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Manly Myths in the *Book of the Thousand and One Nights*

Many characters of the Book of the Thousand and One Nights, which came into being in the Middle Ages, have occupied a permanent place in culture and continue to enjoy popularity, both in the East and in the West. Sheherazade is the embodiment of womanhood, womanly beauty and wisdom and this already attracts attention; however, she seems to be even more interesting as a mysterious princess of the East with its sophisticated culture, intellectual atmosphere, sensuality and fabulous splendour. She is the image and symbol of her world in its various dimensions, that is why she becomes a mythical character and her popularity, like that of tens of heroes from other cultural areas, can perhaps be credited most of all to this fact.[1]

The Book... also brings the characters of unforgettable men: ‘Alī Bābā, who defied the thieves, ‘Alā’ ad-Dīn with his magical lamp in his hand, and Sindibād, who sailed the seas untiringly; today they appear so often e.g. in animated cartoons for children or give their names to restaurants, travel agencies, industrial goods, etc. All the three characters continue to fascinate and enjoy unflagging popularity in the world, sharing their fame with Sheherazade so it may be worthwhile paying more attention to them.

They are the main characters of the fairytales which resulted from a creative inventiveness of popular story-tellers and therefore, according to the essence of the genre, they are literary and fictitious characters whose counterparts can hardly be found in nature, even though their origin might be traced to the patterns of the Muslim Middle Ages. The fame of ‘Alī Bābā, ‘Alā’ ad-Dīn and Sindibād allows us to say that they are the individualised versions of certain general features which are still cherished by the world; they carry both archetypal and universal values as well as the values characteristic of their own culture.

[1] Por. Ewa Machut-Mendecka, Spojrzenie Szeherezady. Mit wschodniej kiężniczki (A look of Sheherezada. Myth of the Eastern Princess), “Albo Albo. Problemy Psychologii i Kultury”, No 1/2000, pp. 87-96.

The differences between the poetics of the myth and the fairytale (or fable) have been established i.a. by a great specialist in this subject-matter, Eleazar Meletinsky: "The main difference here occurs along the line of sacrum/profanum and of exact authenticity vs. inexact authenticity, while the structural differences may not appear at all." And then he continues: "There is no doubt that the fairytale derives from the myth."[2]

If the origin of 'Alī Bābā, 'Alā' ad-Dīn and Sindibād lies, partly as it may, in the sphere of mythology, particularly if we assume that these are archetypal characters, we can look for universal myths in their roots and find out the relationship of these three characters with Muslim tradition, which may also be mythical.

The Myth of a Wanderer

Not only does the tireless wanderer Sindibād but also 'Alī Bābā and 'Alā' ad-Dīn, even though perhaps not in the literal sense, deserve the name of wanderers, if one considers wandering as a metaphor of conduct spread over in time and aimed at achieving a certain goal. Such a wandering means many-sided experiences and gainig maturity which, according to Carol S. Pearson, marks the archetype of a Wanderer, one of the symbolical characters distinguished by her from the culture background which depict the stages of person'Alīty development (Innocent-Orphan-Wanderer-Warrior-Martyr-Magician),[3] illustrating the particular stage of attaining maturity. According to this author, at the stage of the Wanderer one must abandon the hitherto stabilisation regarded as a nuisance, condemn oneself even to perils and solitude or sense of guilt (if any) in order to examine and confirm one's own capabilities and attain identity.[4] "We have many ways of being alone. One is actually to live alone, travel alone, spend time alone."[5]

Meletinsky, by contrast, considers this type of wandering as a kind of initiation done by trials of which the description may fill even a considerable part of the plot of a literary work.[6] In addition to own choices, compulsion and necessity may be at stake and this is the initiation that can be traced in the

[2] E.M. Meletinsky, Poetika mifa (Poetics of the myth), Nauka, Moskva 1976, p. 262.

[3] Carol S. Pearson, The hero within. Six archetypes we live by, Harper San Francisco 1989.

