

LETIZIA OSTI

SCHOLARLY COMPETITION IN THIRD/NINTH CENTURY BAGHDAD:  
THE CASE OF THA<sup>ʿ</sup>LAB AND AL-MUBARRAD

“Is the insight into the private lives of thinkers relevant at all to the appreciation of their thought?”. When Z. Baumann asks this question in 2000<sup>1</sup> he intends it as rhetorical; he admits, however that “[t]he issue cannot be easily dismissed. Once embarked on exploring the private squalors of public men, you must brace yourself for a very long journey”. Indeed, scholarly gossip may or may not be useful to the advancement of science, but it almost always accompanies it, giving shape and texture especially to scholarly competition. With its biographical collections, classical Arabic culture possesses the ideal tool to describe cases of scholarly competition paired with personal rivalry; this paper will explore one of such cases.

The rivalry selected for this investigation takes place in Baghdad at the peak of its cultural golden age, the late third/ninth century. The many developments of sciences which happened in this period are epitomised in some types of sources by a dichotomy of individuals or groups. Examples are the *zāhirī* Ibn Dawūd (d. 297/910) and the *shāfiʿī* Ibn Surayj (d. 306/918)<sup>2</sup>; the grammarian al-Sīrāfi (d. 368/979) and the philosopher Mattā b. Yūnus (d. 328/940)<sup>3</sup>; Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-

<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, “The Man from Waco”. Review of G. Oakes and A.J. Vidich, *Collaboration, Reputation, and Ethics in American Academic Life*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000; *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7<sup>th</sup> July 2000, pp. 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> See for example al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071), *Taʾrīkh Baghdād*, Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1967, V, pp. 259-262.

<sup>3</sup> Abū Saʿīd al-Sīrāfi and Abū Bishr Mattā b. Yūnus were the protagonists in a famous debate in 326/938, where the former defended the excellence of grammatical studies against philosophical ones. See al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023), *Kitāb al-Imtāʿ wa-l-muʿānasa*, ed. Aḥmad Amīn and Aḥmad al-Zayn, Beirut: Dār maktabat al-ḥayāt, [1966], I, pp. 107-133. The discussion is also reported by Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1229), *Muʿjam al-udabāʾ*, ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās, Beirut: Dār al-gharb al-islāmī, 1993, pp. 894-908. It was also translated into English by D.S. Margoliouth (“Abū Bishr Mattā and Abū Saʿīd al-Sīrāfi on the Merits of Logic and Grammar”, *JRAS* (1905), pp. 79-129) and, more recently, into French by Taha Abderrahmane (“Discussion entre Abu Saʿīd al-Sīrāfi, le grammairien et Mattā b. Yūnus, le philosophe”, *Arabica*, 25 (1978), pp. 310-

Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and the *ḥanbalīs*<sup>4</sup>. However, the two enemies *par excellence*, the ones whom the sources always mention together, and always in conflict, are the two grammarians<sup>5</sup>, Abū l-ʿAbbās Muḥammad Muḥammad b. Yazīd al-Mubarrad (d. 286/898) and Abū l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā Thaʿlab (d. 291/904), the most prominent representatives of the so-called *madhhabs* of Kūfa and Baṣra. The famous competition between these two cities at the heart of the ʿAbbāsīd cultural tradition has been studied from different points of view<sup>6</sup>; here, we shall focus on the form which the debate takes in biographical literature, where it is personified by two individuals and synthesised into a series of cross-referring anecdotes. Whether and how the information provided by biographical material contributes to the (medieval and modern) student’s knowledge is the general question underlying the whole study<sup>7</sup>.

---

323). Cf. Kemal, Salim, “The Debate between Mattā and Sīrāfi”, in *Democracy in the Middle East. Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, St Andrews: University of St Andrews, 1992, pp. 189-198.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Yāqūt, p. 2450.

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Gully (*Grammar and Semantics in Medieval Arabic: a Study of Ibn-Hishām’s “Mughnī l-Labīb”*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1995, pp. 73-93) has remarked on the particular competitiveness between grammarians, looking at the positions expressed within their scientific production. Here we shall look at episodes where rivalry is described through interaction between scholars.

<sup>6</sup> On the significance of the Kūfan and Baṣran labels in the third/ninth century literary context, see Geert Jan van Gelder, “Kūfa vs Baṣra: the Literary Debate”, *Asiatischen Studien. Etudes Asiatiques*, 50 (1996), pp. 339-362. The methodological differences between Baṣrans and Kūfans are explained, for instance, in H. Fleisch, *Traité de philologie arabe*, Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1961. However, cf. M.G. Carter, “The Struggle for Authority: a Re-examination of the Baṣran and Kūfan Debate”, in *Tradition and Innovation: Norm and Deviation in Arabic and Semitic Linguistics*, ed. L. Edzard and M. Nekroumi, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999, pp. 55-70. Carter clarifies that such methodological differences did not emerge until a generation after Thaʿlab and al-Mubarrad. A summary of the evidence to this effect in the biographical sources is found in Monique Bernards, *Changing Traditions: al-Mubarrad’s Refutation of Sibawayh and the Subsequent Reception of the Kitāb*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997, pp. 11-17. See also Gully, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>7</sup> See Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “Texts and Tortures: the Reign of al-Muʿtaḍid and the Construction of Historical Meaning”, *Arabica*, 46 (1999), pp. 313-336, p. 336, for some conclusions regarding the specific contribution of biography (in concurrence with, in this case, historical chronicles and *adab* works) to classical Arabic culture.

