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# ”Storytelling” and ”History writing” in Seventh-Century Near East

Maria Conterno

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## **“Storytelling” and “History writing” in Seventh-Century Near East**

Maria Conterno

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The present paper is a study on the circulation of historiographical material across linguistic, religious and political borders in the seventh-century Near East and Mediterranean. Contrary to other scholars, who have tried to explain the similarities among certain historical texts looking only for shared written sources, the author points out the importance that oral transmission must have had in the circulation of historical information, before and beside written production, and finds evidence for that in eight medieval chronicles written in Greek, Latin, Syriac and Arabic.

**Working Papers Series**

# “Storytelling” and “History writing” in Seventh-Century Near East

Maria Conterno

September 2014

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## Abstract

The present paper is a study on the circulation of historiographical material across linguistic, religious and political borders in the seventh-century Near East and Mediterranean. Contrary to other scholars, who have tried to explain the similarities among certain historical texts looking only for shared written sources, the author points out the importance that oral transmission must have had in the circulation of historical information, before and beside written production, and finds evidence for that in eight medieval chronicles written in Greek, Latin, Syriac and Arabic.

## Keywords

intercultural exchanges, historiography, oral transmission, Near East

## « Narration des histoires » et « écriture de l'Histoire » dans le Proche-Orient du septième siècle

### Résumé

Cet article présente une étude sur la circulation des matériaux historiographiques à travers les frontières linguistiques, religieuses et politiques au Proche-Orient et à travers la Méditerranée au septième siècle. Les similarités que l'on observe entre certains textes historiques ont toujours été expliquées par l'utilisation de la même source écrite, mais l'auteur fait ici remarquer que la transmission orale devait aussi jouer un rôle très important dans la circulation des informations historiques, avant et à côté de la production écrite. On en trouve notamment des traces dans huit chroniques médiévales écrites en grec, latin, syriaque et arabe.

### Mots-clefs

échanges interculturels, historiographie, transmission orale, Proche Orient

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The expression “circuit de Théophile d’Édesse” has been coined by Antoine Borrut (Borrut A., 2005; Borrut A., 2011) with reference to the theory proposed by Lawrence Conrad to explain the presence of shared material in Theophanes Confessor’s *Chronographia*, Michael the Syrian’s chronicle, the anonymous *Chronicle of 1234* and Agapius of Mabbug’s *Kitāb al-‘unwān*. According to this theory, these four texts rely on Theophilus of Edessa’s lost *History* for large part of the events of the 7th century and the first half of the 8th century, Agapius directly, Theophanes through a Greek translation-continuation of it, Michael the Syrian and the anonymous chronicler of 1234 via the lost work of Dionysius of Tell Mahre (Conrad L.I., 1988; Conrad L.I., 1992; Hoyland R.G., 1991; Hoyland R.G., 1997; Hoyland R.G., 2011). This “circuit” of intercultural transmission involves, according to Robert Hoyland, three more sources, which show fewer but seemingly significant correspondences with the so-called “Theophilus’ dependants”, namely the *Chronicle of Seert* (an East-Syrian chronicle written in Arabic in the 10th or early 11th century) and two Latin chronicles written in Spain in the 8th century, the *Chronicle of 741* (also called *Byzantine-Arab Chronicle of 741*) and the *Chronicle of 754* (also called *Hispanic Chronicle of 754*).<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will focus precisely on the last three texts, on the information they share with the previously mentioned ones and on the supposed reliance of all of them on the same written source.

The resemblances between the two Latin chronicles and Theophanes’ *Chronographia* had already been observed by their first editor, Theodor Mommsen, who hypothesized the derivation of the shared accounts of Oriental events from an Arabic source.<sup>2</sup> In the *Epimetrum* following the two texts, Theodor Nöldeke proposed a different hypothesis, suggesting that the material shared by the Latin chronicles and Theophanes

came rather from the work of a Syrian miaphysite author, writing most likely in Greek.<sup>3</sup> Although the close parallels are admittedly few, Hoyland includes the two Hispanic chronicles in the “circuit de Théophile d’Édesse”, supposing that they depended on the same Greek translation of Theophilus’ work used by Theophanes. His reconstruction is followed by other scholars, as Borrut and Stephen Shoemaker (Shoemaker S., 2012: 40-42). Contrariwise, according to Wolfram Brandes, the Oriental material to be found in the two Latin chronicles is older than the “Syriac Common Source” shared by Theophanes and the Syriac chronicles, but it comes nonetheless from an Eastern written source on which they all ultimately depend.<sup>4</sup> A different view has been expressed by James Howard-Johnston, according to whom the reason of the resemblances between the two Hispanic chronicles and Theophilus of Edessa’s dependants “is probably to be sought in a common ultimate rooting in reality or the management of news about reality, rather than use of a common written source” (Howard-Johnston J., 2010: 433).

These two chronicles show extensive textual parallels with one another. Mommsen deemed them both continuations of Isidore of Seville’s history, accordingly he named them *Continuatio Isidoriana Byzantia-Arabica et Hispana* and printed their texts in two parallel columns in order to highlight the shared parts.<sup>5</sup> In particular, the two texts are very close in the sections containing correspondences with the other sources, and this is

1. Cf. Hoyland R.G., 2011: 15-19; Borrut A., 2011: 150-151, 252-232. Out of brevity, when referring to both the texts together I will call them “Hispanic chronicles” or “Latin chronicles”.

2. “Tenemus igitur chronicorum Arabum scriptorum saeculo octavo medio epitomen contaminatam et cum historiis Isidorianis et cum laterculo imperatoris Orientis. Ex iisdem chronicis conferenti patet Byzantios scriptores saeculi octavi et noni Nicephorum et Theophanes eas sumpsisse, quae de rebus gestis Arabum adferunt” (*Hispanic Chronicles*: 324). Cf. also the second critical edition of the two texts (Gil J., 1973: xxxv-xl).

3. “Quae in Continuatione Byzantia Arabica de rebus Orientis narrantur, non dubito, quin in Syria scripta sint. [...] Quo verisimile fit, cum heterodoxum fuisse, fortasse Monophysitam ut erant fere omnes terrarum Syrarum Christiani, excepta Palestina; [...] Qui haec in Syria conscripsit aut lingua Syriaca aut Graeca sit oportet. Et cum Syrorum lingua hominibus Latine loquentibus non magis nota esset quam lingua Latina Syriam habitantibus, haec e Graecis Latina facta esse certum videtur. Neque causa est cur conciniamus, textum Graecus e Syriaco verum esse” (*Hispanic Chronicles*: 368-369). See also Proudfoot A.S., 1974: 406; Rochow I., 1991: 46-48.

4. “Auf welchen Wege dieses orientalische Quellenmaterial nach Spanien kam, kann hier nicht behandelt werden. Auf jeden Fall scheint es eine Quelle zu repräsentieren, die vor die von Mango, Conrad u.a. angenommene Chronik ca. 750 - neuerdings meist Theophil von Edessa zugeschrieben - zu datieren ist” (Brandes W., 1998: 555).

5. For this practical reason I will refer to Mommsen’s edition rather than to the more recent one produced by Juan Gil (Gil J., 1973), where the two texts are printed separately. On these two texts see also Burgess R.W. – Kulikowski M., 2013: 201-203.

why Hoyland took into account just the *Chronicle of 741*, giving for granted that the matching passages in the *Chronicle of 754* derive from the same Syrian source (Hoyland R.G., 2011: 16-19; Collins R., 1989: 52-63).

