One of the most serious difficulties confronting the historian of medieval Islam is the general dearth of archival material for Islamic history prior to the sixteenth century. All researchers, of course, face the constant problem of drawing valid and meaningful conclusions from evidence known to be less than wholly reliable. But for the scholar who is of necessity largely dependent upon such literary sources as histories, biographical dictionaries, and works of belles-lettres, the problems are of an order entirely different from those faced by one who can check and supplement his literary material with evidence obtainable from documentary sources: cadastral registers, tax ledgers, birth and death records, economic reports, and so forth.

This difference is nowhere so prominent as it is in the use and significance of numbers. Archival or at least statistical sources, though subject to error and manipulation, aim primarily to provide exactly what the modern researcher expects from them—an accurate numerical record. But in literary material a whole new range of questions must be raised. Could the author (or anyone else, for that matter) have known the true figure? Was he an eyewitness, or did he have access to official records (assuming that such records were kept)? Is he guessing; and if so, would he be biased toward either a high or a low estimate? Is he exaggerating for the sake of lending dramatic effect to his story? Since it is often extremely difficult or impossible to resolve these and other questions with certainty, figures in literary sources must be regarded with great caution. More specifically, any attempt to make use of them and to avoid their pitfalls must proceed
based on an understanding of how numbers in general were regarded and used in medieval times. With this point in mind, I would like to consider an example of special importance, the didactic and symbolic usage of the numbers seven and seventy in medieval Near Eastern literary sources, particularly in those of the Islamic tradition.

The Symbolism of Seven

The enormous symbolic importance of the number seven among ancient peoples is well known\textsuperscript{1}). The reasons behind the rise of this symbolism have been the subject of frequent discussions in relation to various ancient cultures, but in the final analysis modern research seems to indicate that the origins of the significance attributed to seven are lost in remote antiquity. By the time they emerge in recorded history, such numbers as 7, 70, 71, 72, 73, and 77 had already assumed an important place in the speculations of ancient Near Eastern thinkers. This interest became systematic with the appearance of numerology in the astrological lore of Babylonia, and