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Searching for the origins of things.
On the ‘ilm al-awā’il in the culture of the Arabic Middle Ages.

1. Idea of the science on the origins of things in the classical Arabic literature

“Each society has some rites that differ from others in their general homogeneity. It seems that such a clear consistence can be explained only by their common origins. So it was imagined that each such a group of similar rites was established by one common ancestor who revealed it to the entire tribe”.¹ This statement of É. Durkheim corresponds exactly with the tendencies that most probably influenced the emergence in the Arabic culture of the quasi-studies of “pioneers” (Ar. awā’il/sing. awwal).²

Similar kind of knowledge was also known in other cultures, such as the Hellenic world and medieval Europe. However, the highest stage of development it achieved in China. As J. Needham puts it, “no classical literature of any ancient civilization paid more attention than the Chinese to record and honour inventors and innovators; no culture, either, went so far in their deification. Texts that could be called technical-historical dictionaries or registers of inventions and discoveries constitute a separate genre. The oldest book of this kind is Shi Pen (“Book of the Beginnings”).³ Beginnings of the awā’il genre in the Arabic literature should be connected, I presume, with the IX century, when chapters devoted to the “pioneers” appeared in historical works of Ibn Qutayba (Kitāb al-ma’ārif [“The Book of Knowledge”]) and adab literature of Al-Bayhaqi. At the same time it should be remembered,

¹ É. Durkheim, Elementarne formy życia religijnego [Polish translation of Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse], Warszawa 1990, p.274.
however, that before it began to designate studies on the “pioneers”, the term had also been used in other different meanings, even in titles of various theological and historical works. For example, Hağği Halîfa mentions *Awā‘il al-adîllâ fi ṭuṣûl ad-dîn*, a theological work by Abû al-‘Qâsim al-Balhî.4

It can be said with high probability that the first Arab writer to devote a separate work to this subject was Abû Hilâl al-‘Askârî (d.1005). The above-mentioned Hağği Halîfa also maintains so, but, unfortunately, one can not be completely sure about it, since similarly titled earlier works have not been preserved to our times. Works of this kind were also written in later years by Ibn Ħâgar al-‘Asqalânî, Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd Allâh al-‘Iblî, Ġalâl ad-Dîn as-Suyûtî and others. Some of them appended in their books information on *awā‘îr* or “the lasts”.5

It is not certain, either, if knowledge of the origins was treated, in Arabic culture, as a separate branch of knowledge or as an element of history or adab literature. Works as *Kitâb al-awā‘îl* by Al-‘Askârî or *Al-Wâsî‘il ilâ mà‘rifat al-awâ‘îl* by Āt-Ṭa’labî (X-XI centuries) can, on the one hand, be considered a proof of some independence of *ma‘rifat al-awâ‘îl* in the Arabic literature; on the other hand, the sections on the “pioneers” most frequently appeared in historical context, which is the case of *Kitâb al-ma‘rif* by Ibn Qutayba; later on, similarly Al-Qalqašândî took a similar route, which will be discussed further on.

*Awā‘îl* were also treated as an element of adab understood as culture.6 It probably appeared in such a function for the first time in *Kitâb al-maḥâsin wa-āl-masâwî* by Al-Bayhaqî. It seems, however, that this knowledge was usually considered a part of history. In his well known work *Ṣûbûh al-‘a‘ârî fî ma‘rifat al-inšâ‘*, Al-Qalqašândî places *awâ‘îl* in following context:

**Article One: What knowledge is necessary for a scribe (kâtîb)**

**Part One: What knowledge is necessary for a scribe**

**Chapter Two: What knowledge about the chancellery (inšâ‘) is necessary for a scribe**

**Paragraph Sixteen: A glance at the knowledge about history**

**Point One: Historical information that a scribe has to know**

**Passage One: Al-Awâ‘îl.**


The author of the work characterizes the knowledge of the pioneers as “the knowledge about the origins of important things”. Simultaneously, Al-Qalqašandi points out that many people he knew were interested in the beginnings; in the introduction to Kutāb al-awā’il, Al-‘Askarī gives similar reasons for writing his work.