The pieces of information that the two Latin chronicles share with Theophanes and the other texts are the following:

- Heraclius’ and Nicetas’ twofold expedition to overthrow Phocas;
- the defeat of the Byzantine general Theodore at Gabitha against the Arabs;
- ‘Umar I’s murder;
- a peace treaty between Marwān and Constantine;
- a positive remark on ‘Umar II;
- Yazid ibn al-Muhallab’s rebellion against Yazid II.

As regards the *Chronicle of Seert*, the parallels between it and the other texts have been highlighted by Hoyland in his recent volume containing, in English translation, all the material potentially coming from Theophilus of Edessa’s work (Hoyland R.G., 2011). The manuscript preserving the chronicle is defective and stops abruptly in 650. Hoyland observes that the overlap with the other sources supposedly involved in the “circuit de Théophile d’Édesse” is limited, nevertheless he counts the chronicle among Theophilus’ dependants and reports in the volume the few matching passages:

- Heraclius’ and Nicetas’ twofold expedition to overthrow Phocas;
- the desertion of the Persian general Šahrbaraz;
- the defeat of the Persian army on the river Zab;
- a sign in the sky foreshadowing the Arab invasion;
- Heraclius’ withdrawal from Syria;
- the building of a mosque on the Temple site at Jerusalem.

According to Hoyland, the first three items could derive as well from some other source shared by Agapius and Dionysius rather than from Theophilus’ chronicle, and the notice concerning the sign in the sky was “likely to travel easily between

chronicles”, therefore he regards only the last item as coming for certain from Theophilus’ work.

Another text will be taken into account in this study, namely Patriarch Nicephorus’ *Breviarium*. The presence of material of Oriental origin in the *Breviarium* is a debated question. Cyril Mango, and Ann Proudfoot before him, denied any connection with non-Byzantine sources.<sup>6</sup> Mommsen, though, thought that both Theophanes and Nicephorus had drawn information on Oriental facts from a source of Arabic origin.<sup>7</sup> David Olster spotted some parallels between Nicephorus and Michael the Syrian in the accounts on the 7th century,<sup>8</sup> and Wolfram Brandes pointed out the presence in the *Breviarium* of apocalyptic material of Syriac origin (Brandes W., 1987; Brandes W., 1993/1994). Therefore, it is worth including it in this analysis, since the resemblances it shows with the other texts, even if minimal, may be very telling and suggest a different perspective on this “circuit” of intercultural transmission. The following items will be considered:

- a comment on the fact that while the Persians were devastating the land outside Constantinople, Phocas was inflicting even heavier damages to the people inside it;
- Heraclius’ and Nicetas’ twofold expedition to overthrow Phocas;
- the fall into disgrace of Priscus, Phocas’ son-in-law, and Heraclius’ dismissal words to him;
- an episode concerning the Persian general Šahrbaraz and a letter of Khosrau’s counterfeited by Heraclius;

## Shared material concerning Heraclius’ reign

The only item shared by all the sources is the anecdote of Heraclius’ and Nicetas’ expedition against Phocas.<sup>9</sup> The eight texts say that the two

6. “Theophanes is unique among Byzantine chroniclers in his direct use of a foreign source” (Mango C. – Scott R., 1997: lxxxii). “...it must be stated that Nicephorus had no links with Syriac sources” (Proudfoot A.S., 1974: 415).

7. Cf. n. 4.

8. “These two scholars [i.e. E.W. Brooks and N.V. Pigulevskaja] confined their analyses to the eighth century, but abundant parallels between Greek and Syriac sources exist in the seventh century materials, not only between Theophanes and Michael the Syrian, but also between Nicephorus and Michael the Syrian” (Olster D., 1993: 11).

9. Theophanes: 297; Agapius: 449; Michael the Syrian: 391;



young men were sent by their fathers, Heraclius the elder and Gregory,<sup>10</sup> and that Heraclius went by sea, whereas Nicetas by land, with the mutual agreement that the one who would reach Constantinople first would be king. Heraclius arrived first, thanks to calm sea and favourable winds,<sup>11</sup> and he ascended to the throne after killing the tyrant Phocas. This narrative, although containing some elements that match the historical truth, is most likely fictional (Kaegi W.E., 2003: 43; Howard-Johnston J., 2011: 203.). The two Latin chronicles say that Heraclius rebelled because of the deportation of his fiancée Flavia from Libya to Constantinople, ordered by Phocas. The two Syriac chronicles depending on Dionysius of Tell Mahre present instead a rhetoric eulogy of Heraclius the elder and Gregory, saying that they were the best among Roman noblemen, sage and valorous, and they were outraged by Phocas' cruel policy. Such details, together with the race between the two champions, reveal that the story is possibly a piece of Heraclian propaganda fabricated later on and evolved into a popular heroic tale. Hoyland himself, noticing its presence in all the sources, observes that "presumably it derives ultimately from a Byzantine source, possibly the continuation of John of Antioch" (Hoyland R.G., 2011: 60 n. 68). He does not delve, though, into the question of how this fragment of a Byzantine text might have reached all the other chronicles.

The story of Šahrbaraz's desertion is to be found in the *Chronicle of Seert*, but with some interesting additions compared to the version shared by Theophanes, Agapius, Michael the Syrian and the *Chronicle of 1234*.<sup>12</sup> According to the latter, in fact, while Šahrbaraz is besieging Constantinople,<sup>13</sup> some people accuse him of belittling the king

and claiming the credit for the Persian victories. Khusrau writes a letter to Šahrbaraz's fellow general Kardigan (or Kardarigas), containing the order to behead him and take on the command of his troops. But the letter is intercepted by the Romans in Galatia and brought to Heraclius,<sup>14</sup> who summons Šahrbaraz and shows it to him. Šahrbaraz then swears allegiance to Heraclius and counterfeits Khusrau's letter adding the order to kill, along with himself, many of the most valorous and prominent men in the Persian army. He puts Khusrau's seal on the forged letter and shows it to his fellow generals, thus causing the whole army to desert and go over to the Romans. To the same basic plot the *Chronicle of Seert* adds two major elements. The first is the reason of Šahrbaraz's (here called Shahryūn) criticism toward Khusrau: Šahrbaraz's daughter had been insulted at Ctesiphon by the son of a Christian man and he had written to the king asking to avenge his daughter on his behalf as he was facing the Romans, but Khusrau had taken no notice of his request, causing the general's wrath. The second is the reason why Heraclius had not counterattacked yet: questioned by Šahrbaraz, the emperor reveals that he has been preparing the counteroffensive for a long time, but a dream, showing Khusrau riding an elephant and chasing him, keeps him from taking action. After Šahrbaraz has sworn allegiance to him together with Kardigan (here called Fardinjān) and their troops, Heraclius dreams that he is riding an elephant and chasing Khusrau, from which he knows that the time for attacking has come. One key element is missing in this version, namely the detail of Šahrbaraz counterfeiting Khusrau's letter. Kardigan in fact is said to follow Šahrbaraz of his own initiative and not because of any ruse. This story, too, sounds very much like a fabricated one, and the variants to be found in the *Chronicle of Seert* – the offended daughter, the denied revenge, the emperor's premonitory dream – represent the typical stratification of invented details to which a narrative is subject when it is retold and reused in different contexts. Indeed, a detail in the part concerning Šahrbaraz's daughter reveals the Persian origin of this additional piece: the chronicle says in fact that the girl was offended by Shamṭā, the son of Yazdīn, a Christian magnate known also from other sources and other passages of the

*Chronicle of 1234*: 225–226; *Hispanic Chronicles*: 334–335; *Chronicle of Seert*: 526–527; Nicephorus: 34. Cf. Hoyland R.G., 2011: 59–61.