*Biographical dictionaries: a problematic tool*<sup>8</sup>

This paper takes inspiration from the branch of research analysing the more literary elements of biographical dictionaries in conjunction with their inner structure.

Despite the unsolved question of the genre's origins<sup>9</sup> and its resistance to classifications<sup>10</sup> and definitions<sup>11</sup>, biographical dictionaries have always been plundered for information by modern scholars, in a process not dissimilar to that, physiological of classical Arabic prose, of collecting data and stitching it together into a new compilation. Only relatively recently, however, have scholars begun to

<sup>8</sup> Although it is the most frequently debated, the issue of this genre's origins (and therefore of its definition) still awaits a definitive solution. Therefore, "biographical literature" or "biographical dictionary" will be in this paper a shorthand term for a loosely-defined genre encompassing all works in which lists of people and their biographies are prominent features.

<sup>9</sup> Opinions mainly revolve around the two views of O. Loth ("Die Ursprung und Bedeutung der Tabaqāt", *ZDMG*, 23 (1869), pp. 593-614), who regarded the genre as a direct filiation of *ḥadīth* studies, and W. Heffening ("Ṭabaqāt" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden-Paris: E.J. Brill-A. Picard et Fils, 1913-1938, Supplement), according to whom biography writing is a typically Arabic genre derived from the pre-islamic, tribal interest in genealogy. More recently, most scholars have opted for an interpretation which somehow takes into account both the tribal and the religious elements. The latest example of this is found in Claude Gilliot, "Prosopography in Islam; an Essay in Classification", *Medieval Prosopography*, 23 (2002), pp. 19-54, p. 20 (the article opens a special issue of this journal, entirely devoted to biographical dictionaries).

<sup>10</sup> Biographical literature has not traditionally been perceived by modern scholarship as a distinct and unitary genre when considered within the framework of historiography but, rather, as various genres which appeared at different points in time (*tabaqāt*, local histories, universal biographical dictionaries). An illustration of this can be sought comparing how F. Rosenthal (*A History of Muslim Historiography*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968<sup>2</sup>, pp. 93-98, 99-106, 172), S. Humphreys, "tā'rikh" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, n. ed., Leiden-Paris: E.J. Brill-Maisonneuve, vol. 10, 1998, pp. 271-280) and T. Khalidi (*Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 46-48, 204-210) treat the subject in three works which are apart in time as well as in method, outlook and format. Attempts at internal categorisations, the latest of which is Gilliot's above-mentioned "Prosopography in Islam", may be useful but are necessarily partial.

<sup>11</sup> See Wadād al-Qāḍī, "Biographical Dictionaries: Inner Structure and Cultural Significance", in *The book in the Islamic World: the Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*, ed. George N. Atiyeh, Albany: State University of New York Press for the Library of Congress, 1995, pp. 93-122. As al-Qāḍī points out, there is no unique Arabic equivalent for "biographical dictionary", and a discussion of the genre must be preceded by a definition for it. A similar approach can be found in M. Abiad, "Origine et développement des dictionnaires biographiques arabes", *BEO*, 31 (1979), pp. 7-15.

take into account the structure according to which information is arranged within biographical dictionaries. This has resulted in two branches of study, driven respectively by the advent of personal computing and by advances in the research on early Islamic history: quantitative history on the one side, dealing with snippets of information (such as dates, place names, professions, affiliations, etc.), and literary/structural analysis on the other, looking at longer accounts such as anecdotes and at any other kind of unquantifiable material<sup>12</sup>.

Three main approaches to the material, or combinations thereof, have been used within this latter kind of analysis: one can look at the micro-structure of single biographical entries and possibly compare how different sources arrange material in the biography of the same individual, or in other genres<sup>13</sup>. Alternatively, one can trace the movements of one account or cluster of accounts across different biographies and/or across different sources<sup>14</sup>. Finally, one can look at the macro-structure of single sources and possibly compare it with others<sup>15</sup>. The general aim of all three approaches, each of which will be used here, is to identify and analyse the compiler's individual contribution, his (more or less unique) rendition of material which might have been available elsewhere.

In the next section a theme, the rivalry between two scholars, shall be explored as it appears in several biographical dictionaries. This theme is treated by all sources through the use of similar material, albeit transformed and rearranged in different places and also within the biographies of different individuals. Identifying

<sup>12</sup> See for instance Malti-Douglas's distinction between brief statements and anecdotes in her analysis of a biographical entry (*loc. cit.*, p. 323); while the former group can be handled by quantitative analysis, the latter cannot.

<sup>13</sup> Besides Malti-Douglas's article mentioned above, see also her "Controversy and its Effects on the Biographical Tradition of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī", *SI*, 46 (1977), pp. 115-131. Another example is D.P. Little, *An Introduction to Mamlūk Historiography. An Analysis of Arabic Annalistic and Biographical Sources for the Reign of al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalā'ūn*, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1970, pp. 100-136.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Hartmut Fähndrich, "Compromising the Caliph: Analysis of Several Versions of an Anecdote about Abū Dulāma and al-Manṣūr", *JAL*, 8 (1977), pp. 36-47.