Medieval and later medieval authorities, did not then consider awā’il as a separate branch of knowledge; the first to define it as a separate “science” with affinities to history and adab was, according to F. Rosenthal, Ḥaǧǧī Ḥalīfa (Katib Čelebi), a seventeenth century Turkish intellectual and the author of a large biographical dictionary written in Arabic, Kašf az-żumūn ‘an asāmī al-kutub wa-āl-funūn, known under its abridged title, Kašf az-żumūn. We read in this dictionary: “Al-Awā’il is a science that indicates the origin of things and events according to places of their emergence and provenience. Its subject and aim are clear. The science is a branch of history (tawārīh) and adab (muḫārat); it is not mentioned in books of subjects (kutub al-mawdū`ū’át).”

I am not convinced that it was Ḥaǧǧī Ḥalīfa who first defined awā’il, since in my conviction the above quoted description is not more precise than, for instance, Al-Qalqašandi’s definition, and a close examination of the awā’il’s place in Subḥ al-a’ṣā surely gives a much better idea about the subject than Čelebi’s brief definition.

Chinese literature on the origins tried to give the knowledge on the beginnings of inventions and discoveries in arranged and systematic way. It is much the same in the Arabic culture. At the same time the way of systematization is not homogeneous. Sometimes information is given in a non-arranged way, as is the case with the chapter of Al-A’lāq an-nafīs by Ibn Rusta (d.903) titled Dikr al-awā’il al-lāḏīna ahdaṭṭu al-asāyā’ al-lāḏīna uqtudiya bi-him fīhā or “A Notice about those who invented [various] things and who were imitated in that”.

In the above-mentioned work of Al-‘Askarī, chronologically the first book dealing with this subject, we find information on the “pioneers” clearly divided on the grounds of a historical-personal criterion. The author divided his book into ten chapters. Combination of matters relating to the tribe of Prophet Muhammad on the one hand and of those whose beginnings go back to the gāhiliyya or pre-Islamic period. A few centuries later Al-Qalqašandi introduced in his work a quite different criterion of division. The Egyptian

9 H. Halifa, op.cit., I, p. 199.
encyclopedist’s system seems to be more practical and it can be basically described as rational (with some exceptions in the first and last paragraph).

2. Ġâhiliyya and Islam in the context of the “science of the origins”

In order to analyze the knowledge about awâ’il and to characterize its scope I will present the contents of the works of Al-‘Askari, Al-Qalqašandî and Ibn Rusta as related to events attributed to the ġâhiliyya; this will show the most typical features of the way in which the events were presented. I have divided the things attributed to ġâhiliyya into five groups: everyday culture, religion, literature, war/fight, and varia.

A. Everyday culture

1. The first one to say marhaban: Sayf Ibn Dî Yazan (Al-‘Askari [later on: ‘Ask], p. 17; Al-Qalqašandî [later on: Qalq], p. 433).
2. The first one to break bread while receiving guests during a famine: Hâšîm Ibn ‘Abd Manâf (Qalq., p. 431; Qusayy Ibn Kilâb (‘Ask., p. 17).
3. First famous Arab king: Ġâḏîma al-‘Abraš (Qalq., p. 416; ‘Ask., p. 98).
4. The first Arab to wear sandals: Ġâḏîma al-‘Abraš (Qalq., p. 428; Ibn Rusta [later on: Rust.], p. 174; ‘Ask., p. 98).
5. The first Arab to ride in the saddle: Ḥazm Ibn Zabbân al-‘Imyarî (Qalq., p. 427; ‘Ask., p. 112).
6. The first to ride a horse while men were walking by his side: Al-‘Aš’aš Ibn Qays (Rust., p. 172).
7. The first Arab king to sit on the throne: Ġâḏîma al-‘Abraš (Qalq., p. 416).
8. The first from among the Qurayš to dye his skin with indigo: ‘Abd al-Muṭalib (Qalq., p. 436; ‘Ask., p. 27; Rust., s.173).
10. First Arab king to wear a necklace: Ġâḏîma al-‘Abraš (Qalq., p. 416).

