SAFAR
THE EARLY HISTORY OF TIME TRAVEL LITERATURE:
AL-MUWAYLIHĪ’S HADĪTH ‘ISĀ B. HISHĀM
AND ITS ANTECEDENTS1

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I. Introduction

Modern Arab culture stands in a much-debated relationship with the trappings of modernity. It is therefore not surprising that modern Arabic literature should boast a relatively large number of time-travel stories. More than any other genre of fiction, time-travel stories—that is, stories in which a character travels physically from one clearly defined period of history to another—foreground historical change and our perception of it. In a 1998 article, I offered a tentative overview of the genre as it exists in Arabic.2 Since then, many more examples, including films and plays, have come to my attention. In a forthcoming monograph on time travel as a literary device, I hope to present these works along with their counterparts in other literary traditions in a comparative and historical context. The present essay offers a preview based on one line of inquiry: the antecedents of

1 This essay is dedicated to Wolfhart Heinrichs, who has both practiced and encouraged the comparative study of literary traditions; and who, despite personifying the most rigorous standards of philological inquiry, has with characteristic good humor indulged explorations of non-canonical topics, of which time travel is undoubtedly an example.
2 Cooperson 1998.
Muhammad al-Muwaylihi’s (1858?-1930) *Hadith ‘Isā b. Hishām*, the first time-travel story in Arabic.

Al-Muwaylihi’s *Hadith* was first published in serial form beginning in 1898 under the title *Fatra min al-zaman*. It tells the story of the Bāshā, a Mamluk-era military official who returns to life during the British Mandate and wanders around Egypt getting into trouble. In a 1944 study, Saadeddine Ben Cheneb suggested that the *Hadith* may have been inspired by two works by Edmond About: *L’homme à l’oreille cassée*, about a man roused from suspended animation; and *Le fellah*, about a Frenchman’s visit to Egypt. In another 1944 study, Henri Pérès found parallels to the *Hadith* in the wave of social-reformist publications that appeared in Egypt beginning in 1880. He also supplied a long list of antecedents for the idea of raising a character from the dead and using him as a protagonist. Some of these antecedents are classical Arabic, such as the Qur’ānic sleepers in the cave and al-Ma‘arri’s *Risālat al-Ghufrān*; while others, including About’s story, are European or American.

The most recent contribution to the search for al-Muwaylihi’s antecedents is that of Roger Allen, who, following a suggestion he credits to Nadia Farag, proposes that the Egyptian journalist’s immediate inspiration was a book by Constantin-François Volney (1757-1820) called *Les ruines*. Volney’s work, first published in 1791, begins with a visit to the ruins of Palmyra, where the narrator converses with an apparition. The *Hadith*, similarly, begins with a visit to a graveyard, where a specter rises from the tomb to interrupt the narrator’s meditations. Resurrection is of course commonly discussed in religious contexts, and Arabic biographies abound with visions of the dead; but the number of verbal parallels between *Les ruines* and the

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4 Pérès 1944. The episodes of *Fatra min al-zaman* began appearing in 1898 (Allen 1992: 32) before being published in book form in 1907. Pérès, however, knows only the latter date, meaning that some of his suggested influences drew on the *Hadith* instead of the other way around. The earlier date also explains the fact (astonishing to Pérès) that Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm’s *Layālī Saṭīh* (1907), like the *Hadith*, has a resurrected protagonist.
5 Pérès also notes that Muḥammad’s father Ibrāhīm al-Muwaylihi published a serial entitled *Hadith Mūṣā b. ‘Iṣām*. Judging from the title and from the one installment he was able to see, Pérès suggests that the father’s work may have inspired the son’s. In 1954, Gottfried Widmer clarified this last problem by publishing a German translation of several episodes of the *Hadith Mūṣā b. ‘Iṣām*, which turns out not to contain any resurrected characters (Widmer 1954: 78-81).