<sup>15</sup> Works in this category abound. Some examples are: Hartmut Fähndrich, "The *Wafayāt al-A'yān* of Ibn Khallikān: a New Approach", *JAOS*, 93 (1973), pp. 432-445; Hilary Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs. Compilation and the Author's Craft in Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī's Kitāb al-Aghānī*, London: Routledge and Curzon, 2003; eadem, "Criteria of Classification in the *Ṭabaqāt Fuḥūl al-Shu'arā'* of Muḥammad b. Sallām al-Jumāhī", in *Proceeding of the Ninth Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants*, (Amsterdam 1978), ed. Rudolph Peters, Leiden: Brill, 1978, pp. 141-152; Abdel S. Gamal, "The Organizational Principles in Ibn Sallām's *Ṭabaqāt Fuḥūl al-Shu'arā'*", in *Tradition and Modernity in Arabic Literature*, ed. J.R. Smart, London: Curzon Press, 1996.

such shifts of position and transformations will illustrate both the development of the theme and the internal structure and consistency of some sources across the limits of single biographies. Finally, it will assess whether and how, in this specific case, the information conveyed by biographical literature can be integrated with that from other genres.

*Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab and al-Mubarrad: a question of points of view*

As we have seen, the case of Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab and al-Mubarrad is connected to the context of the rivalry between Kūfa and Baṣra but it also stands out from it because it is both independent from physical geography (it takes place in Baghdad, where Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab was actually born) and it is not actually connected to a great scholarly difference; in fact, it has been demonstrated that in the third/ninth century there were no such things as a Baṣran or a Kūfan grammatical *madhhab*<sup>16</sup>. This is a very personal rivalry, which acquires greater significance thanks to the Baṣra – Kūfa framework in which the sources place it, but which could exist also on its own. It shall now be seen which kind of material biographical sources employ to illustrate it.

The selection of sources which have been used for this study provide several different points of view. The earliest is a biographical dictionary of Baṣran grammarians written by a follower of al-Mubarrad, al-Sīrāfi's *Ṭabaqāt al-naḥwiyyīn al-baṣriyyīn*, followed by the book of al-Sīrāfi's student, Ibn al-Nadīm's *Kitāb al-Fihrist*. We shall then move to al-Andalus and consult the *Ṭabaqāt al-naḥwiyyīn wa-l-lughawīyyīn* by al-Zubaydī, a work on grammarians of all schools and places. Finally, a broader viewpoint shall be provided by later, more general works on wider categories of people: the *Ta'rikh Baghdād* by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī and Yāqūt's *Muḥjam al-udabā'*. The point of view will become gradually more removed in time and space from third/ninth century Baghdad grammatical circles.

A general point which has been obtained thanks to a piece of easy quantitative analysis of the sources can be used as the premise to this section: the results of a survey of these sources' indexes says that the most common situation in which the names Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab and al-Mubarrad appear is when they are part of the list of a scholar's teachers, a piece of information which is present in most entries of most sources and which only confirms the fact that both Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab and al-Mubarrad were well known. Moreover, when they are both present in the list of somebody's teachers, these two names are always next to each other, as a pair, and no doubt they constitute a sign of prestige, regardless of affiliations and of personal

<sup>16</sup> Cf. footnote 6 above.

competition between them<sup>17</sup>. This kind of mention obviously does not imply any rivalry, but rather an equality of status as renowned and prestigious masters. This neutral mention of the two scholars is contained not within anecdotes but within the “hard data” elements of an entry. The fact that it might not necessarily be correct only adds to the idea of it as a sign of prestige, regardless of *madhhab* affiliations and of personal competition.

### *Başran fair play*

The earliest extant work containing biographical information on the two grammarians is al-Sīrāfi’s *Ṭabaqāt al-naḥwiyyīn al-baṣriyyīn*, written in the second half of the fourth/tenth century<sup>18</sup>. The book is devoted to Başran grammarians only, and therefore Thaʿlab does not have an entry in it, whereas al-Mubarrad occupies the last and longest article<sup>19</sup>. However, Thaʿlab is mentioned a few times as a reliable authority<sup>20</sup>. There are only few instances in the book where a rivalry between Thaʿlab and al-Mubarrad is hinted at. The first of such instances is in the biography of their older contemporary al-Riyāshī (d. 257/871):

Abū Bakr b. Abī l-Azhar<sup>21</sup> transmitted to me (he knew the *akhbār* of al-Riyāshī): we saw [al-Riyāshī] going to see Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Mubarrad when he came [to Baghdad] from Başra. Abū l-ʿAbbās Thaʿlab also met him; [al-Riyāshī] preferred him and considered him superior<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> In all the sources which have been examined for this study, when the two scholars both appear in the same list of teachers, their names are always, without exception, next to each other. The only possible variable is which of the two names comes first!

<sup>18</sup> al-Sīrāfi (d. 368/978), *Ṭabaqāt al-naḥwiyyīn al-baṣriyyīn*, ed. Fritz Krenkow, Paris-Beirut, 1936.

<sup>19</sup> al-Sīrāfi, pp. 96-109.

<sup>20</sup> Thaʿlab is mentioned a remarkable number of times in the book, considering the short length of the work. In four cases (pp. 36, 44, 51, 55), he appears as an informant and an authority, at times also giving his opinion on other scholars’ reliability. The other cases will be presently illustrated.

<sup>21</sup> D. 325/936-7. On him, see al-Zubaydī (d. 379/989), *Ṭabaqāt al-naḥwiyyīn wa-l-lughawiyyīn*, ed. Muḥammad Abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Cairo: Khānjī, 1954/1373, p. 127; Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 380/990), *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Riḍā Tajaddud, Tehran<sup>2</sup>, 1973/1393, p. 165; *Ta ʿriḫh Baghdad* III, pp. 288-91.