B. Religion

11. The first to make a key for the House [Al-Ka’ba]: As‘ad al-‘Imyarî i.e. Tubba’ Abû Karib (‘Ask., p. 67).
12. The first to cover Al-Ka’ba with the veil (kiswa): Tubba’ As‘ad Abû Karib (Qalq., p. 427; ‘Ask., pp. 66-67).
13. The first in Mecca to believe in One God before the onset of Islam: Quṣṣ Ibn Sā‘îda al-Iyâdi (Qalq., p. 436; ‘Ask., s.84).
14. The first to offer up a sacrifice in the House: Ilyās Ibn Muṭar (Qalq., p. 436).
15. The first to light fire in Al-Muzdalifa: Qusayy Ibn Kīlāb (Qalq., p. 436; ‘Ask., p. 34).
16. The first in gāhiyya to take off his sandals while entering Al-Ka‘ba: Al-Walīd Ibn al-Muqīra (Qalq., p. 428; ‘Ask., p. 57; Rust., p. 57).
17. The First to dig siqāya for the pilgrims: Qusayy Ibn Kīlāb (‘Ask., p. 17).

C. Law and Morality

19. The first in the gāhiyya to forbid the arrow game of chance (maysir): Al-Akra‘ Ibn Ḥabīs at-Tamīmī (Qalq., p. 435; ‘Ask., p. 118).
20. The first to stone for debauchery: Rabī‘ Ibn Ḥaddan (Qalq., p. 435; ‘Ask., p. 90) [Both names mean probably the same person; it is hard to say, however, which of the two names is spelled properly]
21. The first to pass judgment on a hermaphrodite: ‘Āmir Ibn az-Zarīb al-Adwānī (‘Ask., p. 89)
23. The first in gāhiyya to forbid drinking of spirits: Al-Walīd Ibn al-Muqīra or Qays Ibn ‘Aṣim (Qalq., p. 435; Rust., p. 173).
24. The first to say that a child belongs to the bed: Akṭām Ibn Ṣayfī (Qalq., p. 435; ‘Ask., p. 95).
25. The first to put diya (blood money) at 100 camels: ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib (Qalq., p. 435; ‘Ask., p. 22; Rust., p. 173); Abū Sayyāra al-Adwānī (‘Ask., p. 25; Rust., p. 173); An-Nāḍr Ibn Kinānā (‘Ask., p. 24).

D. Literature

26. The first to write a qaṣīda: Al-Muḥallīl (Qalq., p. 433).
27. The first to sign letters with words fulān ibn fulān (so-and-so, son of so-and-so): Abū Ibn Ka‘b (Qalq., p. 422).
28. The first to write in Arabic: Murāmīr Ibn Murra of Al-Anbār (‘Ask., p. 115; Rust., p. 173).
29. The first to lean on a stick during the sermon (ḥuṭba): Quṣṣ Ibn Sā‘ida al-Iyādī (Qalq., p. 421; ‘Ask., p. 84).
30. The first to make a speech from a she-camel’s back: Quṣṣ Ibn Sā‘ida
al-Iyādī (Qalq., p. 421; ‘Ask., p. 84).
31. The first to say ammā ba’d: Quss Ibn Sā‘ida al-Iyādī (Qalq., p. 433; ‘Ask., p. 85); Ka‘b Ibn Lu‘ayy (Qalq., vol. vi, p. 231).
32. The first to write min fulan ila fulan: Quss Ibn Sā‘ida al-Iyādī (Qalq., p. 422; ‘Ask., p. 88).
33. The first to start a letter with words bi-‘ismika Allāhumma: Umayya Ibn Abī aš-Šalt (Qalq., p. 422).

E. Wār/Fight
34. The first Arab to use catapult (manğańiq): Ġağīma al-Abraš (Qalq., p. 429; ‘Ask., p. 98; Rust., p. 174).
35. The first to use a whip: Al-Asbaḥ Ibn Malik, the king of Yemen (Qalq., p. 428; ‘Ask., p. 111).
36. The first Arab to be killed by strangulation: Adī Ibn Zayd (‘Ask., p. 127).
37. The first one for whom the swords were prepared: Sa‘d Ibn Sayd (‘Ask., p. 138).
38. The first to use iron [for making a sword]: Sayf Ibn Dū Yāzān (Qalq., p. 429; ‘Ask., p. 118).