10. With the only exception of the two Latin chronicles, that do not mention them. In the other texts Heraclius and Gregory are variously referred to as the governor of Africa and his second-in-command (Theophanes), two men who revolted in Africa (Agapius), two patricians of Africa (Michael the Syrian and the *Chronicle of 1234*), the master of Africa and the master of Egypt (*Chronicle of Seert*), two brothers appointed by Maurice governors of Libya (Nicephorus).

11. The detail of Heraclius' fortunate navigation is omitted by Theophanes and the two Latin chronicles.

12. Theophanes, pp. 323–324; Agapius, p. 461–462; Michael the Syrian, p. 408–409; *Chronicle of 1234*, p. 231–233; *Chronicle of Seert*, p. 540–541. Cf. Hoyland 2011, pp. 69–73.

13. Chalcedon in Theophanes.

14. Heraclius' son in Theophanes, who places the anecdote after Heraclius had moved with the army toward Persia leaving his son in charge at Constantinople.

chronicle itself (Wood P., 2013: 180-181, 211-214, 216-219). Be it real or fictional, such a detail probably veils an actual friction between the Persian general and the members of the influential Christian family.

The anecdote is not reported by the Latin chronicles nor by Patriarch Nicephorus, but the *Breviarium* contains an account that remarkably echoes some elements of this story.<sup>15</sup> While Šahrbaraz is besieging Chalcedon, Khusrau gets to know that Heraclius is moving against him supported by an army of Turk allies, therefore he writes to Šahrbaraz the order to give up the siege and return to back him up with his troops. The letter, though, is intercepted by the Romans and brought to Heraclius, who then forges a different one containing the order to carry on with the siege, places Khusrau's seal on it and has it delivered to Šahrbaraz. Here as well we have a letter written by Khusrau, sent to the army that is besieging Chalcedon/Constantinople, intercepted by Roman soldiers, delivered to Heraclius, counterfeited and re-sealed with Khusrau's seal. Nicephorus' account is less improbable, and may reflect an actual operation of military espionage realised during Heraclius' Persian campaign. The two narratives may be totally independent from one another,<sup>16</sup> but Nicephorus's story might as well contain a core of truthful information starting from which a more fanciful tale was developed and spread. Theophanes' version, in fact, seems to bear another trace of the original story, as he says that Khusrau, in the message sent to Kardigan, ordered him to take on the command of the army and hasten back to Persia to assist him, which is actually what Khusrau wants Šahrbaraz to do in Nicephorus' account.

Finally, it should be remarked that an episode concerning Šahrbaraz's desertion is known also to

Muslim sources, as Walter Kaegi and Paul Cobb have first remarked. There are two versions of it, one ascribed to al-Zuhri (d.730 ca) and reported in Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam's *Futūḥ Miṣr*, and the other going back to 'Ikrima (d. 724) and preserved by al-Ṭabarī in his *Ta'riḫ*.<sup>17</sup> In al-Zuhri's version, Khusrau is angry at Šahrbaraz because of his lingering in Anatolia instead of besieging Constantinople, and he writes to one of the generals that are with him to kill him. The latter, who remains unnamed, refuses and tries to convince Khusrau that he cannot do without Šahrbaraz because he is a most skilled commander. But Khusrau repeats the order writing to him three times, and at the third refusal he writes to Šahrbaraz ordering him to kill the other general. Šahrbaraz summons the general to fulfill the order, but is shown Khusrau's three letters by the other and they both decide to desert their king and go over to Heraclius, whom they contact and secretly meet. The plot of 'Ikrima's account is almost the same, with the only difference that Šahrbaraz is the one who refuses three times to execute the other general, which is said to be his brother and is named Farrukhān.<sup>18</sup> The elements that the two Muslim accounts share with Theophanes and the Syriac chronicles are Khusrau's anger towards Šahrbaraz, his sending a letter containing the order to kill him and Šahrbaraz's meeting with Heraclius, ending with an alliance between them. The only element shared also by Nicephorus' account is the presence of a letter written by Khusrau to his general.

The resemblances among all the accounts are best and most simply explained by the oral circulation, development, and reshaping of an original narrative reflecting a core of historical truth. As said above, Nicephorus is likely to preserve the version that is closest to the real event, whereas the four so-called Theophilus' dependants on one side, and the *Chronicle of Seert* on the other, testify to the independent written registration of two further stages of reworking. The Islamic narratives preserve only a vague trace of it, which nonetheless

15. Nicephorus: 56-58.

16. As suggested by Walter Kaegi and Paul Cobb, who make a distinction between the "Heraclian historiographical tradition" represented by Nicephorus' account (earlier and of Constantinopolitan origin) and the later tradition transmitted via Theophilus of Edessa's lost work (Kaegi W.E. – Cobb P., 2008: 107). According to Howard-Johnston, instead, the account of Theophanes and the Syriac chronicles is very early as well, being "an elaborate piece of disinformation manufactured and disseminated by the Roman authorities soon after the completion of the Persian withdrawal, with the twin objects of souring relations between the *shahanshab* and the greatest of his generals and of encouraging dissident activity among provincials in the occupied territories" (Howard-Johnston J., 2011: 204).

17. Both the accounts are reported in English translation in Kaegi W.E. – Cobb P., 2008: 108-112.

18. It should be noted that Farrukhān is actually Šahrbaraz's real name, Šahrbaraz being just an honorific title meaning "Wild Boar of the Realm" (Jones A.H. – Martindale J.R. – Morris J., 1971-1992: IIIB, 1141-1144). It seems that the Islamic tradition splitted a single character in two, or that it somehow mismatched Šahrbaraz (with his two names) and his fellow general. The same mismatch may be reflected in the name Fardinjān in the *Chronicle of Seert*.



confirms them as testimonies of the multifarious oral evolution of the same original account, or even of the different accounts originated from the same event.<sup>19</sup>

Nicephorus offers another piece of evidence pointing to the independent record of spoken words in written sources. He shares in fact with Theophanes, Michael the Syrian and the *Chronicle of 1234* a comment on how Phocas was doing worse damages within Constantinople than the Persian army outside of it.<sup>20</sup> The identical wording and the identical position (after the description of the Persians’ advance in Anatolia) in Theophanes and in the two Syriac chronicles point to the derivation of the remark from the same written source:

Theophanes: “They took Galatia and Paphlagonia and advanced as far as Chalcedon, killing indiscriminately people of every age. *And while the Persians were oppressing the Romans outside the city, Phocas was committing worse crimes inside by murdering and imprisoning people*”.

Michael the Syrian: “The Persians crossed to the west side of the Euphrates and captured Mabbug, Qenneshre, Aleppo, and Antioch. *And while the Persians were doing these things, Phocas was killing the leaders from within, and many other people, until almost all the free men and those capable of fighting were done away with*”.