<sup>22</sup> al-Sīrāfi, p. 89. News of the meeting between the two grammarians is present, in other versions, in many other sources on Thaʿlab. However, in the other sources (such as Yāqūt, p. 538) al-Mubarrad disappears and the standard Kūfan interpretation of the story emerges: the meeting between Thaʿlab and al-Riyāshī was a total disaster for the latter; he had to recognise Thaʿlab’s superiority and leave philology to him. Al-Sīrāfi, a Başran grammarian, keeps his remark much more vague.

Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab and al-Mubarrad also appear together in the latter’s entry:

I heard Abū Bakr Ibn Mujaḥid<sup>23</sup> say: I have never seen anyone better than al-Mubarrad in answering on the *ma<sup>ʿ</sup>ānī al-Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān* regarding points into which nobody had gone before. I also heard him say: “I missed out on much knowledge from [al-Mubarrad] because of my decision to stick with Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab”<sup>24</sup>.

al-Sīrāfī himself then adds:

Between [al-Mubarrad] and Abū l-<sup>ʿ</sup>Abbās Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab there was open aversion (*munāfara*). Most scholars preferred [al-Mubarrad]<sup>25</sup>.

This remark is followed by three short poems in praise of al-Mubarrad reported by Abū Bakr b. Abī l-Azhar, who is the author of the third piece. In all of the poems Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab is mentioned, but with different nuances. In the first poem, composed by an Aḥmad b. <sup>ʿ</sup>Abd al-Salām<sup>26</sup>, al-Mubarrad’s superiority is clearly stated (*wāfir*):

They say that Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab is a learned man  
Where is a star, compared with sun and moon?  
They say that Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab gives fatwās and dictations  
Where are the two Foxes (al-tha<sup>ʿ</sup>labāni), compared with the Lion?<sup>27</sup>

The second poem, by the same author, also puts Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab in a humbler position than al-Mubarrad (*tawīl*):

You were granted a knowledge which the [the whole of] human sciences  
do not embrace, nor does the grammar of Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab  
People go to you, to the point that it is as if  
at your door they [found] Minā and al-Muḥaṣṣab<sup>28</sup>

However, the third poem, whose author is the transmitter himself, puts Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab and al-Mubarrad on the same level. It is a miniature *qaṣīda*, with the “searcher of knowledge” as the *raḥīl* and Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab and al-Mubarrad as the objects of praise (*mutaqārib*):

He complained about the passion he had, towards  
his lover, the most painful and greatest [passion]  
They stayed [together] the night, ploughing

<sup>23</sup> The famous Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān reader, d. 324/935.

<sup>24</sup> al-Sīrāfī, p. 102.

<sup>25</sup> al-Sīrāfī, p. 102.

<sup>26</sup> The editor of al-Sīrāfī’s book identifies a reference to probably the same person in *Ta<sup>ʿ</sup>rikh Baghdād* VI, p. 272.

<sup>27</sup> al-Sīrāfī, p. 103. *Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab*, fox, is also the name of several stars of the Great Bear, whereas *hizabr*, lion, is the constellation of Leo. I am grateful to Julia Bray for help, especially with the poetry, in this paper. Any mistake is, of course, my responsibility.

<sup>28</sup> al-Sīrāfī, p. 105; the hills named are sites of the Pilgrimage.

the heat of the cheeks with their shed tears  
 And embracing, while their hearts  
 were like on the hot embers of Ghaḏā  
 Until a shining appeared in the darkness  
 from the morning, breaking into the dark  
 Oh, the beauty of that night, could it  
 last for ever and never go  
 Will it return, with its delight  
 while we are safe from our guardians?  
 Searcher for knowledge, do not be ignorant  
 take refuge with al-Mubarrad or Thaʿlab  
 You will find with these two all human learning  
 do not be like the mangy camel<sup>29</sup>  
 The whole knowledge of mankind is conjoined,  
 with these two, in the East and the West.<sup>30</sup>

Al-Sīrāfī, a Baṣran grammarian, does not hesitate to quote Thaʿlab as an authority in several cases. In fact, his book seems to be addressing the Kūfans as well as the Baṣrans, because all generations (*ṭabaqāt*) of Baṣrans are dated against the dates of Kūfans (i.e. al-Sīrāfī will often say of the grammarian X, a Baṣran: “He belonged to the same generation as Y”, a Kūfan). The overall impression is that there is not much animosity, and that the Kūfans, and Thaʿlab amongst them, are respected as equals<sup>31</sup>. Nevertheless, a personal rivalry between Thaʿlab and al-Mubarrad (*munāfara*) is indeed mentioned.

<sup>29</sup> The mangy camel is infectious and stays away from the herd; similarly, a student would be isolated if he did not study with al-Mubarrad and Thaʿlab.

<sup>30</sup> al-Sīrāfī, p. 106. Cf. al-Marzubānī (d. 384/994), *Die Gelehrtenbiographien des Abū ʿUbaydallāh al-Marzubānī in der Rezension des Ḥāfiẓ al-Yaghmurī (Nūr al-Qabas al-Muqtaṣar min al-Muqtabas fī Akhbār al-Nuḥāt wa-l-Udabāʾ wa-l-Shuʿarāʾ wa-l-ʿUlamāʾ)*, ed. R. Sellheim, Vol. 1: Text, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1964/1384, p. 234. There, these lines are attributed to ʿAbdallāh b. al-Ḥusayn b. Saʿd al-Quṭrabbulī. Al-Zubaydī (see below) only reports the last lines of the poem and only mentions that they were composed by one of the Moderns. *Taʾrīkh Baghdād* reports the full poem with an *isnād* going back to al-Sīrāfī and Abū Bakr Ibn Abī l-Azhar. Cf. also al-Masʿūdī (d. 345/956), *Murūj al-dhahab wa-maʿādhin al-jawhar*, ed. Barbier de Meynard, Pavet de Courteille and Pellat, Beirut: Publications de l’Université Libanaise, 1965-79, 3381, where both poetry and attribution are the same.