F. V aria
39. The first for whom a candle was lit: Ġağīma al-Abraš (‘Ask., p. 98).
41. The first to sell on credit: ‘Amr Ibn Luḥayy (Qalq., p. 436); Ḥudayfa Ibn ‘Abd Ibn Fukayn (‘Ask., p. 68).
42. The first to build a window in Mecca: Budayl Ibn Wārqā’ al-Ḥuzā‘ī (‘Ask., p. 70).
43. The first to build a square house in Mecca: Budayl Ibn Wārqā’ al-Ḥuzā‘ī (‘Ask., p. 70).
44. The first to set up a roof in Mecca: Qusayy Ibn Kilāb (Qalq., p. 426; ‘Ask., p. 70).
45. The first to build a door in Mecca: Ḥaṭīb Ibn Abī Balta (the Companion of the Prophet) (Qalq., p. 426; ‘Ask., p. 69).
46. The first to name Friday ḡum’a: Ka‘b Ibn Lu‘ī (‘Ask., p. 47).
47. The first to receive īlāf for the Qurayšis: Hāšim Ibn ‘Abd Manāf (‘Ask., p. 18).
48. The first king to set by night on a journey: Ġağīma Ibn Malik al-Abraš (Rust., p. 174).
49. The first performer of ḥudā’: one Muḍārī man (‘Ask., p. 21).
50. First to lead the Iyād tribe out of Tihāma (‘Ask., p. 13).
Analysis of the pre-Islamic awā’il has showed that significant part of them are activities of important cultural value. They had been of great significance to pre-Islamic Arabs and later on were adopted by Islam. Of the group of records marked with letter A these are: 1, 2, 4, 5; of group B: 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17; of C: 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25; of D: 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32; of F: 40, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 49, 51.

The list of activities and principles adopted in later centuries is therefore quite long. However, now I would like to point out these which from the emergence of Islam have been a part of either the Islamic doctrine or the Muslim law (šari’a); these are records: 11-17, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 51. The activities could be arranged into two groups: – cult activities connected with Al-Ka’ba (kiswa, nār al-Muzdalifa, siqāya, taking off the shoes before entering the Meccan shrine /which was later to expand to all the mosques/) – prohibitions and dictates relating to law and morality (ban on drinking spirits, ban on hazardous games, punishment for debauchery, punishment for theft, introduction of some principles and legal institutions).

It can be said without exaggeration then that Muslim customs of pre-Islamic provenience belong to those generally received as the most characteristic for Islam as religion. Some of these activities can doubtlessly be qualified as originating from gāhiliyya: for instance, institution of siqāya [together with all the pilgrimage to Mecca!], or lighting of fire in Al-Muzdalifa, the fire which is also called the fire of Quzaḥ (the old Arabian god of the sun, rainbow and lightning). However, some others, such as prohibition of drinking spirits and prohibition of gambling did not, constitute a rule in the pre-Islamic period. Maybe such records were created by way of the reverse projection, possibly to “clear” the own past, pagan but heroic, in view of the endeavors by some (over)zealous Muslims to completely reject the pre-Islamic achievements because of their “unpure” and “satanic” character. Maybe also it is to legitimize certain attitudes in Islam that some reports refer to the pre-Islamic monotheists (e.g. Quss Ibn SṢida, to whom

11 I disregard here the undeniable fact that appropriate anecdotes were ascribed to many of these activities on the grounds of the reverse projection; this will be discussed later.
13 The total disapproval of the pre-Islamic period of the Arab history that some fundamentalist Muslim (e.g. Abul A’la al-Maududi; cf. his Towards understanding Islam, Tripoli, pp. 33-34) theologians propagate seems curious and – which I regret to say – false in this context.
14 The gāhiliyya is called “The Heroic Age” by, e.g., H.A.R. Gibb in Arabic Literature. An Introduction, Oxford 1966.
15 Cf. note 14.
16 On this see, e.g., H. Lammens, L’Arabie occidentale avant l’Hégire, Beirut 1928, pp. 33-34.
the next part of this article will be devoted).

A lot of “inventions” of different value were attributed to members of the Qurayš tribe, which surely is a result of apologetic tendencies in relation to Prophet Muhammad. This aim is clearly shown in the work of Al-‘Askarī who, as I have already mentioned, devotes the first, special chapter of his book about the “pioneers” to the tribe of the Prophet of Islam.

Those of the awā’il which are ascribed to the ḡāhiliyya refer, almost without exception, to particular persons - sometimes obviously historical, sometimes semi-legendary and sometimes those living in the legends only. One way or another, such personal understanding of the historical process clearly manifests itself here.