*Chronicle of 1234*: “Thus he [i.e. Šahrbaraz] passed through the regions of Cappadocia and Galatia and reached the vicinity of Constantinople. There was no region that rose up against him which he did not devastate and destroy, killing its men and enslaving its populace. *And while the Persians were thus ruining the Roman territory, Phocas was outdoing them from within by his lack of clemency, killing the leaders of the Romans until his kingdom was bereft of powerful men*”.

Nicephorus presents the same remark in a slightly different context, adding a telling detail:

19. The presence of a core of historical truth within the Christian accounts had been already assumed by Cyril Mango, who did not deem the *Chronicle of Seert* a dependant of Theophilus of Edessa’s. Mango observed that both the *Chronicle of Seert* and Theophanes mention Galatia as the place where the letter was intercepted, and saw this as a sign that the two accounts are ultimately grounded on historical facts (Mango C., 1985).

20. Theophanes: 296; Michael the Syrian: 391; *Chronicle of 1234*: 224; Nicephorus: 34. Cf. Hoyland R.G., 2011: 57–58.

“After the murder of Emperor Maurice, Phokas, who had committed this [deed], seized the imperial office. When he had assumed power the situation of the Christians came to such a pitch of misfortune that *it was commonly said that, while the Persian were injuring the Romans State from without, Phokas was doing worse [damage] within*”.

Noticing the presence of the same comment in the four texts, Hoyland suggests that it, too, might derive ultimately from the continuation of John of Antioch (Hoyland R.G., 2011: 57 n. 59; Mango C. – Scott R., 1997: 425 n. 4). But here as well there is no reason to suppose a unique written source linking the *Breviarium* to the other three texts, since Nicephorus himself tells us that he (or rather his source) is simply reporting what had actually become a common saying among people, which could just as well have been recorded by different sources independently. Indeed, such a common saying might even have been embodied into larger oral accounts centred on Heraclius’ figure, to mark the *spannung*, the peak of distress caused by the tyrant and brought to an end by the saving intervention of the future emperor.

Some other odd coincidences point to an oral circulation of accounts concerning Heraclius’ reign. For instance, in Michael the Syrian and in Nicephorus we find the same words of dismissal attributed to Phocas (at Philippicus, Maurice’s brother-in-law; Michael the Syrian: 379) and to Heraclius (at “Crispus”, i.e. Priscus, Phocas’ son-in-law; Nicephorus: 39–41) respectively. The two scenarios are very similar, since in both cases a relative-in-law of the deposed emperor tries to ingratiate himself with the new ruler and is warded off with the following reproach: “Since you have not been a good relative, how will you make a good friend?”. After that, both Philippicus and Priscus get tonsured and retire to a monastery. Of course, such a remark on loyalty is a *topos*, but *topoi* are precisely among the main features of oral accounts, as role reversal and words/deeds transfer typically occur in oral transmission. In this case, the shift of the cue from one emperor to the other may have been facilitated by the fact that the same word (meaning generically “male relative-in-law”<sup>21</sup>) designates, in Greek and in Syriac as well, both the brother-in-law and the son-in-law. Furthermore, shortly after reporting Priscus’ death in the monastery, Nicephorus men-

21. Namely *gambros* in Greek and *ḥatnō* in Syriac.

tions Philippicus too, recalling that he as well had been tonsured: a possible clue that the two characters were somehow associated.

Another *topos* of heroic tales is to be found in the *Chronicle of 754* (*Hispanic Chronicles*: 335-336).<sup>22</sup> Heraclius and Khusrau decide to have a duel between two warriors, chosen within the respective armies. Cunningly, Khusrau chooses a soldier almost as huge as the giant Goliath and no one among the Romans dares to face him. Therefore the emperor in person takes the field and, as a new David, defeats the opponent with one single blow. Beside the clear biblical echoes,<sup>23</sup> this episode finds partial matches in two different passages of the *Chronographia* and the *Breviarium*. In the latter we read that the Persian general Razates delivers to the Roman camp a challenge to a duel but no one volunteers, therefore Heraclius himself goes forth and fights against Razates in a single combat (Nicephorus: 61). Theophanes, instead, says that Heraclius, during the battle on the river Saros, is attacked by a giant man from the Persian army and he confronts him alone, strikes him and throws him in the river (Theophanes: 314).

The correspondences analysed so far urge us to stop hunting a supposed written “Urquell” shared by all the chronicles and to take seriously into account the idea that this material was simply being circulated orally. Indeed, some of the features highlighted in the shared accounts suggest that they originally belonged to a sort of epic narrative centred on the figure of Emperor Heraclius. The recurring of the same key details in modified contexts leads to argue that such a narrative was transmitted orally and was subject to the typical metamorphosis of oral epos. To say how this corpus of heroic tales actually originated, how far it spread and by whom it was passed around, a broader investigation would be required, involving a larger range of sources.<sup>24</sup> What can be said so far is that it was in part grounded on some real events and, although

produced within the Byzantine Empire, it crossed linguistic, religious and political borders.

It would be tempting to infer that it was a product of Heraclian propaganda, in which case we would expect it to contain only successful episodes, mainly pertaining to the Persian wars. But we find correspondences among our sources also in pieces of information concerning the loss of the Oriental provinces to the Arabs. Particularly telling is the case of Heraclius’ withdrawal from Syria.<sup>25</sup> Michael the Syrian and the *Chronicle of 1234* report the anecdote of the emperor saying farewell to the region, then they both say that he allowed his troops to lay waste the land as if it already belonged to the enemy, and he sent order to the people in Mesopotamia, Egypt and Armenia not to put up resistance to the Arabs anymore and just hold on to their places. Theophanes, very briefly, says only that Heraclius abandoned the region in despair, taking with him the relic of the Holy Cross. Agapius says that Heraclius retired from Mabbug to Antioch because he had already despaired of saving the region, and later on, after knowing about the defeat of the Persians by the Arabs, he wrote to Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia and Armenia ordering not to oppose the will of God and not to engage in battle against the Arabs anymore. The *Chronicle of Seert*, as well, says that Heraclius ordered to his men that they should not oppose to the will of God and not fight the Arabs anymore, but just hold on to their places, and that he left Syria despairing of keeping it. It seems like behind all these versions there was an account containing the following items: Heraclius’ despair of saving the region, his salute to the region, his order to devastate the land as if it already belonged to the enemy, his order not to fight the Arabs anymore, not to oppose God’s will but just to hold on. Here as well, there is no need to think that our sources drew different pieces of information from the same written text containing a fuller version, because all these could simply be the details the event got embroidered with as the story was told and retold. This is confirmed by the presence of Heraclius’ desperate farewell to Syria in sources unrelated to the “Theophilus’ circuit”, such as Euthychius of Alexandria, al-Ṭabari and al-Balādhuri.<sup>26</sup>

22. A passage unparalleled in the *Chronicle of 741*.

23. The association between Heraclius and David was one of the main themes of imperial propaganda after the Persian war (Spain Alexander S., 1977), and is attested also by the famous David Plates (see. Spain Alexander S., 1977: 235, on the possible interpretations of the plate representing the victory over Goliath).

24. I was encouraged to delve into this hypothesis by the stimulating conversations I had with Constantin Zuckerman. I am grateful to Prof. Zuckermann for discussing with me this matter and sharing his views and ideas on it, which I hope he will decide to publish.

25. Theophanes: 337; Agapius: 470 and p. 471; Michael the Syrian: 424-425; *Chronicle of 1234*: 251; *Chronicle of Seert*: 626. Cf. Hoyland R.G., 2011: 106-108.