<sup>31</sup> A similar consideration has been made regarding Thaʿlab: for his pragmatic use of Baṣran wisdom, see J.C. Vadet, *L’esprit courtois en Orient dans les cinq premiers siècles de l’Hégire*, Paris: Maisonneuve, 1968, pp. 282-283.



### *Baghdadi discretion*

Al-Sīrāfi's pupil, Ibn al-Nadīm, devotes one of the ten chapters of his *Kitāb al-Fihrist*<sup>32</sup> to grammarians, divided into Baṣrans, Kūfāns and eclectics, "those who mixed the two *madhabs*". Tha'lab and al-Mubarrad are obviously found in two different sections<sup>33</sup>, but there is no mention of personal rivalry between the two. On the other hand, here as well as in all the following sources, Tha'lab and al-Mubarrad emerge as the most prestigious grammarians, if not scholars overall, of their time, and are among the most quoted people in the whole book<sup>34</sup>. To be sure, the *Fihrist* does convey the atmosphere of competition between Baṣrans and Kūfāns. However, it only does so outwith the boundaries of Tha'lab and al-Mubarrad's personal spaces, in the biographies of their students. In particular, it is one of Tha'lab's most faithful students, Ibn al-Ḥā'ik, who is said to have had debates with al-Mubarrad<sup>35</sup>.

### *Andalusi rumours*

It is Ibn al-Nadīm's Andalusī contemporary, al-Zubaydī, who delves in the proper gossip, so to speak. In his *Ṭabaqāt al-naḥwiyyīn wa-l-lughawīyyīn*, references to the rivalry between Tha'lab and al-Mubarrad are to be found all over the place. The first of such references is in al-Mubarrad's entry, where al-Zubaydī reports some lines of poetry composed by al-Mubarrad lampooning Tha'lab, and Tha'lab's answer to those:

Abū 'Alī Ismā'īl b. al-Qāsim [al-Qālī]<sup>36</sup> said: Abū l-<sup>c</sup>Abbās Muḥammad b. Yazīd [al-Mubarrad] said, on Abū l-<sup>c</sup>Abbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā Tha'lab (*sarīc*):

I swear by [my lover's] sweet mouth  
and him who suffers from passionate love  
If [Tha'lab] were to write down grammar at God's dictation  
it would only make his heart more blind<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> While the *Fihrist* may not be considered *only* a biographical dictionary, it is certainly *also* one.

<sup>33</sup> *Fihrist*, p. 64 and pp. 80-81 respectively.

<sup>34</sup> According to the index, al-Mubarrad is mentioned thirteen times in the book, and Tha'lab twenty-four times, which makes him one of the most often mentioned individuals in the book.

<sup>35</sup> *Fihrist*, p. 81.

<sup>36</sup> A grammarian of the Baṣran *madhhab* who moved to al-Andalus and became al-Zubaydī's teacher and main authority, d. 356/967. See al-Zubaydī, pp. 132 and 202-205; Yāqūt, pp. 729-32; Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282), *Wafayāt al-a'yan*, ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās, 8 vols, Beirut: Dār al-thaqāfa, 1968-1972, I, pp. 226-228.

Abū ʿAlī [al-Qālī] said: when these two lines were recited to Abū l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā [Thaʿlab], he quoted the verse of the poet (*sarīʿ*):

The servant to the Banū Mismaʿ mocked me  
and I defended from him myself and my dignity  
I did not answer to him for my disdain of him  
when a dog bites, does one bite it back?<sup>38</sup>

This exchange can easily be seen as a series of unimaginative insults well within the *hijāʿ* tradition. However, a long episode almost at the end of the entry, where the story of al-Mubarrad’s arrival in Baghdad is reported, provides a much more personal background:

Ismāʿīl [al-Qālī] informed me, from his memory: after al-Mutawakkil was killed in Samarra, al-Mubarrad moved to Baghdad<sup>39</sup>. He arrived in a place among whose people he had no acquaintance, and he was ill (*ikhtalla*), so he got in a state of necessity. He wanted to attend the Friday prayer, and when the prayer was finished he approached one of those who were present and asked him if he could address him [al-Mubarrad] first with a question, in order to give him an opportunity to speak; but he had no knowledge. When [al-Mubarrad] realised this, he raised his voice and began to explain the Qurʾān, so that it was supposed that he had been asked. A circle formed around him, in which Abū l-ʿAbbās [al-Mubarrad] gave his lecture. Abū l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā [Thaʿlab] expected [to see] the circle of people, as often a group of Khurāsānī philosophers (*dhawī l-naẓar*) came to the mosque and discussed (*yatakallamūna*), and people gathered around them. When Thaʿlab saw them he would send some of his students to ask them questions; when they stopped answering [because they were unable to], people would disperse from around them. So, when Thaʿlab saw who was around Abū l-ʿAbbās, he ordered Ibrāhīm b. al-Sarī al-Zajjāj<sup>40</sup> and Ibn al-Ḥāʾik<sup>41</sup> to get up, and said: “Disperse the circle of that man”. Those other companions of his who were present got up with them. When the two arrived in [al-Mubarrad’s] presence, Ibrāhīm b. al-Sarī told him: “Do you allow questions, may God exalt you?” Abū l-ʿAbbās answered: “Ask whatever you like”. [al-Zajjāj] asked him a question, and he answered with a convincing answer. Al-Zajjāj looked at the faces of his companions, surprised at the perfection of Abū l-ʿAbbās’s answer. When he was over with it, Abū l-ʿAbbās told him: “Are you happy with this answer?”. He said: “Yes”. “And if someone told you such-and-such on this answer of ours, what would you say in return?” And he started to criticise [his own] answer to the

<sup>37</sup> al-Mubarrad accuses his rival to be insensitive to the subtleties of grammar, which require emotional insight as well as memory.