It is worth pointing here at the clear anachronism of reports on the awā’il. One of such examples comes from the circle of the Prophet. According to what Ibn Rusta relates, it was the Prophet Muhammad’s wife, Zaynab Bint Ṿaḥš, for whom the bier (Ar. na’š) was first built (p. 174). On the other hand it is known that na’š was used long before the rise of Islam.17

3. Awā’il of Quss Ibn Sā‘īda

It will be interesting to study how do the awā’il work in the case of one specific (mythical) Old-Arabian biography; Quss Ibn Sā‘īda al-Iyādī, an alleged bishop of Naḡrān, will be an example here.18 The list of his awā’il looks quite impressive as for a rather unknown Christian monk of the ḡāhiliyya. It consists of the following elements:

I. The first to believe in the Only God in Mecca before the coming of Islam; the first to believe in Resurrection (ba’ṭ).19

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In his *Kitāb al-awā’il* Al-‘Askari (d.1010) cites various statements relating to the priority in this area. In addition to Quss, Waraqa Ibn Nawfal and Zayd Ibn ‘Amr Ibn Nufayl are mentioned. As-Suyūṭi (d. 1505) repeats much more later these versions in his work on *awā’il*. Aṣ-Ṣahrastānī (d. 1153) also mentions Quss and Zayd among the first Arab monotheists, but Quss is not listed among “those who ejected a belief in idols” in *Al-Muḥabbir* by Ibn Ḥabīb.\(^{21}\)

Al-‘Askari adds: “Even if Quss was not the first, his standing is risen by the fact that he was mentioned by the Prophet – let the God save Him - and this is sufficient glory for him”.\(^{22}\)

Quss and Waraqa are also mentioned among “the people of the interval” (*ahl al-fatra*) who were also Christians or generally monotheists.

II. The first to lean on a staff (*ašâ*) during the sermon (*ḥuṭba*).\(^{23}\)

Basically the term *ašâ* was used by the Arabs to designate a stick used by nomad herdsmen in the Arabian Peninsula.\(^{24}\) The function and symbolism of the staff found their confirmation in the Arabic tradition as well, mostly through the Moses’s staff (Ar. مَسَى). In Arabic legends its story begins with Adam who transferred it to Set; after that, it was inherited in succession by: Idris, Noah, Sālih, Abraham, Šu‘ayb and finally Moses.\(^{25}\) Besides, Moses’s staff was not the sheep-hook only: “It is my staff; upon it I lean and with it I beat down the leaves for my flock. It has other uses besides” (*The Qur’ān*, 20:18); it was kind of a magic wand, as the Koranic legend has it further on.

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\(^4\) Al-‘Askari, op. cit., p. 84.


In the stories of the Old Testament the staff plays an important role in the case of prophet Eliseus: it had a healing power (2 Kings 4, 29).

It is the gospel legend, beside the Koranic and the Old Testament tradition, which in the case of Quss may have some significance, too. In the New Testament the stick was an attribute of St. Peter’s and Good Shepherd’s\(^{26}\), and also of St. John the Baptist, to mention the most characteristic examples only. John the Baptist deserves our special attention here, as he shares some more attributes with Quss.

In the context of religious (not only genuinely Arab) tradition then, the stick is, above all, an element which makes Quss Ibn Sa’ida resemble prophets and saints with whom, undoubtedly, he has much in common.\(^{27}\)

Among the Arabs the stick was, from the pre-Islamic times, a symbol of authority and an attribute of judges and orator. That is why, considering tradition which surrounds this object it is hard to believe in the record saying it was Quss to be the first orator to lean upon the stick. It is just one of many elements in the process of mythologization of his person. Considered to be the most outstanding orator of the pre-Islamic Arabs, Quss Ibn Sā’ida was vested with this additional honour.

A few specific works were in Arabic culture devoted to the function of the stick, mostly by classical authors. The most famous of them is chapter titled *Kitāb al-‘aṣā* (Book of the Stick) in *Kitāb al-bayān wa-ṣīt-tabyīn* by Al-Ǧāhiz. Similarly titled work was written by Usāma Ibn Munqiḍ (d.1188), and separate sections on the subject can be also found in subject dictionaries, e.g. *Al-Muḥaṣṣas* by Ibn Sīda (d.1066), or *Fiqh al-luḡa* by At-Ta’ālibī (d.1038).

