿ*, 820–821 (*Kitāb al-Jāmiʿ*); Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, 3:392 (*Kitāb al-Ṭibb*). For these and other similar traditions, see Uri Rubin, “Muḥammad the Exorcist: Aspects of Islamic-Jewish Polemics,” in *Muḥammad the Prophet and Arabia*, ed. Uri Rubin (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Variorum, 2011), 107–108.

86 See for example al-Ṭahāwī, *Sharḥ*, 4:140–153 (*Kitāb al-Karāha*).

87 ‘Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, 11:13 (*Kitāb al-Jāmiʿ*). Some versions of the story of Muḥammad’s bewitchment referred to above present Labīd’s daughters as the ones who cast the

the free women who owned them, sometimes with the hope of killing the latter and thereby gaining their freedom.⁸⁸ In such traditions, the “correct” and divinely willed social hierarchies which place men above women and free persons above the enslaved are graphically inverted, as men’s and free women’s performances of power are rendered ineffective by supernatural means beyond their control—though tellingly, this state of affairs proves to be only temporary.

It is against this complex background that the question of what type of cure or benefit *ruqyat al-namla* is supposed to effect was discussed and debated. That there was some disagreement on this question is apparent from *gharīb al-hadīth* works, as well as some later hadith compilations and commentaries. Debates about its meaning have the paradoxical effect of emphasising Muḥammad’s location in the first/seventh century Arabian past (as this expression was apparently already obscure in the late second/eighth century),⁸⁹ and seeming to bridge this gap of time and space by nonetheless rendering it comprehensible. The multiple meanings attributed to this expression also enable Muḥammad to seemingly address several different issues.

In his *gharīb al-hadīth* work, Abū ‘Ubayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām (d. 224/838) quotes the grammarian al-Aṣma‘ī (d. 213/826) as saying that “*al-namla*” refers to sores that appear on the sides of the body⁹⁰—shingles, perhaps?⁹¹ Ibn Qutayba concurs with this explanation,⁹² which is also quoted later by al-Hākim and al-Bayhaqī.⁹³ However, Abū ‘Ubayd also goes on to say that “*al-*

spell. There is a long history of association of women with certain types of magic thought to bring about various sexual ends, including male impotence; see for example: David Frankfurter, “The Social Context of Women’s Erotic Magic in Antiquity,” in *Daughters of Hecate: Women and Magic in the Ancient World*, eds. Kimberly Stratton and Dayna Kalleres (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 319–339. I would like to thank Kimberly Stratton for this source.

88 ‘Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, 10:180–181, 183 (*Kitāb al-Luḡta*).

89 Walid Saleh suggests that it might have “originally” meant an incantation intended to remove or guard against infestations of ants from a house, but that in any case, early grammarians may have simply been presenting their own best guesses as to what *ruqyat al-namla* is (personal communication, November 2015).

90 “*hiya qurūḥun takhruju fi al-janb wa-ghayrihi*” (Abū ‘Ubayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām al-Harawī, *Kitāb Gharīb al-hadīth*, ed. Ḥusayn Muḥammad Sharaf (Cairo: Al-Hay’a al-‘Āmma li-Shu‘ūn al-Muṭābī‘ al-Amīriyya, 1984), 1:217).

91 Juynboll translates “*namla*” as “pustules” (Juynboll, *Encyclopedia*, 39), while Lecker renders it as “small pustules” (Lecker, “The Preservation of Muḥammad’s Letters,” 6, no. 35).

92 Ibn Qutayba ‘Abdallāh b. Muslim, *Gharīb al-hadīth*, ed. ‘Abdallāh al-Jabbūrī (Baghdad: al-Jumhuriyya al-‘Irāqīyya Wizārat al-Awqāf Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1977), 2:620.

93 al-Hākim, *Mustadrak*, 7:2463 (*Kitāb Ma‘rifat al-ṣaḥāba*); al-Bayhaqī, *Sunan*, 9:585 (*Kitāb al-Ḍaḥāyā*).

namla" means "*namīma*" (slander).⁹⁴ The inclusion of the *ruqyat al-namla* tradition in chapters or sections that address healing in a number of the hadith collections discussed above strongly suggests that in the opinion of their compilers, "*namla*" refers to some sort of physical ailment. However, the second definition given by Abū 'Ubayd seems to indicate that some held that *ruqyat al-namla* is intended to offer protection from a blameworthy trait.