<sup>38</sup> al-Zubaydī, pp. 113-114.

<sup>39</sup> al-Mubarrad worked at court in Samarra. See Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī (d. 335/947), *Kitāb al-awrāk, kKniga listov*, ed. and Russian translation by A.B. Khalidov, St. Petersburg: Tsentr Peterburgskoe Vostokovedenie, 1998, pp. 509-510 (par. 158), where the scholar gives an account of his first encounter with al-Mutawakkil.

<sup>40</sup> D. 310/922.

<sup>41</sup> See above, footnote 21.

question and to find faults in it. Ibrāhīm remained confused, not being able to find an answer. Then he said: “What if the *shaykh* [al-Mubarrad], may God exalt him, decided to speak on this?” Abū l-ʿAbbās said: “Grammar says so-and-so”, and he confirmed the first answer and criticised the argument with which he had weakened it. Al-Zajjāj became pale. Then he said to himself: “Maybe it is possible to present to him the memorization of this question and the agreement on its discussion (*qawl*), so that the question will be agreed upon if he asked it”. He asked him another question, and Abū l-ʿAbbās did with it a similar thing. [This went on] up to about fourteen questions: [al-Mubarrad] would answer each one of them with something satisfactory, then he would criticise the answer, then he would go back to confirming the first statement. When Ibrāhīm b. al-Sarī saw this, he told his companions: “You go back to the *shaykh* [Thaʿlab], as I shall not leave this man. No doubt I have to attach myself to him”. His companions rebuked him and said: “Will you study with a nobody whose name you do not know, leaving he whose knowledge is already shining, and whose fame has spread all over the regions?” He answered: “I do not defend renown and indolence; I defend knowledge and intelligence”. So he became attached to al-Mubarrad: he asked him about himself and acquainted him with his own desire for knowledge, and that he had devoted himself to it, apart from what was taken up by his job as a glass cutter (*zajjāj*)<sup>42</sup> five days a month; he supported himself with that for the whole month. Then al-Mubarrad charged him thirty dirham per month, and ordered him to throw away the books of the Kūfans, so that they did not remain in his property. [Al-Zajjāj] studied with him until he became his best companion. Al-Mubarrad would not have anyone study the *Book* of Sībawayh<sup>43</sup> with himself, if they had not first studied it with al-Zajjāj and he had corrected their book<sup>44</sup>.

This story is in itself a mine of information: firstly, it describes the procedure of the standard scholastic debate, implicitly claiming that it was al-Mubarrad who introduced it in Baghdad; secondly, it provides a concrete example of the social standing and financial situation of three scholars at different points in their careers. Finally, it lays down the basic elements of the *topos* on Thaʿlab and al-Mubarrad, which can be summarised as follows: Thaʿlab was the best grammarian in town until al-Mubarrad arrived. Al-Mubarrad, with his innovative methods, stole students

<sup>42</sup> Cf. K. Versteegh, “A Sociological View of the Arab Grammatical Tradition: Grammarians and their Professions”, in *Studia Linguistica et Orientalia Memoriae Haim Blanc Dedicata*, ed. P. Wexler, A. Borg and S. Somekh, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1989, pp. 289-302, especially p. 295.

<sup>43</sup> The *Kitāb Sībawayhi*, also known as simply *al-Kitāb*, was the founding book of the Baṣran *madhhab*, on which al-Mubarrad was the main authority of his time. These economic sacrifices of al-Zajjāj were to be repaid, because it was through al-Mubarrad that al-Zajjāj was introduced to the vizier ʿUbaydallāh b. Sulaymān b. Wahb (d. 288/901) and became the private tutor of his children, in a public dispute in which he humiliated a faithful student of Thaʿlab (see below, footnote 90). But the fortune of al-Zajjāj did not stop there as, on the advice of the vizier, the caliph himself appointed him tutor of his children.

<sup>44</sup> al-Zubaydī, pp. 118-119.

and renown from him. The themes of betrayal and jealousy are introduced here and highlighted in al-Zubaydī's biography of Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab<sup>45</sup>, which brings another betrayer to the fore, this time from within Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab's own family:

[Abū ʿAlī Hārūn b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz] al-Awārijī the *kātib*<sup>46</sup> said: al-ʿAjūzī<sup>47</sup> transmitted to me: ... [Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab's] son-in-law Abū ʿAlī al-Dīnawarī, husband of his daughter, would go out of his house while [Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab] was sitting at the door of his apartment, and would pass through Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab's companions, carrying his inkwell and notebook, as he was learning Sibawayh's *Book* with al-Mubarrad. Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab would rebuke him: "When people see you going to that man and learning from him, what will they say?" Al-Dīnawarī would not pay attention to his words<sup>48</sup>.