III. The first to make a speech from the she-camel’s back.\(^{28}\)

IV. The first to make a speech on the hill (ṣarāf).\(^{29}\)

Making a speech from the she-camel’s back or from the hill (the latter is mentioned only by Al-İsfahānī) belong, along with the leaning upon the stick or the shepherd’s staff, to customs typical for hatibs during oration. Similarly, Prophet Muhammad spoke from female camel’s back during the so called “farewell pilgrimage” (the year 632). On the other hand, speeches

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\(^{28}\) Al-Qaṣṣāndī, op. cit, p. 421; Ibn Kaṭīr, op. cit, II, p. 216; As-Suyūṭī, *Al-Wasā’il...,* p. 38; Al-‘Askarī, op. cit., I, p. 84.

\(^{29}\) Al-İsfahānī, op. cit., XIV, p. 41.
from the hill were made, in ġāhiliyya times, during the rain-making ceremonies.\textsuperscript{30} As Muslim prophet stories have it, this was also a custom of John the Baptist (Ar. Yūḥannā)\textsuperscript{31}; the author analogically uses here word šaraf to designate a hill.

It may be that the Muslim custom of making the ġuṭba-oration from the pulpit (minbar) is the echo of this custom.\textsuperscript{32}

V. The first to say ammā baʿd.\textsuperscript{33}

The Arabic tradition disagrees on the priority in this area. The names most frequently mentioned in this context are those of Quss Ibn Sāʿīda’s, Kaʿb Ibn Luʿī’s, Prophet Muḥammad’s ancestor,\textsuperscript{34} and of Prophet Dāwūd’s.\textsuperscript{35} Still further possibilities are quoted, in the form of mnemotechnic verse, by Muḥammad Bahṣat al-Ąṭārī, the editor of Aš-Šūlī’s work (cf., p. 37, n.1).

In the Arabic rhotorics, the ammā baʿd phrase was used mostly in ġuṭbas, wasiyyas-testaments and risālas-letters. The expression is quite difficult to translate (lit. “and next”), and in the old Arabian orations appeared most frequently at the beginning of an issue, whereas in the Islamic texts it appeared either after the ḥamdala or another relevant formula, or after the phrase min fulān ilaʾ fulān (cf. hereafter).\textsuperscript{36}

According to Al-ʿAskarī, the first text in the Arabic literature to begin with this formula is a wasiyya by Quss Ibn Sāʾīda.

The fact that the priority in this area is ascribed, along with Quss, to Dāwūd and the Prophet’s grandfather, indicates a really high position of

\textsuperscript{30} Cf. Al-Qalqašandi, op. cit., I, p. 409; MM. Dziekan, Arabia Magica, p. 98.
\textsuperscript{32} On the other customs of the ġuṭbs see A. Ar-Rubayʿī, Quss Ibn Sāʾīda al-Iyādī. Ḥayātuhu. ġuṭbuhu. ·iʿruhu. Ḥuṭbuhu. Śiʿrahu, Baghdad 1974, 89-93, which includes further bibliography.
\textsuperscript{34} Al-Qalqašandi, op. cit., VI, p. 231; Aḥ-Ṣūlī, Adab al-kuttāb, wyd. M. B. al-Ąṭārī, Cairo 1341 H., p. 36.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.; Al-ʿAskarī, op. cit., p. 86.
\textsuperscript{36} Aḥ-Ṣūlī, op. cit., p. 87; Al-ʿAskarī, Kitāb as-šināʾ atayn al-kitāba wa-āṣ-šīʾr, ed. ‘A. M. al-Bağāwī, M. A. F. Ibrāhīm, Cairo 1971 p. 165; on the grammatical structure of the expression see Al-Qalqašandi, Subḥ..., VI, p. 231.
Quss among medieval Muslim scholars.

According to many Muslim authors, the formula was very frequently used by the Prophet and his Companions. Although the expression had already been criticized in the middle ages, it was still in use in the XIX century – for instance, ‘Abd ar-Rahmān al-Kawākibī opens his work *Umm al-Qurā*37 with those words. Sporadically the expression is still used nowadays.