[4] Ibid., pp. 51-73.

[5] Ibid., p. 58.

[6] E. Meletinsky, op.cit., p. 226

fortunes of many different characters which are important for the development of culture.

"The archetypal American hero leaves the small town and embraces his journey; the beat hero and later the hippie hit the open road; the Western hero rides off into the sunset."[7]

Wanderings full of adventures and search last from time immemorial, when Odysseus was their most obvious parable, to the present time and they do not omit the areas of Muslim tradition. Sindibād sails away, 'Alī Bābā and 'Alā' ad-Dīn set out to seek the magic caves on the land, starting to continually gain new experience and becoming more and more mature, self-dependent and conscious of their goals. Each one of them faces innumerable adventures and though all of them seem to be very colourful and unusual and the story enhances their dramatic course, they seem to be very similar. The heroes always fall into troubles through no fault of theirs and fight, first of all, to get off safe and sound, obtaining numberless treasures which they always encounter during their travels.

'Alī Bābā, from the moment he hears by chance the incantation spoken by the thieves "Open sesame," goes into the cavern and finds gold, diamonds and other valuables there till the moment when he manages to safely take possession of them experiences a series of adventures and dramatic events; the treasure he finally finds may be a metaphor of his transformation or maturity. 'Alā' ad-Dīn needs the initiation most: an unruly, light-minded boy undergoes many hardships and faces dreadful adventures when he seeks a magic lamp and tries to retain it, growing up and becoming a man during these events. The embodiment of the archetype of a Wanderer is "Sindibād the Sailor," a traveller by nature, who—before he starts his travels—is not more reasonable than 'Alā' ad-Dīn, when being a cherished merchant's son he wastes the property he inherited and desperately tries to change everything in his life, which means that he tries to grow up. He travels in the literal sense of the word and travels are his initiation. He sells the rest of his property and buys merchandise in order to trade them to various peoples and he makes for the open sea. As can be seen, he travels out of internal necessity and he always feels the deficiency of trials and perils, for which he blames himself in the most difficult moments. "I blamed and reproached myself for my much [love of] travel and said, 'How long wilt thou thus imperil thyself?' And I abode as I were a madman, unable to rest."[8]

[7] C. S. Pearson, op. cit., p. 59

[8] Tales from the Arabic (translated by John Payne), Breslau, Calcuta 1814-18, vol. 3, p. 209

Sindibād's worries cease only after the last, seventh travel. For him, like for all the three heroes, peace and wealth are the prize for their hardships and dangers; surrounded by his family and friends, he cannot be disturbed any more. Characteristically, in all three fairytales this state is linked up with the beginning of a happy marriage and wedded life: 'Alī Bābā marries off his son, 'Alā' ad-Dīn regains his wife, and Sindibād brings himself a wife from the journey. The initiation is finished; it took such a dramatic course that the adult or further life will not present any trouble.

The Wanderer as a Symbol of a Man

The three "wanderers" from the Book... already during their initiation organise their world in a manly way and devote themselves to all "manly" occupations. 'Alī Bābā and Sindibād do not win women; although sometimes they have troubles with them (e.g. 'Alī Bābā with his sister-in-law, Sindibād with one of his wives, etc.), but, as opposed to many tales of the Book..., in their tales there are not many abducted princesses or young men being madly in love with beautiful female slaves. Sindibād does not court any of his wives in any special way (his marriage with the first one ended badly, which will be discussed later), even though both of them, in accordance with the fable's convention, were extremely beautiful; the marriages were rather arranged by their fathers. 'Alī Bābā easily arranges a well-matched marriage for his son. It is different with 'Alā' ad-Dīn, an unruly boy whom the cruel magician urges to look for a magic lamp which he later wants to take away from him. 'Alā' ad-Dīn appeared to be so brave that he obtained the lamp and made use of its power, calling a mighty jinni that obeyed his orders, and he made use of its services in a reasonable way, which is the happy ending of the plot developed at the beginning. But this is perhaps insufficient for 'Alā' ad-Dīn to finish his initiation, as in the successive plot he must show courage like in the first one. A typical convention of the Book... finds expression here: a mad love starts at first sight, which blinds him to other matters. The boy falls in love with a beautiful Badr al-Budūr, sultan's daughter, and he does unusual things to win her and then to maintain his marriage against the power of evil forces.