Building upon the power relations depicted in this hadith, in which a male religious and political leader (and household head) supervises the instruction given to his wife by a woman from his community, some later medieval *gharīb al-hadith* works further elaborate on this latter line of interpretation. Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144)—who quotes al-Aṣma'ī's explanation of what the word "*namla*" means—nonetheless asserts that the incantation the Prophet instructed al-Shifā' to teach Ḥaḥṣa was as follows: "The bride celebrates. She holds sway, and applies kohl; she may do anything, except disobey her husband."⁹⁵ Majd al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr (d. 606/1210) elaborates, stating that it is said (*qīla*) that the *ruqyat al-namla* in question is a joke or a riddle that women tell, "and whoever hears it knows that it is (just) words that neither (bring) harm nor benefit." According to him, Muḥammad instructed al-Shifā' to teach Ḥaḥṣa this *ruqya* (i.e. "The bride celebrates ...") in order to rebuke his wife for divulging the secret that he had confided to her.⁹⁶

In the explanation credited to al-Aṣma'ī, *ruqyat al-namla* is intended to heal a physical ailment; to the extent that the reader/audience believes that this incantation is efficacious, then al-Shifā' is presumed to be able to heal through it, and also to teach Ḥaḥṣa how to do so. In that case, it is depicted as words of power,⁹⁷ which might well enable a person who knows it to garner status

94 Abū 'Ubayd, *Gharīb*, 1:218. However, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) quotes the definition attributed to al-Aṣma'ī for "*al-namla*," and states that "*al-numla*" means *namīma*, slander (Abū l-Faraj 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. al-Jawzī, *Gharīb al-hadith*, ed. 'Abd al-Mu'ṭī Amīn Qal'ajī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2004), 2:438).

95 Jār Allāh Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Fā'iq fī gharīb al-hadith*, eds. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm and 'Alī Muḥammad al-Bajāwī (Cairo: 'Iysā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1971), 4:26. Uri Rubin draws attention to this interpretation of al-Zamakhsharī's (Uri Rubin, "Ḥaḥṣa," *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 2:398).

96 Majd al-Dīn Abū l-Sa'ādāt al-Mubārak b. Muḥammad b. al-Athīr al-Jazarī, *Al-Nihāya fī gharīb al-hadith wa-l-athar*, eds. Ṭāhir Aḥmad al-Zāwī and Maḥmūd al-Ṭanāḥī (Cairo: 'Iysā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1963), 5:120. The "secret" referred to here is an allusion to an incident famously mentioned in Qur'ān 66: 1–5, in which Muḥammad spoke in confidence about an unspecified matter to an unnamed wife, but she informed a co-wife about it, and some sort of crisis ensued. Ḥaḥṣa is typically identified as the wife who divulged the secret (e.g. Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, 3:376).

97 For the gendering of access to words of power in classical qur'ānic exegesis, see Geissinger, *Gender*, 44–47.

through healing or teaching others to do so—though their transmission and utilisation are clearly subordinated to the Prophet's approval. The interpretation given by al-Zamakhsharī (and rather dubiously elaborated upon by Majd al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr), however, re-presents *ruqyat al-namla* as words that more starkly affirm “correct” gender hierarchies, as women jokingly remind brides—who might be tempted to use their bewitching attractiveness in order to assert themselves with their new husbands—of their “proper” place.

3 Conclusion

The *ruqyat al-namla* tradition cannot be treated as a neutral vessel of information. Rather, it is a polemical text, which is primarily designed to address debates in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries as well as later about the legal status of healing or protective incantations, as well as the associated imperial anxieties about religious identity, internal and external boundaries, and social as well as cosmic order.

Most versions of this tradition as we have it today (complete with transmitters' interjections identifying the women involved) present the Prophet asking al-Shifā' to teach his wife Ḥafṣa how to perform this incantation. In this depiction, Muḥammad is both located in his household in first/seventh century Medina, yet at the same time vividly made present in theological, legal, grammatical, and other debates in Iraq, Syria, Egypt and elsewhere.

The *ruqyat al-namla* tradition is but one of a number of hadiths dealing with allied healing or protective rituals that were apparently intended to bring these within the ambit of Muslim custom by rendering them compatible with monotheism and a component of the *sunna*, at least on a rhetorical-textual level (though how this might have affected lived practices is quite another matter).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the conference attendees for their observations, as well as the editors for their very thought-provoking comments and questions. My thanks also go to Walid Saleh and Johannes Wolfart for helpful conversations about method. Any errors of fact or interpretation are mine alone.

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