VI. The first to write *min fulān ʿila fulān*.38

The *min fulān ʿila fulān* formula constitutes the most popular way of opening letters in the Arab-Muslim epistolary art.39 According to a tradition conveyed by Al-ʿAskarī in his *Kitāb al-awāʿil*, it was Quss Ibn Sāʿida who first used this formula in a letter written to an unknown addressee (as the record has it: *min Quss Ibn Sāʿida ilā fulān ʿiba fulān*). The formula, simple and comfortable, had already been used in the antiquity and was also very popular in more modern times in the European culture. Its actual spread in the Arabic language opens with the rise of Islam, which is connected with the spread of the written language and the custom (or necessity) of correspondence. Along with *ammā baʿd* formula which followed it and an introduction in the form of *basmala* (or any other expression of Islamic character) preceding it, the *min fulān ʿila fulān* phrase was used by famous personalities of the Islamic history. This tradition was sanctified by Prophet Muhammad’s example: Al-Bāqillānī (d.1012) in his *Iʿjāz al-Qurān* quotes other cases, i.e. the Prophet’s letters to Khusrau (Ar. Kūšrāv) and Negus (Ar. An-Naṣārī) in which, however, the Prophet restricts himself to formula *min Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh ʿala ʿiba ʿala Muḥammad*, etc.40

VII. The first to say: “the plaintiff should introduce the evidence, and the oath is required from the defendant” (*al-bīna ʿalā ʿal-muddaʾa ʿašā-ʾal-yamin ʿala ʿal-muddaʾa ʿašā-ʾal-yamin*).41

The priority in shaping this legal principle is ascribed to Quss Ibn Sāʿida and prophet Dāwūd, as is the case with the *ammā baʿd* formula, and also to

39 Cf. Al-Qaṣṣāndī, op. cit., VI, p. 344 and passim.
40 Al-Bāqillānī, op. cit., p. 134.
Alí Ibn Abí Ťalib. Analogically, it is connected with the Sura 38, 19(20) of the Qur’án. The Koranic fašlu āl-ḥiṭābi is explained in various ways. Traditionalists, among others, believe that fašlu āl-ḥiṭābi is al-qadā, or giving just judgments which are based on principle that the plaintiff has to introduce the evidence, and the oath is required from the defendant. The principle is quoted in various versions by At-Ťabarí: aš-šāhidānī ‘alā āl-muddā’i wa-āl-yamīn ‘alā āl-munkir (the plaintiff must introduce two witnesses, and the oath is required from the defendant who pleads not guilty), and: al-bīnā ‘alā āt-tālibin wa-āl-yamīn ‘alā āl-maṭlūb (the plaintiff introduces the evidence, and the defendant the oath).

This principle, which seems to originate in the customary law (‘āda), has been taken over by the Islamic law. This assertion is testified to both the fact that it is ascribed to ‘Alí and that it exists among the other valid legal principles mentioned in risāla fi āl-qadā written by ‘Umar Ibn al-Hashāb to Muḥammad al-Ash‘ari, and quoted later by Al-Ǧāḥīz in his Kitāb al-bayān wa-āt-tabyīn.

In his commentary to this principle, ‘Umar explains: “Do not acknowledge the right of the plaintiff unless he introduces the evidence in the time [you have] fixed. If he introduces it, you decide in his favour, and if he does not, you judge him [accordingly]”.

The list of the awā‘il of Quss Ibn Sā‘ida is in practice the same in various records that convey it. As-Siğistānī’s record contained in his Kitāb al-mu‘ammarīn is the widest and the earliest of the kind - the author was the first to mention the standardization of the rules of behavior during the sermon (ḥutba) (activities III, V) and the shaping of the formula typical for the Arabic epistolography (IV). Al-Ǧāḥīz adds the monotheism (I) to this list, as well as the custom of making speeches from the she-camel’s back (VI), though Quss is not regarded here as the first. It is Abū Hilāl al-Askari (X/XI century) who first quotes this act among the awā‘il of Quss; a mention of the shaping of the legal rule by Quss (II) which was first mentioned in Kitāb al-mahāsīn wa-āl-masāwī by Al-Bayhaqū (X century) was probably the latest to appear on records.