During these adventures 'Alā' ad-Dīn grows up so fast that he even goes soldiering: "Now in those days certain of the Sultan's enemies took horse against him; so he levied troops to repel them and made Alaeddin chief thereof. Alaeddin set out with his host and fared on till he drew near the enemy, whose troops were exceeding many; whereupon he drew his sword

and fell upon them and there befell battle and slaughter and sore was the stress of the mellay; but Alaeddin broke them and routed them and slew the most part of them. Moreover, he plundered their goods and possessions and gat him spoil beyond count or reckoning, wherewith he returned in triumph, [Having gained] a great victory, and entered the city, which had adorned itself for him of its joy in him."[9]

'Alī Bābā, first of all, obtains treasures. Sindibād is not only a merchant and sailor but he also practises a somewhat strange and rather manly occupation, i.e. the teaching of the manufacturing of saddles which are inexistent in a certain kingdom; in another country, he becomes a port administrator and a high-ranking clerical officer.

The three wanderers of the Book... seem to be the prototypes of males and the embodiment of manly attitudes with their yearn for great tasks and exploits in which a woman may not find her place but she may also take possession of the entire space as princess Badr al-Budūr did with 'Alā' ad-Dīn's life.

'Alī Bābā, 'Alā' ad-Dīn and Sindibād, due to their adventures, share their fortunes with hundreds of heroes of various works (not only of the literary ones but also of movie characters) all over the world and they seem to embody the type of a "he-man" with all his virtues and vices. This is what characterises them during the entire initiation, in the course of all tests and experiences, and this is what allows them to find themselves a place in the universal system of values.

Dynamics of Wandering

How dreadful and unusual are the tests to which 'Alī Bābā, 'Alā' ad-Dīn and Sindibād put themselves in the fairytales and how much courage and virility they need to get off safe and sound:

"Then a huge elephant came up to the tree and winding his trunk about it, tugged at it, till he plucked it up to me, as a lay aswoon for affright, wound his trunk about me and tossing me on to his back, made off with me, accompanied by the others; nor did he leave faring on with me, and I absent from the world, till he brought me to a certain place and casting me down from off his back, went away, followed by the rest. I lay there awhile, till my trouble subsided and my senses returned to me, when I sat up, deeming in a

[9] Tales from the Arabic. Alaeddin. Enchanted Lamp (translated by John Payne), London 1889, p. 196-197

dream, and found myself on a great hill, stretching far and wide and all of elephants' bones. So I knew that this was their burial-place and that they had brought me thither on account of the nones."[10]

From time to time, in the fairytales appear the dialogues, less frequently the monologues; they are most often replaced by a verse improvised by the hero as a kind of alleviating the tension and the form in which he describes his spirits. There are no author's comments, no psychologising, thanks to which the fairytales are subjected to a widely accepted convention of this genre, which is indicated by Meletinsky when he emphasises a "non-psychological way of presentation in mythology and folklore."[11] Here the experiences of the protagonists are not related but shown. The action and the colourful and plastic ways of space management, stylistic measures and composition are of importance:

"In this island is a river of very seet water, issuing from the shore of the sea and entering in at a wide cavern in the skirt of an inaccessible mountain, and the stones of the island are all limpid sparkling crystal and jacinth of price. Therein also is a spring of liquid, weiling up like [molten] pitch, and when it cometh to the shore of the island, the fish swallow it, then return and cast it up, and it becometh changed from its condition and that which it was afretime; and it is crude ambergris. Moreover, the trees of the island are all of the most precious aloes-wood, both Chinese and Comorin; but there is no way of issue from the place, for it is an abyss midmost the sea; the seepness of its shore forbiddeth the drawing up of ships, and if any approach the mountain, they fall into the eddy aforesaid; not is there any resource in that island."[12]

Like in any fairytale, here, too, the oppositional elements determine the structure of the story; there are numbers of them already in the short fragment quoted above (deadly menace/rescue, stormy sea/Garden of Eden, awe/calm, etc.) and they can be grouped in the series according to universal criteria of good and evil. Here we can see how the dark and bright sides of reality make up a complementary entity, and thanks to their incessant exchange, the fairytales acquire their specific dynamics.