26. Euthychius of Alexandria: 335; al-Balādhuri: I, 210; al-Ṭabari: XII, 182.

In the two Hispanic chronicles we find instead the account of Theodore's defeat and death at Gabitha.<sup>27</sup> It does not actually show any literal correspondence with the ones to be found in Theophanes and the Syriac chronicles. The latter, by the way, are quite dissimilar from one another as well, because Agapius and the anonymous chronicler of 1234 add, independently, information of Arabic origin. Both the *Chronicle of 741* and the *Chronicle of 754* mistake the Theodore that was killed at Gabitha for Heraclius' brother, whereas he was actually the emperor's Sacellarius, who bore the same name. According to Theophanes, Heraclius' brother had been defeated at Gabitha as well, earlier, but he had survived the battle.<sup>28</sup> Theophanes is also the only one to say explicitly that the Sacellarius' name was Theodore, whereas the others call him just "the Sacellarius", and this could suggest that the Latin chronicles present a garbled version of what was in Theophanes' source. But it could also simply mean that they have merged into a single event the accounts that were circulating about the defeat of Heraclius' brother and about the defeat of the Sacellarius. This is confirmed by the detail that the Romans got into panic in front of the Arabs, which echoes Agapius' assertion about Heraclius' brother, who is said to have been scared of the Arabs when sent against them. Therefore, although the presence of this piece of information in the Latin chronicles seemingly links them to the so-called Theophilus' dependants, nothing really proves its provenance from the same written source. Once again, the only link among these text is rather their drawing from the same pool of orally transmitted information.

The last two items suggest that the oral accounts concerning Heraclius did not deal exclusively with his military successes and with the most glorious part of his reign. Therefore, either Heraclius' epos covered his whole life, or the heroic tales centred on Heraclius' figure were just a subset of the historical material that was being circulated orally in the 7th century. To assess which is the case, the other items that the two Latin chronicles and the

*Chronicle of Seert* share with Theophanes and the Syriac chronicles shall be examined.

## Other shared items in the Latin chronicles

The other passages of the two Latin chronicles that have been signalled by Hoyland as coming from Theophilus' chronicle concern the caliphate and derive ultimately from the Islamic tradition: 'Umar I's murder; a peace treaty between the Arabs and the Romans; a positive remark on 'Umar II; Yazīd ibn al-Muhallab's rebellion against Yazīd II.

The notice of 'Umar I's death<sup>29</sup> is extremely concise, but it shares three details with the other four sources, namely the fact that the caliph was murdered a) while he was praying, b) by a slave, c) with a sword.<sup>30</sup> A thorough analysis of this episode has been provided by Sean Anthony, who has also investigated the Islamic tradition and has reached the conclusion that Theophilus' skeletal notice was considerably expanded by Dionysius on the basis of Arabic materials deriving from al-Zuhri's version of the story (Anthony S., 2010).<sup>31</sup> The first piece of information appears in all the sources. The fact that the murder was a slave is mentioned only by Dionysius of Tell Mahre's dependants (Michael the Syrian and the *Chronicle of 1234*, that talk about the Roman slave of a Qurayšite man) and the Syriac *Chronicle of 819* (the Indian slave of a Qurayšite man), whereas in Theophanes he is a Persian Muslim, and Agapius gives simply his name (Abū Lu'lu'a). Contrariwise, the sword as murder weapon is to be found only in Theophanes, whereas Dionysius talks about a dagger, Agapius and the *Chronicle of 819* do not mention the weapon explicitly, and the Islamic accounts describe it variously as a knife with two blades or a double-bladed dagger with the handle in the middle (Anthony S., 2010: 221). Finally, the two Latin chronicles place the murder in the tenth year of 'Umar's reign, whereas the Syriac texts place it in the twelfth year, and the Islamic sources in the eleventh. According to the "Theophilus' theory", Theophilus of Edessa and the anonymous chronicler of 819 both used a Syriac chronology written around 730 in

27. Theophanes: 348; Agapius: 479; Michael the Syrian: 430; *Chronicle of 1234*: 261; *Hispanic Chronicles*: 337-338. Cf. Hoyland R.G., 2011: 99-103.

28. According to Dionysius' dependants, Heraclius' brother was defeated at Gousiya, in the region of Hims (Michael the Syrian: 418, *Chronicle of 1234*: 242-244). Agapius instead does not mention the place (Agapius: 454, 469). Cf. Hoyland R.G., 2011: 96-98.

29. Theophanes: 343; Agapius: 479; Michael the Syrian: 430; *Chronicle of 1234*: 261; *Chronicle of 819*: 12; *Hispanic Chronicles*: 339. Cf. Hoyland R.G., 2011: 128-129.

30. This detail is reported only in the *Chronicle of 754*.

31. In his study Anthony does not take into account the two Latin chronicles.



the monastery of Qartamin (Hoyland R.G., 2011: 316-318; Borrut A., 2011: 143-152), to which the core of this piece of information should be ascribed too. But in such a jigsaw puzzle of different details, differently combined together, I find it very hard to recognise a shared written core saying anything more than the caliph was killed as he was praying. Anthony himself spots only what Dionysius drew from al-Zuhrī, while acknowledging that it is not possible to say for certain what was and what was not in Theophilus’ version, since other items might have been added in the other transmission lines, on the basis of other sources or simply of educated guesses. But once again, the independent registration of the same account is an easier explanation than such an intertwining of unknown written sources, even more so since the account originated within the Islamic oral tradition.

There is no need to dwell on the prominence of oral tradition before and beside written transmission at the beginnings of Islamic culture. Although the time of the first put into writing of historiographical material in the Islamic tradition is a debated question (Donner F.M., 1998: 13-19, 205-206; Borrut A., 2011: 175-176<sup>32</sup>), there is no doubt that many of the narratives reported in the first written sources derived from the practice of storytelling, as in the case of the so-called *akhbār* (pl. of *khbar*, lit. “notice, account”) (Hoyland R.G., 1991: 13-219; Leder S., 1992). In his examination of the Islamic tradition on ‘Umar I’s murder, Anthony makes reference to precise authors and written sources, either lost or preserved, and he points out that “most of our information derives from second/eighth century accounts redacted and compiled together in works mostly dating from the third/ninth century onwards” (Anthony S., 2010: 214). But the eighth-century accounts were based on stories that were being told, and that most likely kept on circulating and evolving orally beside their written versions. Nothing forbids to think that such stories had spread also across the linguistic and religious borders, and were received in oral form by Christians as well.

The same observations can be applied to the other items. The peace treaty between the Arabs and the Romans<sup>33</sup> was signed, according to the *Chron-*

*icle of 741*, by Marwān and Constantine IV, and the Arabs were to release all the captives and the deserters found in their lands and to pay to the Romans a daily tribute of 1000 golden coins, one girl, one Arab mule and a silk garment for nine years. Michael the Syrian and the *Chronicle of 1234* report instead a peace treaty of ten years between ‘Abd al-Malik and Justinian, according to which the latter would remove the Mardaites from Lebanon and withdraw his troops from Arab territory and the former would pay a daily tribute of 1000 gold coins, one horse and one slave; the anonymous chronicler adds that the Arabs were also supposed to share with the Romans the tax revenue of Cyprus. Agapius has the same account as the *Chronicle of 1234*. Theophanes says that a first agreement was proposed to Constantine IV by ‘Abd al-Malik, with the same conditions of a previous peace treaty signed under Mu‘āwiya, namely 365.000 gold pieces, 365 slaves and 365 horses per year; after Constantine’s death ‘Abd al-Malik sent emissaries to Justinian to ratify the peace, he asked him to remove the Mardaites from Lebanon and promised in return 1000 gold pieces, one horse and one slave per day, and half of the revenue of Cyprus, Armenia and Iberia. In neither case Theophanes mentions the duration of the treaty.