42 An-Naysābūrī, Taḥsīr ǧarāt ʿabal-Quṭr ʿān wa-rağā ʿabal-furqān, on margins of At-Ťabarī, Ğāň t al-bayān fi taḥsīr al-Quṭr, Būlāq, 1329 H., XXIII, p. 90.
43 At-Ťabarī, op. cit., p. 88.
44 Ibid., p. 89.
45 Vol. II, 50; cf. also Al-Bağillānī, op. cit., p. 141.
46 Al-Ǧāḥīz, op. cit., pp. 50-51.
4. Conclusion

In the case of the Arabic stories on awâ’il, we deal with a clear fusion of history and legend. It is also the case of Quss Ibn Sâ‘ida, who is traditionally perceived as a demi-god, or a culture hero and creator of certain important rules of life (mostly literary, but in this case also religious) as well as the author of a legal rule accepted also by the Islamic jurisprudence.

Hamilton A. R. Gibb noticed here a clear tendency: “the history of the Islamic Community is essentially the contribution of individual men and women to the building up and transmission of its specific culture; that is these persons (rather than the political governors) who represent or reflect the active forces in Muslim society in their respective spheres; and their individual contributions are worthy of being recorded for future generations.”

Gibb’s commentary relates to the biographical literature, but I think that it also fits perfectly the “pioneer” literature.

On the other hand, the will to justify certain Muslim rites with their historicity is connected, in my opinion, with the rule presented by E. Shills, who says that these are particular ties with those, who preserved given traditions in the past that constitute a condition necessary for adopting and accepting a tradition as one’s own norm. This is not, however, the only explanation of this striking phenomenon. It may be that it is a Muslim version of a phenomenon noticed by Peter Gray in relation to the historiography of the European middle ages, directed at the central myth: the Incarnation of Christ.

In the case of the cultural circle with which we are dealing here, the rise of Islam itself and descent of the Koran – the holy Word of God – may be considered to be the central myth.

Referring to definite persons, authors, or the first executors of some certain acts, may still have another explanation in the Arabic culture. The transfer of information happened in this culture almost exclusively through personal contacts, as proved by the chains of authorities (isnād) that precede records on historical, religious and literary events, typical for the Sunna and the Arab-Islamic historiography. This kind of transmission is characteristic for the “oral” cultures - and the Arabic culture preserved the signs of its oral character well into the later middle ages.

The awâ’il phenomenon can be interpreted according to M. Eliade’s methodology of the sacred time. In the context of sacrum the acts, gestures

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and sayings, authored by ancestors more or less distant in time, become acts and gestures of archetypic character which place man in the sacred time. At the same moment, this time is creative time in the sense of the in illo tempore, when the world and the whole universe were set in order.⁵⁰ In the case of the Arabic āwâ’il stories we deal with a clear fusion of history and legend. The materials which I have analyzed in the present article may not have indicated the historical personalities clearly enough, but an examination of the entire body of available material confirms this assertion sufficiently [cf., for example, the above-quoted table of contents of Al-‘Askarī’s work].

The concept of āwâ’il would thus constitute the realization of non-periodical repeating and the Muslim thought’s inclination to ward the full hierophanization of time. This way the sacred time is not only a period of cyclically and regularly repeated religious rites, but also of non-cyclic activities of [seemingly] secular character. As M. Eliade puts it, one can always go fishing, hunting, etc., and imitate a mythical hero, personify him, reproduce mythical time, go out of the secular persistence, and repeat a mythical story. Every time can become a sacred time, of any moment the duration can be transformed into infinity.⁵¹ Thus the pagan time of ḡāhiliyya becomes a time of culture heroes, a time of demiurges who had shaped the way that was to be taken by the later Arabic culture, already marked with a stamp of its religion - Islam. So ḡāhiliyya could not be a time without the religion which, after all, does not necessarily imply a belief in God, gods or ghosts, but relates to the experience of sacrum and thus is connected with ideas of the existence, the meaning and the truth.⁵² All this confirms Eliade’s opinion that no religion is completely new, no religious message ruins the past completely; it is rather about reshaping, renewal, revalorization, integration of elements - these most important ones! – of the eternal religious tradition.⁵³

Georges Khoury seems to be right then, when he calls for the reevaluation of our knowledge concerning the pre-Islamic period in the history of the Arabs and for looking at it from another perspective, using the latest accomplishments of the humanities treated as a whole. This will surely let to a wider understanding of certain phenomena, seemingly purely Islamic, which however, are naturally marked with the pagan sacrum of the ḡāhiliyya.

⁵¹ M. Eliade, Traktat..., p. 382.
⁵³ Ibid., p. 23.