THE CHEW STICK OF THE PROPHET IN
SĪRA AND ḤADĪTH

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A chew stick (Arabic ṣiwāk or ṭiwāk) is a twig, mostly of the arāk tree (Salvadora persica). The end is chewed until it is fibrous and it is moved to and fro in the mouth to clean the teeth and strengthen the gums. The twig can be green and succulent, or dried.

This article is about the chew stick as a motif, whose development will be followed in one sīra text and a number of hadīths. I have placed the texts loosely in what I think is the chronological order, on the basis of their contents. Admittedly, the arrangement is impressionistic, but a better result may never be possible.

1. The Chew Stick in the Sīra
("Biography of the Prophet")

The earliest Islamic text in which the chew stick occurs is the narrative about the deathbed of the Prophet, in the sīra of Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767):

T1 Ya'qūb b. `Uthā from al-Zuhrī, from `Urwa: `Ā'isha said, The apostle came back to me from the mosque that day and lay in my bosom. A man of Abū Bakr’s family came in to me with a chew stick in his hand and the apostle looked at it in such a way that I knew he wanted it, and when I asked him if he wanted me to give it to him he said Yes; so I took it and chewed it for him to soften it and gave it to him. He rubbed his teeth with it more energetically than I had ever seen him rub before; then he laid it down. I found him heavy in my bosom and as I looked into his face, lo his eyes were fixed and he was saying: ‘No, rather the

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highest companions (al-rafiq al-a'lid) in Paradise. I said, ‘You were given the choice and you have chosen, by Him Who sent you with the truth!’ And so the apostle was taken.3

What part does the chew stick play in this story? Did the narrator want to make the Prophet purify himself or at least freshen up in view of his meeting with the high companions in paradise? That seems unlikely.

Or did the narrator intend to present the Prophet as establishing a sunna? At first sight, that may seem somewhat more feasible. The later a sunna is placed in the Prophet’s life, the smaller the chance that it could be changed or abolished. Therefore we see sunnas established during the conquest of Mekka and the farewell pilgrimage; and why not also during the final illness and on the Prophet’s deathbed? An example is the protest by the Prophet on his deathbed against ladd, the forced administration of a medicine through the mouth corners of a sleeping or unconscious patient. Indeed this became the precedent for a ban.4

But if our text had intended to establish a sunna, of what kind would it be? The use of the chew stick was so widespread, that Arabs hardly needed a prophetic example for it. It was a pre-Islamic habit and indeed non-Muslim pastoral peoples of Eastern Africa use such twigs for cleaning their teeth until today. If non-Arab Muslims, e.g. Persians, had other habits of dental care, they may have needed encouragement to clean their mouth the Arab way, or with a twig of that specific plant, but our text does not look like establishing any sunna at all. There is no obvious intention. Neither legal nor pious interest in purity are present here, and how and when to apply the siwak is neither discussed nor demonstrated. Moreover, it would have been tactless to stress the importance of that little twig against the setting of the very last moments of the prophet.

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3 Das Leben Muhammeds nach Muhammed ibn Ishāq [...], bearbeitet von ʿAbd el-Malik ibn Hischām [...], ed. F. Wüstenfeld, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 1838–60; henceforth Ibn Ishāq), p. 1011. The translation is that of A. Guillaume (The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ishāq’s [sic!] Sīrat Rasūl Allāh [Oxford, 1955]). Asterisks mark my own modifications. Guillaume translated as follows: ‘Nay, the most Exalted Companion is of paradise’. Given the capitals, he had God in view. But who would ever refer to God as a companion? It may be better to take rafiq as a plural, and think of the company that is meant in Qur’ān 4:69: ‘the company of those whom God has favoured: the prophets, the veracious, the witnesses and the righteous people. What excellent companions (rafiq) they are!’ Furthermore, I do not read the phrase as a nominal sentence, as Guillaume does, but as the object to a presupposed ‘I have not chosen this world, but rather...’. On the choice that prophets have when they are about to die cf. Ibn Ishāq, p. 1006.

4 Ibn Ishāq, p. 1007, and see A.J. Wensineck et al., Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane, 8 vols. (Leiden, 1936–80) s.v. ladd.