Wealth, possessing, envy, and avarice are opposed to poverty, worries, troubles, honesty and kindness; heroes are in opposition: the portraits of a rich and bad brother and a poor and good brother in the tale of 'Alī Bābā seem to be so simplified that for a while they lose their plot in favour of a

[10] Tales from the Arabic, Breslau, Calcuta , op.cit., vol. 3, pp. 230-231.
[11] E. Meletinsky, op.cit., p. 226.
[12] Tales from the Arabic, Breslau, Calcuta, op.cit., vol. 3, p. 208.

morality story having archetypal and complementary contents. However, the didacticism is not too boring, as the simplified moralising is compensated by a very interesting action, leading from the story of ‘Alī Bābā to the adventures of thieves seeking revenge for entering the cavern in which they hide their treasure. The chain of adventures lasts continually and the heroes are changing; when some thieves die, their task is immediately undertaken by others. During these frequent changes, the characters seem to be unimportant any longer; we do not know much about them, they just stand for the roles they perform, and the wandering itself comes to the fore, regardless of who undertakes it; someone has to experience adventures to make the wandering last till the happy end. By their nature, the fairytales deal with the fortunes of individuals and societies, but the composition presented has a more general expression and brings universal symbols, which suggests the affinity of these works to mythology.[13]

The dichotomic composition of the Book... gives rise to an avalanche of symbols and meanings as well as to surprises. The reader that starts to read the fairytales for the first time may feel astonished that he will meet there not one but two Sindibāds: a Porter and a Sailor. The first one is a poor and tired man who works hard, yet he lives a quiet life which is monotonous but relatively safe. The second one is utterly different in all respects. He is travelling all the time, he is exposed to dangers (his initiation lasts till his last travel) and he lives a colourful life abounding in adventures; at the same time, as a merchant he gets rich already in the first journey and multiplies his property during the successive travels; he enjoys his lovely house, comfort and numerous friends. They make friends: one is the alter ego of the other one and together they create a kind of an allegory of human fate, full of controversies, defeats and successes, joyful and tragic events, and many other oppositions. Both sides of this fate—the bright one and the dark one - are interrelated and even separated for a long time; finally, they cannot exist one without the other, just as the two Sindibāds, who, once they meet, they will never part, even though each one remains himself. In the conclusion of the Sailor’s tale of a successive travel which he completed, the following scene recurs:

“When Sindibād the Sailor had made an end of his story, he bade his servant give the porter a hundred mithcals of gold and said to him, ‘How now, my brother! Has ever in the world heard of one whom such calamities have betided as have betided me and hath any suffered that which I have undergone of hardships? Wherefore it behoveth that I have these pleasures in

[13] E. Meletinsky, op.cit., p. 226.

requital of that which I have undergone of travail and humiliations.' So the porter came forward and kissing the merchant's hands, said to him, 'O my lord, thou hast indeed suffered grievous perils and has well deserved these bounteous favours [that God hath vouchsafed thee]. Abide, then, O my lord, in thy delights and put away from thee [the remembrance of] thy troubles; and may God and Most High crown thine enjoyments with perfection and accomplish the days in pleasance until the hour of thine admission [to His mercy]!"[14]

These symbols of the characters of the two Sindibāds cannot be deciphered completely since they encompass, as it seems, an infinite number of opposed values, such as misery/happiness, poverty/wealth, being close/being far away, stability/destabilisation, one's countrymen/ aliens, land/sea, etc. Due to this type of dialectics, the plots of the fairytale develop dynamically, and in the sphere of contents the semantics is enriched so much that it is hard to grasp its diverse meanings and this diversity encourages us to seek its sources in the archetypal forms.