In the *Chronicle of 741*, the reference to the Roman captives and deserters to be released by the Arabs is very likely a misunderstanding of the request made by the Arabs themselves to remove the Mardaites that were devastating Lebanon. The Mardaites were Romans who had settled in the region of Lebanon under the reign of Constantine IV.<sup>34</sup> The name means “rebels” in Syriac (*marīdoyē*), but in the passage concerning their arrival in Lebanon, Michael the Syrian tells us that they were also called *Līpūrē*, a word unknown in Syriac, probably of Greek origin and meaning “plunderers” (from *laphyra*) or “deserters” (from *leipo*).<sup>35</sup> If the second conjecture is correct, this detail would strengthen the hypothesis that the reference to captives and deserters in the Latin chronicle is an echo of the Mardaites affair. But this, far from

ian: 445-446; *Chronicle of 1234*: 292; *Hispanic Chronicles*: 346 (the passage is present only in the *Chronicle of 741*). Cf. Hoyland R.G., 2011: 180-182.

34. Their origin is still unclear, the hypothesis proposed by David Woods (Woods D., 2006) is not deemed totally compelling by Hoyland (Hoyland R.G., 2011: 169-170). See also Howard-Johnston J., 2012.

35. Michael the Syrian: 437. Cf. Hoyland R.G., 2011: 170 n. 442.

32. Borrut supports the view of an early written production, but he also argues in favour of the coexistence of orality and literacy, saying that they should not necessarily be considered as opposing cultural features.

33. Theophanes: 361, 363; Agapius: 497; Michael the Syr-

pointing out the provenance of the notice from the same written source shared by the other four chronicles, confirms rather that the Latin chronicler (or his source) just registered a twisted version of the facts that was passed around<sup>36</sup> and got more approximate on one hand (ascribing for instance the treaty to Marwān and not to ‘Abd al-Malik, and changing its duration from ten to nine years), and rich in additional details on the other (as in the list of the items to be paid by the Arabs, where the slave became a girl, the horse a “mula Arabica villosa”, and a silk garment was added). Another independent record is offered by Elias of Nisibis, who says that ‘Abd al-Malik made a peace treaty with the king of the Romans (without specifying the name) and promised to pay 1000 dinars per week (Elias of Nisibis: 150).

The positive remark on the Caliph ‘Umar II in our sources has been examined by Borrut among the testimonies of the origins of the caliph’s idealized figure.<sup>37</sup> Following the “Theophilus theory”, Borrut ascribes the core of the description to Theophilus, and, from its presence in the *Chronicle of 819* and in the *Chronicle of 846*, he gathers that Theophilus must have found it in the chronology of Qartamin, the source he shared with the two anonymous chroniclers. Accordingly, he points out the resemblances in wording among the *Chronicle of 819*, the *Chronicle of 1234* and the *Chronicle of 741* (Borrut A., 2011: 303-304). It seems to me, though, that such resemblances look significant only if one gives *a priori* for granted a textual connection among the chronicles.<sup>38</sup>

36. None of the two Latin chronicles says anything about the arrival of the Mardaites in Lebanon or about any other devastation of the region at the hand of the Romans, therefore a very complicated reconstruction would be required to see a textual connection between the word *Līpūrē* in Michael the Syrian and the word *transfugas* in the *Chronicle of 741*. Assuming that behind the term *Līpūrē* there really were a word meaning “deserters” (which remains a pure conjecture), the easiest explanation would be that the general talking about the withdrawal of the Mardaites/*Līpūrē* from Lebanon entailed by the peace treaty was turned upside-down into the release of any prisoner and deserter to be found in the territories under Arab control.

37. Theophanes: 399; Agapius: 242-243; Michael the Syrian: 455-456; *Chronicle of 1234*: 307-308; *Hispanic Chronicles*: 357; *Chronicle of 819*: 15; *Chronicle of 846*: 234. It should be noted that Theophanes’ notice on ‘Umar II’ reign shares some details with Agapius and Michael the Syrian, but does not contain any reference to the caliph’s positive fame (cf. Hoyland R.G., 2011: 215-217).

38. I am giving Hoyland’s translation of the passages (Hoyland R.G., 2011: 217).

*Chronicle of 819*: “Umar son of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz [son of Marwān became king for two years and seven months, he was {a good man} and a more compassionate king than all the kings] before him”.

*Chronicle of 846*: “[Umar son of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz] son of Marwān was king for two years and seven months, he was {a good man} and a more compassionate king than [all the kings] before him”.

*Chronicle of 1234*: “This man, ‘Umar son of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz son of Marwān, began to reign in the year 99 of the Arabs. He was a good and compassionate man, truth-loving and just, and he was averse to evil. However, he was very opposed to Christians, more than the kings before him”.

*Chronicle of 741*: “In military matters ‘Umar achieved no great success nor anything avers, but he was of such great kindness and compassion that to his day as much honour and praise is bestowed on him by all, even foreigners, as ever has been offered to anyone in his lifetime holding the reins of power”.

The passage is defective in both the *Chronicle of 819* and the *Chronicle of 846*. In particular, the words in square brackets in the *Chronicle of 819* mark a lacuna that has been filled in by the editor from the *Chronicle of 846*. But the words “a good man” are actually missing even in the latter and they are a conjecture by the editor, most likely based on the text of the *Chronicle of 1234*.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the translation may be misleading, since the Syriac word that Hoyland translates as “compassionate” (*mraḥmonō*) is built on the root *rḥm* (“to love, to have pity upon”) and means literally “merciful”, whereas the Latin word that he translates as “compassion” is *patientia*, meaning rather “patience, tolerance”. The difference is of course slight, but such a translation may suggest a close literal correspondence that is not there. The comparison with the previous kings is a rhetorical feature that does not necessarily point out the dependence on the same written source more than the dependence on the same cliché, and it should be noted that it is shaped in three different ways (more compassionate than all the kings before, opposed to Christians more than all the

39. In the edition of the *Chronicle of 819* the words “a good man” are in round brackets, whereas in the edition of the *Chronicle of 846* a blank space was left.



kings before, and more honoured and praised than all the kings before). Borrut himself suggests that such an image of piety and benevolence might go back to the very time of the caliph and have been built and spread by his own propaganda. In any case, it must have circulated at least as early as the 730s. If the resemblances among the Syriac passages allow speculations on their ultimate derivation from the same written source, no compelling signs of a connection with such a source are to be found in the two Latin chronicles.