The condensed action of the Book..., thanks to its compositional approaches, leaves places in which the primary and fundamental values find a powerful expression, which makes these fairytales even more similar to a myth. If we approach 'Alī Bābā, 'Alā' ad-Dīn and Sindibād from this point of view, they will look like the mythical heroes in statu nascendi, as they did not achieve any heroic deeds that are important for the humankind and its relationships with the superior forces or nature. But each myth, too, has to be born and find its expression; perhaps in the Muslim culture the birth place of this myth, i.e. the revelation of the archetype, was supposed to be the Book of the Thousand and One Nights. But even in such a case, this phenomenon escapes general rules: "however, gradually, the 'biography of the culture hero itself acquires a paradigmatic character, also as a chain of critical events in life, correlated with the rites of transition among which initiation blinds all other issues," writes Meletinsky.[15]

'Alī Bābā, 'Alā' ad-Dīn and Sindibād, together with the heroes of other fairytales from other cultures, seek treasures and obtain them; in the adventures which make one's blood run cold they prove they are courageous and wise, in tens of tests they strive for perfection or they undergo initiation to enter their future fortunes, as without this they would not obtain the treasure—literally, as it results from the plot, or metaphorically, as one may add—the sense of maturity or identity. Those heroes do meet the

[14] Tales from the Arabic, Breslau, Calcuta, op.cit., vol. 3, p. 234.
[15] E. Meletinsky, op.cit. 226.

expectations, even the worst ones: “Heroic deeds do not preclude ‘ugly’ acts, breaking social norms, including incest, and on the other hand, exceptional abilities of the culture hero and capabilities of doing good to people attained for the price of cruel trials.”[16]

The illustration of this hypothesis is one of the adventures of Sindibād during which he learns, as a happy husband of a beautiful woman whom he married in a distant country, that it is customary in this country to bury alive an outliving wife or husband together with the dead spouse, giving him/her a jar of fresh water and seven barley pies to allow them to live in the grave for some time. Of course, Sindibād cannot escape this dreadful fate, but he gets an idea how to extricate himself from that oppression: in order to survive under the earth, he kills the successive living persons buried there with the dead and takes their food. The Book..., however, does not consider this to be bad; Sindibād, who as usual tells the family and the guests his adventures after his return, reveals everything from the last travel but nobody blames him. His stay in the grave, on the other hand, is a “cruel test” from which he goes out victorious, like from many other tests, and is as usual taken aboard the ship which sails by and he goes to Basra and Baghdad.

‘Alī Bābā, ‘Alā’ ad-Dīn and Sindibād are thus the “true” culture heroes who may often escape unharmed as they meet the universal need of the archetype of heroism expressed in incredible deeds and difficult decisions.

The Typically Muslim World

Thanks to a universal symbols the fables telling about ‘Alī Bābā, ‘Alā’ ad-Dīn and Sindibād are widely understood and clear in culturally different areas, but they arouse a real enthusiasm because the archetypal truths are interwoven in the local scenery and veiled by the mystery of the East.

At first glance, we can see that the three heroes live in the Muslim world, recall Allāh at every step, propound His glory and begin all their actions with His name; as Islam ordains, they make prayers, including the Friday prayer in a mosque, and give alms; in accordance with the norms of the shari’at, they are patient, helpful and kind; in the background there are outlines of Muslim architecture.