Finally, in the case of Yazīd ibn al-Muhallab's rebellion against Yazīd II,<sup>40</sup> not only is any literal correspondence between the Latin chronicles and the other sources missing, but the former also contain some details that are not in the latter: they say, in fact, that it was a military rebellion started by the troops that were defending the Persian territories; they specify the place of the final battle, namely in the Babylonian plain above the Tigris;<sup>41</sup> the *Chronicle of 741* says that Maslama, the general sent by Yazīd II against the rebel, was his half-brother, born of a different mother.<sup>42</sup>

## Other shared items in the *Chronicle of Seert*

Beside the passages concerning Heraclius, the *Chronicle of Seert* shares only two more significant items with the other four chronicles: the appearance of a sign in the sky and the building of a mosque on the Temple site at Jerusalem.

The first piece of information is recorded by Theophanes, Michael the Syrian and Agapius, and they all link the phenomenon to an earthquake, which is not mentioned in the *Chronicle of Seert*.<sup>43</sup> Theophanes and Michael the Syrian describe the sign as resembling a sword, in Agapius it is a column of fire, the *Chronicle of Seert* says it looked like a lance. Theophanes says that it appeared

in the direction of the South and moved from South to North for 30 days, in Michael the Syrian as well it stretched out from South to North for 30 days, Agapius instead says that it moved from East to West and from North to South, in the *Chronicle of Seert* we read that it was oriented from South to North and then it extended from East to West, remaining for 35 nights. Theophanes, Michael the Syrian and the *Chronicle of Seert* share also the final remark on the fact that the sign was commonly interpreted as a presage of the Arab invasions. One could be tempted to see in this additional detail a proof of the provenance of this piece of information from a shared written source, but we find just the same remark associated to a very similar astronomical phenomenon in the *Zuqnin Chronicle*, which is not supposed to be linked to the "circuit de Théophile d'Édesse": "In the year 937 the stars of the sky fell and they all would throw like arrows toward the North, giving a terrible omen of the defeat of the Romans and the invasion of their lands by the Arabs, which actually happened to them after a short time, without delay" (*Zuqnin Chronicle*: 150). As already said, Hoyland observes that this kind of notice was likely to travel easily between chronicles. I rather think that here, as in the case of the remark on Phokas' bloodthirsty policy, we have to do with independent recordings of an event that had been largely commented upon and turned, in the collective memory, into a *ex eventu* prophecy.

The second item is to be found in Theophanes, Michael the Syrian and the *Chronicle of 1234*.<sup>44</sup> According to Hoyland, it is actually the only account in the *Chronicle of Seert* that can be confidently ascribed to Theophilus of Edessa, and he therefore admits that "as a single notice it does not give us a sufficient basis for assessing how much and in what way the *Chronicle of Seert* used Theophilus" (Hoyland R.G., 2011: 16.). In the light of what has been observed so far, this single notice does not actually allow us to say whether the *Chronicle of Seert* used Theophilus or not. The structure and the contents of the accounts are the same: the Arabs try to build a mosque on the site of Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem, as ordered by 'Umar; at every attempt the building collapses; the Jews say to them that it will keep on falling

40. Theophanes: 401; Agapius: 504; Michael the Syrian: 489; *Chronicle of 1234*: 308; *Hispanic Chronicles*: 357-358. Cf. Hoyland R.G., 2011: 218-220.

41. Michael the Syrian is the only one to name the place, but he says more vaguely "near Babylon".

42. The text in the critical edition reads as follow: "fratre dudum memorato Mazlema nomine non dissimili matre progenito". The apparatus, though, records the variant "non de simili matre", which matches the historical truth and is therefore adopted by Hoyland in his translation.

43. Theophanes: 336; Agapius: 454; Michael the Syrian: 414; *Chronicle of Seert*: 580. Cf. Hoyland R.G., 2011: 94-95.

44. Theophanes: 342; Michael the Syrian: 421; *Chronicle of 1234*: 260-261; *Chronicle of Seert*: 624. Cf. Hoyland R.G., 2011: 126-127.

unless they remove the cross that is on top of the Mount of Olives; the cross is removed and the construction stands firm. There are, though, some small differences that it is worth remarking. The *Chronicle of Seert* says that the Arabs try to build a mosque and also a palace (or a citadel, *qasr*), and Hoyland observes that the latter probably refers to the complex lying immediately south of the Aqsa mosque. If Hoyland's conjecture is correct, this precise piece of information betrays a certain knowledge of early Islamic building activity in Jerusalem. Curiously enough, the anonymous chronicler mentions the place as the site of the tomb of Solomon and not of his Temple, a detail that betrays, instead, a hazy knowledge of Christian Jerusalem. Another detail added by the anonymous chronicler is that 'Umar left Jerusalem ten days after its conquest and appointed Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan governor of Syria, which is a correct piece of information (Mu'awiya was actually appointed third governor of Syria by 'Umar I) but placed in a quite odd context, as is odd the mention of Syria as geographical reference point to state the position of the cross on the Mount of Olives ("the cross placed on top of the Mount of Olives, opposite Syria"). Finally, whereas Theophanes and Michael the Syrian conclude with an anti-Islamic and anti-Judaic note, saying that in consequence of this episode the Arabs became enemies of the Christians and removed many crosses, the *Chronicle of Seert* says just that 'Umar, informed by letter, was astonished by the fact.

The anti-Judaic and anti-Islamic bias point to a Christian origin of the anecdote, but in the *Chronicle of Seert* the anti-Islamic bias has vanished. Indeed, the differences and additional details listed above suggest that the narrative might have been received and passed about also in the early Syrian Islamic tradition, and that it reached the *Chronicle of Seert* through this go-between. The fact that the episode is not recorded in Islamic sources is not a valid argument against such a hypothesis, since it is by now commonly acknowledged that Christian sources preserve pieces of lost early Islamic traditions and, as the episode of Šahrbaraz's desertion shows, early Islamic tradition in turn took over items coming from the Christian side as well. Of course, it is just a hypothesis but it is a thought-provoking one, and it will seem less far-fetched as soon as we stop approaching these examples of intercultural transmission in terms of pure "Quellenforschung" and we start considering the idea that the

cultural barriers were much more fluid than we think, thanks also to oral transmission.

An example of how misleading it can be to trace all the similarities back to a shared written source is provided by Stephen Shoemaker's book *The Death of a Prophet*. Shoemaker spots, both in Christian and Islamic sources, passages hinting at Muḥammad's presence during the first Arab raids in Roman territory. Such a detail is at odds with the traditional account, according to which the Islamic expansion began only after the Prophet's death. With his careful analysis of the sources, Shoemaker shows that so many unrelated testimonies of the same alternative version cannot but prove that the early Islamic tradition had initially produced two different narratives of the first conquests, both of which circulated widely and were recorded also in Christian sources, and that in the end one of the two became mainstream and overshadowed the other. Shoemaker relies on the "Theophilus theory" and follows Hoyland in reckoning the *Chronicle of Seert* one of Theophilus' dependants. Both Michael the Syrian and the *Chronicle of 1234* say explicitly that at first Muḥammad led in person the incursions into Palestine and later on he sent forth his men without him. The same piece of information, expressed more concisely, is to be found also in the *Chronicle of Seert*, and even though it is actually the only item this text shares with the other two in the account about Muḥammad's life, Shoemaker sees in this only match the prove that Dionysius of Tell Mahre drew his account on the rising of Islam from Theophilus (Shoemaker S., 2012: 47-52). But the correspondence is really too feeble to prove the provenance from the same written source.<sup>45</sup> Misled by the "Theophilus theory", Shoemaker fails to realise that the *Chronicle of Seert* is indeed one more independent witness to the lost early tradition whose traces he is looking for, therefore one more piece of evidence supporting his argument.

## Conclusions

James Howard-Johnston, although embracing the "Theophilus theory", did not include the two Latin chronicles and the *Chronicle of Seert* among the supposed Theophilus' dependants. As said at the outset, he explained the presence of similar accounts in the two Hispanic chronicles

45. Hoyland himself does not include the passage in his volume.

and in Theophilus' dependants with a common ultimate rooting in reality (or the management of news based on real events). As regards the *Chronicle of Seert*, while noticing the presence in it of episodes covered by Theophilus, he did not go so far as to link the chronicle to Theophilus' circuit, saying just that the anonymous chronicler (or his source) probably made use of a West Syrian source (Howard-Johnston J., 2010: 325-326, 433). The examination of the sources proposed in this paper confirms Howard-Johnston's view and allows us to define it even better. The resemblances among these sources are explained by common rooting in what was being reported as reality, that is rooting in the same branches of shared memory. The two Latin chronicles and the *Chronicle of Seert* do not depend on the same written source attested by the other four texts, but they depend on the same accounts that were produced and first spread orally, accounts that might have been immediately, or ultimately, or even not at all based on reality. Therefore, if we look at them from a "Quellenforschung" perspective, they are to be considered independent sources. But if we look at them from the point of view of "intercultural transmission" they actually share the same material, although not via a straightforward written transmission.

In the case of the supposed Theophilus' dependants, the conspicuous amount of shared items, some extensive passages showing word for word correspondence and some identical sequences of events displayed in the four texts prevent us from denying the provenance of the shared material from one or more written sources. Whether Theophanes' *Chronographia*, Michael the Syrian's chronicle, the *Chronicle of 1234* and Agapius' *Kitāb al-unwān* share just one written source, whether this source was Theophilus of Edessa's lost *History*, and which items actually derive from it, is still open to debate (Conterno M., 2011; Conterno M., 2014; Conterno M., forthcoming; Debié M., forthcoming), but the evidence in these four texts is such that it proves a written connection among them. The same does not hold true for the two Latin chronicles and the *Chronicle of Seert*, where the shared items are rather isolated narratives and their resemblances with the matching passages in the other four texts are never so extensive and so literal to imply necessarily a written connection. Besides, as the comparison with Nicephorus' *Breviarium* has shown, brief identical sentences can be found also where no shared written source can

be realistically postulated. Introducing Theophilus' dependants in his volume, Hoyland stresses that by using the term "dependants" he does not ascribe to them a slavish use of their shared source, since they all "felt free to creatively revise and reshape it, to abbreviate and reword it, and to supplement it with material from other sources" (Hoyland R.G., 2011: 7). In particular, regarding the *Chronicle of 741* he says that the presence of only few textual parallels could be due to the fact that Latin chronicler heavily abbreviated his Syrian source, and regarding the *Chronicle of Seert* he admits that most of the shared items could just as well come from other sources. The "Theophilus theory", which is supposed to explain in the most simple way all this evidence of intercultural transmission, seems rather to complicate the picture in this case. The simplest explanation, as far as the two Latin chronicles and the *Chronicle of Seert* are concerned, is that there is no written source linking them to the other four texts, and that the oral transmission of historical information played a more important role than has been acknowledged so far.

Seen the extensive textual parallels between them, there is no doubt that the *Chronicle of 741* and the *Chronicle of 754* are both based on the same written source, which contained the items examined above and all the other pieces of information of Oriental origin shared by the two texts. As observed by Collins and Hoyland (Collins R., 1989: 56; Hoyland R.G., 2011: 17. Cf. also Constable O.R., 2010: 109-115), the positive presentation of Umayyads caliphs, together with the total absence of any mention of 'Alī and the reference to Mu'awiya II as legitimate ruler, suggest that such Oriental material originated from Syria. But this is as far as we can go in the "Quellenforschung", since there is no way to assess when and where such material was translated into Latin, when and where it was put into writing, how it actually got from Syria to Spain. The hypothesis of a Greek source written in Syria, brought to Spain and there translated into Latin is not more plausible than the hypothesis of an author writing down directly in Latin accounts that he got from Oriental informants. Also, there is no reason to suppose that all the Oriental items made their way from the East to Spain in a single lot. The epic stories concerning Heraclius' deeds may have spread around the Mediterranean and they were possibly being told also in Latin by the time of composition of the two Hispanic chronicles. On



the other side, there is no reason to exclude that the accounts produced by early Islamic historiography in Syria were circulating all over the caliphate, and since all of Northern Africa was under Muslim control by the beginning of the 7th century, the pieces of information of Islamic origin may have found written form anywhere between Syria and Gibraltar.<sup>46</sup>

It is likewise impossible to say when the above examined passages of the *Chronicle of Seert* found their current written form. Of course, by stressing the importance of oral transmission I do not imply that the anonymous chronicler himself got all of them from oral sources in the late 10th century. He must have found them in the sources he used, but the analysis of the passages shows that there is no way to demonstrate, and most of all no need to think, that he used Theophilus of Edessa, or that one of his sources did. Neither can we prove that he found all the items in the same source, nor that they reached him only through Christian intermediaries.

The scarcity of preserved contemporary sources makes the study of the circulation of historical knowledge in the Near East between the 7th and the 8th centuries a most delicate task. A balance should be kept, between postulating many different unknown sources and connecting everything to the few lost sources of whose existence we know, since both tendencies can lead to a misrepresentation of what was really going on. An aspect that so far has not been paid real attention is the role played by orality in the production, circulation and alteration of historical information beside written transmission. The material analysed in the present study urges scholars to take into more serious consideration the interaction between oral and written tradition, and leads to the conclusion that the evidence provided by the preserved sources cannot be explained only by mapping the circulation of written texts.

Also, it invites scholars to consider as more fluid the religious, linguistic and cultural borders that historical knowledge was to cross. Studying the circulation of historical information in

46. Collins in fact hypothesized two different sources for the legendary stories related to Heraclius (supposedly coming from a source shared by Theophanes as well) and for the information on the Arab rulers (supposedly coming from some sort of *Historia Araborum* arranged on the basis of regional years and written in Spain or in Northern Africa), cf. Collins R., 1989: 56-57.

this period in terms of “intercultural transmission” was a pioneering and fruitful idea,<sup>47</sup> but the potential of such an approach has been diminished by its application to written sources only. This was understandably due to the fact that written sources are all we have, and paths of written transmissions are the only ones we can hope to reconstruct, whereas what happened at an oral level shall always remain much more difficult (if not impossible) to assess and to prove. But consequence of this was that, while showing that historical knowledge actually crossed linguistic and religious borders in the seventh-century Near East, the studies produced so far have also given the wrong impression that it did that in a quite rigid and controlled way, only through chains of written sources, that were copied, quoted, translated, expanded. This prevented from taking into account the idea that written narratives, or certain elements within written narratives, might have passed orally from a language to another, and from a religious-cultural context to another, before being put into writing in the form we read them.

Of course, a balance shall be kept here as well, lest we make the opposite mistake of overstating the weight of oral transmission and denying any possibility of reconstructing the connections between written sources. However, paying due attention to the possible traces of oral transmission cannot but lead to a profitable development of the studies on “intercultural transmission” in the seventh-century Near East.

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47. The expression “Intercultural Transmission” has been first applied to this context by Lawrence Conrad (Conrad L.I., 1990).

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