Islam, however, permeates a deeper semantic layer of the literary works, thanks to their complex composition which can be seen specifically in the layouts of time and space. The time of the fable amazes us with an apparent

[16] Ibid., p. 228.

inconsistency: on the one hand, it develops in the cause-and-effect order, but on the other hand, it is governed by chance. Each of the heroes acts, up to a certain point, in accordance with the first order: Sindibād wants to set out, he buys merchandise and boards a ship; when Alaeddin wants to win a princess, he sends his mother to the sultan with gifts and offer of marriage; when ʻAlī Bābā sees the treasures in the thieves' cavern, he takes them. However, the cause-and-effect system is short-lived, the time develops in a linear way, which might be marked by an upward vector only till the moment when its line is disturbed by accident since every important moment of the action is a matter of chance which takes the shape of a sudden event or a suddenly appearing figure, be it human, animal or other. Accidents accumulate when the action takes place at sea: a ship always falls a prey to them, for example it roams and crashes against the rocks, as in The Sixth Voyage of Sindibād the Sailor, and Sindibād lands on the shore where precious stones and amber flow in streams and this extremely fortunate coincidence causes that he gets very rich. This is hardly the beginning of his adventures: on the raft which he builds for himself he goes on a foolish voyage to the interior of the mountain and then it is the speed of the raft and not himself that decides that he will find himself amongst brown people...

The chance appears more or less regularly in the remaining fairytales, but it happens to take some more complicated forms; for example, in the tale of ʻAlā' ad-Dīn, the chance takes the shape of a female slave who appears in the key moments of the action like deux ex machina, each time preventing tragedy and misfortune. The cause of events in the story of ʻAlā' ad-Dīn is a magician—an evil sorcerer who, however, allows by an oversight (chance) the fortune to take away the course of events out of his hands. In the action plan, determinism in the shape of a cause-and-effect system of events clashes with fatalism expressed in chances, which may be explicated in the field of contents and linked with great religiousness of the heroes. As I have said, they mention the name of Allāh all the time and they use many expressions like: "God the Most High inspired me with an idea;" "Extolled by the perfection of the Living One who dieth not!"; "if it be the will of God the Most High;" "grand praise be to God, the One, the Creator, the Maker!"[17]

A deep belief in destiny, which is given by God, leads to fatalism; besides, one can hardly doubt, considering this great piousness found in the fables, that it is God that guides all the fortunes of the described humans by

[17] Tales from the Arabic, Breslau, Calcuta, op. cit., vol. 3, pp. 209, 218, 225, 233.

sending chances upon them. This is the attitude utterly compliant with Islam, a concept which denotes an utter submission to God's Will. At the same time, however, this attitude does not require that man should be passive (which might be associated with it); on the contrary, 'Alī Bābā, Alaeddin and Sindibād experience adventures resulting form the chances sent upon them or even face them, like Sindibād, who, having saved his life by a miracle in one travel, cannot resist starting another one.

In the world of fairytales, as in the world of Islam there appears an ubiquitous jinni. It matches these areas as a fairly ambiguous figure since it is a being sanctioned by the Qur'ān; it is also a product of folk culture ascribing magic properties to it. In the latter function it interferes in human fortunes too much, it becomes the source of the side of profane practices, it is fought with the Qur'ān in hands. The echoes of this ambivalence sound in the fairytales: as the contents show, genies have magic features here; 'Alā' ad-Dīn calls them by rubbing the ring or the lamp, and they come to fulfil his will; in the sphere of action, however, they seem to be the cause of a lower order; acknowledged by Islam, they add colour to the Muslim fatalism.

Ǧinn managed to slip into Islam from the old time of ǧāhiliyya, but in the light of its radical monotheism this religion resisted the old legends and myths, and those sanctioned by it found expression in the Qur'ān. This book played the main part in the evolution of Muslim mythology. The myth of cosmogenesis evolved in it under the influence of the Qur'ānic thought.[18] Within the framework of this myth, the sacred areas in heaven took huge dimensions, and they were marked by intensive colours; suffice to mention God's throne made of green emerald the ruby legs of which are placed 40 thousand years apart from one another[19] or the pen of a length equal to the distant from heaven to earth,[20] one of the first objects to have been created by God. Traces of those magnitudes and colours can be encountered in the fairytales devoted to the three wanderers of the Book. The bird in The Second Voyage of Sindibād the Sailor is so huge that when it flies over the island, it covers the sun and causes that it gets dark, in which he resembles a huge angel of the Muslim myth of cosmogenesis covering the world with its

[18] Por. Ewa Machut-Mendecka, Under the wings of an angel (Muslim myths of creation), "Studia Arabistyczne i Islamistyczne" No. 7/1999, pp. 62-70.

[19] Isḥāq Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad Ibrāhīm an-Naysābūrī aṯ-Ṯa'labī, Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā' al-musammā 'arā'is al-maǧālis, Al-Maktaba aṯ-Ṯaqāfiyya, Beirut n.d., p. 16.

[20] Muḥammad Aḥmad Ilyās al-Ḥanafī, Badā'i' az-zuhūr fī waqā'i' ad-duhūr. Adab, tārīḫ, 'aǧā'ib, qiṣaṣ, fukāha, Maṭbū'āt Maktabat wa-Maṭba'at al-Ḥāǧǧ 'Abbās Ibn 'Abd as-Salām Ibn Safardān, Cairo n.d., p.3.

wings thanks to which the time of the day and night changes. A huge fish devouring ships in the seventh voyage of Sindibād seems to have been taken directly from the myth of cosmogenesis. Colours, too, play a similar role in the myth of cosmogenesis and in the fables. Magnificent emeralds, rubies and pearls adorning the heavenly world on the threshold of creation can be associated with extremely intensive colours of jewels described in the Book..., to which it owes much of its fabulous atmosphere:

“Now the fruits of these trees were all precious stones, each tree bearing fruit of one colour and kind of jewel, and these fruits were of all colours, green and white and yellow and red what not else of colours. Their glitterance outshone the rays of the sun in its forenoon splendour and the bigness of each jewel overpassed description; suffice it that not one of them might be found with the greatest of the kings of the world, no, nor a gem half the bigness of the smallest that was there.”[21]

In the Muslim mythology the symbolical figures find expression, among which the number one thousand or the magic seven are important, their semantics going far beyond their concrete meaning: “From the King of Hind, before whom are a thousand elephants and on the battlements of his palace a thousand jewels...” writes a powerful king to the grand caliph, a famous Hārūn ar-Rašīd of Baghdad.[22]

The archetypal figure four,[23] which is credited with harmonious spatial solutions, finds its expression here:

“So the stone came up and he threw it aside; whereupn there appeared to him an underground place and its door, whereas one entered by a stair of some dozen steps, and the Mugrabin said to him, “O Alaeddin, give heed and do punctually that which I shall tell thee, neither fail of aught thereof. Go down with all circumspection into yonder vault till thou come to the bottom thereof and thou wilt find there a place divided into four chambers, in each of which thou wilt see four jars of gold and others of native ore and silver. Beware lest thou handle them or take aught therefrom, but pass them by till thou come to the fourth chamber, and let not thy clothes or the skirts touch the jars, no, nor the walls, and stay not one moment; for, and thou do contrary to this, thou wilt forthright be transformed and wilt become a black stone.”[24]

[21] Tales from the Arabic, London, op.cit., vol. 3, pp. 83-84 .
[22] Tales from the Arabic, Breslau, Calcuta, op.cit., vol. 3. p. 215.
[23] Aṯ-Ṯa‘labī, p. 7
[24] Tales from the Arabic, London. op. cit. , p. 81.

These figures function in the fairytales as symbols and when Sindibād wanders seven days and nights, this means that his travel lasts long enough to make his destiny fulfil upon the completion of his seventh voyage.

In the Book... there sound the echoes of folk approaches to cosmogenesis, which proves again its links with the myth not only in universal dimensions but also at the Muslim level. ‘Alī Bābā, ‘Alā’ ad-Dīn and Sindibād come to be, as I have said, the culture heroes marked by the features of the paradigm since they have an archetypal dimension and personify the style of mythological thinking in the culture of Islam.