This Abū ʿAlī al-Dīnawarī (d. 289/902), of whom there is no mention in the *Fihrist*, has another important role: not only is he one of those who prefer al-Mubarrad to Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab; he is also a witness of how the competition between the two scholars took place:

[al-ʿAjūzī said]: This Abū ʿAlī was knowledgeable. I heard Ismāʿīl b. Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Muṣʿabī ask him: "Abū ʿAlī, how did al-Mubarrad the grammarian become more knowledgeable on the *Book* of Sibawayh than Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab?" He said: "Because al-Mubarrad learned it from the scholars, while Aḥmad b. Yahyā read it by himself<sup>49</sup>."

Finally, al-Dīnawarī explains what made al-Mubarrad better than Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab at debating:

[al-ʿAjūzī said]: Muḥammad b. Yazīd liked to get together with [Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab in gatherings], and asked him many questions; Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab refused. I asked his son-in-law al-Dīnawarī: "Why does he do this?" He said: "Al-Mubarrad has good diction, smooth clarification, an eloquent tongue and clear explanation. The way of Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab, instead, is the way of teachers. When they get together in a party, favour will be given to the one who is exteriorly better against the one who knows things in depth<sup>50</sup>. When they met in the street they asked each other questions and wrangled. God have mercy on them<sup>51</sup>."

Despite this emphasis on conflict, al-Zubaydī also reports, from the same informant, the poem praising both grammarians:

He and Muḥammad b. Yazīd were two scholars who put a seal to the history of *udabāʿ*.  
One of the moderns said (*mutaqārib*):

<sup>45</sup> al-Zubaydī, pp. 155-167.

<sup>46</sup> D. 344/955. See *Waḥyāt* II, p. 172.

<sup>47</sup> This might be Abū-l-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, a student of Ibn al-A<sup>ʿ</sup>rābī like Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab, although Ibn al-Nadīm (pp. 77-78) says that he did not leave any book.

<sup>48</sup> al-Zubaydī, p. 156.

<sup>49</sup> al-Zubaydī, p. 156.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj*, 3382, for the same dialogue.

<sup>51</sup> al-Zubaydī, p. 158.

Searcher of knowledge, do not be ignorant  
[same lines as reported by al-Sirāfi follow]<sup>52</sup>

Al-Zubaydī's biography of Tha'lab also contains, narrated in Tha'lab's own voice, the description of a *majlis* in which the two grammarians actually wrangle in front of an audience. Unlike the previous story, this account contains not only a general description of the rivalry, but also a very detailed explanation of the content of this particular dispute<sup>53</sup>:

Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā [Tha'lab] said: one day I entered [the *majlis* of] Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir<sup>54</sup>. Al-Mubarrad was there, together with a group of the host's peers and secretaries, as Muḥammad b. 'Īsā<sup>55</sup> had talked to him about al-Mubarrad. When I sat down, Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh asked me: "What do you say about this verse by Imru' al-Qays (*mutaqārib*):

*Lahā matnatāni khazātā kamā akabba 'alā sā'idayhi l-namir*<sup>56</sup>

I said: "It is unusual that it is said *khazā*, with *zā* ' and *alif*, when it means firm backbone and he describes a horse. '*Kamā akabba 'alā sā'idayhi l-namir*' means 'in the firmness of the leopard's forelegs', when it lands on its paws. *Matn* means the path spreading from the right of the body to its left [flanks]. The rarity from the linguistic point of view is what happens with *khazātā*: when the *tā* ' is vocalised, [the poet] restores the *alif* because of the vowel *fatha*<sup>57</sup>". [Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir] turned towards Muḥammad b. Yazīd, who said: "God exalt the commander! [The poet] meant to put *khazātā* in construct with *kamā*<sup>58</sup>". I said: "Nobody has ever said this". Al-Mubarrad said: "On the contrary, Sibawayh says that". I said to Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh: "No, by God! Sibawayh never said that. Here is his book, let it be shown." Then I turned to

<sup>52</sup> al-Zubaydī, p. 158. Only the three lines concerning Tha'lab and al-Mubarrad are quoted here.

<sup>53</sup> For a list of face to face debates between Tha'lab and al-Mubarrad and their sources, see Bernards, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-30, especially note 44.

<sup>54</sup> This was Tha'lab's main employer and patron, d. 253/867. See C.E. Bosworth in *EP*, "Ṭāhirids" and the works quoted therein.

<sup>55</sup> This Muḥammad b. 'Īsā appears in other episodes concerning Tha'lab and his Ṭāhirid employer. He might be one of the brothers of the vizier 'Alī b. 'Īsā, a secretary himself, of whom little is known (cf. Dominique Sourdel, *Le vizirat 'abbāside de 749 à 936*. Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1959-60, p. 748).

<sup>56</sup> "She has two flanks firm like the leopard landing on its paws". The line is found in the *Dirwān* (ed. Muḥammad Abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1958), poem n. 29, v. 32 (p. 164).

<sup>57</sup> Tha'lab intends this word as a perfect third person dual feminine from the root *khzw*, *khazātā*, where the weak radical, which disappears in the third person feminine singular because of the *sukūn* ending (*khazat*), reappears because of the final *alif*.

<sup>58</sup> Al-Mubarrad intends the word as the feminine dual of *khazm*, *khazātāni*, which loses the final *nūn* because it is in a construct. Most commentaries to this line favour this second reading but report both.

Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh and told him: “And why do we need the *Book* of Sībawayh? Can one say ‘*marartu bi-l-Zaydayni ẓarīfay ʿAmr*’, putting in construct the qualifier of one thing with another thing?” Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh said with certainty: “No, by God, this cannot be said”, and turned to al-Mubarrad, who remained silent and did not say anything. I stood up and the *majlis* broke up<sup>59</sup>.

The two longer anecdotes reported up to now (al-Mubarrad’s arrival in Baghdad and the dispute on the line of poetry) are very different from one another not only because they record the success of two different people, but also because, while the latter portrays a situation of conflict from the point of view of one of the protagonist, the former describes a situation of indirect competition, narrated by a third individual whose role is to decree the winner. Moreover, while the story in favour of al-Mubarrad describes a method but does not go into the details of the discussion, that in favour of Thaʿlab provides a very minute description of a specific case. These last aspects of the two stories seem to reflect the very methodological difference which are attributed to the two *madhhabs*: *qiyās* for the Baṣrans, *samāʿ* for the Kūfans.

Further elements on the rivalry between Thaʿlab and al-Mubarrad are found in the biography of al-Dīnawarī, Thaʿlab’s son-in-law<sup>60</sup>. The entry contains several elements, starting with the essential biographical data:

Abū ʿAlī Aḥmad b. Jaʿfar. He went to Egypt. He was originally from Dīnawar, then went to Baṣra, where he studied with al-Māzini<sup>61</sup> and learned the *Book* of Sībawayh by heart from him. Then he went to Baghdad and studied the *Book* of Sībawayh with al-Mubarrad. Then he took up residence in Egypt. He was the son-in-law of Thaʿlab, husband of his daughter.

This general introduction is followed by a repetition of the scene with al-Dīnawarī going out of Thaʿlab’s house to study with al-Mubarrad. This is the longest narrative unit in the entry, and the central one. It is followed by a list of books composed by al-Dīnawarī, which include a book of *ikhtilāf* between Baṣrans and Kūfans. The entry ends with dates and references to two other scholars:

When ʿAlī b. Sulaymān al-Akhfash<sup>62</sup> arrived in Egypt, Abū ʿAlī al-Dīnawarī left it, returning after al-Akhfash had gone back to Baghdad. Abū ʿAlī al-Dīnawarī died in Egypt in 289[901-2]. Abū l-Ḥusayn b. Wallād and others studied with him.

<sup>59</sup> al-Zubaydī, pp. 160-161.

<sup>60</sup> al-Zubaydī, p. 234.

<sup>61</sup> Abū ʿUthmān Bakr b. Muḥammad (d. 247/861 or 249/863), a student of Sībawayhi on whom see R. Sellheim in *Et*. He had also been a teacher of al-Mubarrad.

<sup>62</sup> D. 315/927. See al-Zubaydī, pp. 125-7; *Taʾriḫ Baghdad* XI, pp. 433; Yāqūt, pp. 1770-4; *Wafayāt* III, pp. 301-3.

Four elements in this entry are somehow connected to our topic. These are: the episode with Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab; the book on Baṣrans and Kūfans; the fact that al-Dīnawarī settled down in Egypt, with this peculiar exchange between him and al-Akhfash (the two are never said to have met), another grammarian classified as Baṣran; and the mention of his main student, Muḥammad b. al-Walīd Ibn Wallād (d. 332/943-944), whose biography is found only a couple of pages after al-Dīnawarī’s<sup>63</sup>.

This Ibn Wallād, the reader is told, was born in Egypt and, after studying with Abū ʿAlī al-Dīnawarī, went to Baghdad and remained there for eight years, studying with al-Mubarrad. He also met Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab. What most interests us is, however, another detail: al-Dīnawarī married Ibn Wallād’s mother. In other words: after marrying the daughter of a grammarian, al-Dīnawarī married the mother of another. This daughter of Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab’s was the same one who inherited so much wealth from the deceased father, as we are told by many sources, because the same sources tell us that he had only one daughter<sup>64</sup>, who may have survived her husband and returned to Baghdad before her father’s death<sup>65</sup>.

Once again, this entry on Ibn Wallād brings together several elements which seem to be recurrently connected to the relationship between Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab and al-Mubarrad: relations acquired by marriage<sup>66</sup>, travelling between Egypt and Baghdad, study with al-Mubarrad and Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab. It is almost a closed circle, but it will have to be manipulated by another compiler to achieve its perfection. It also seems interesting that al-Dīnawarī is never mentioned in the *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadīm. This seems to suggest that for al-Zubaydī the importance of al-Dīnawarī lies not, or not only, in his being a grammarian, but mainly in his role as a connector between

<sup>63</sup> al-Zubaydī, pp. 238-239.

<sup>64</sup> Yāqūt, p. 544, reports a passage where Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab, asked by his teacher Ibn al-A<sup>ʿ</sup>rābī how many children he has, answers that he has one only daughter. It would be possible that he had male or female children later, but the fact that his wealth was inherited by one female (see the following footnote) excludes it.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. al-Zubaydī, p.159: “One of [his students] said: we were at Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab’s, condoling him on the death of his son-in-law al-Dīnawarī (news of his death had reached us on Sunday 23 of *dhū l-ḥijja* 286[/899, note the different date from the one given in al-Dīnawarī’s biography]), when he said...”. Cf. al-Zubaydī, pp. 166-7: “When he died, Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab left 21000 *dirham* and 2000 *dīnār*, besides shops at Bāb al-Shām for the value of 3000 *dīnār*. His wealth was inherited by his granddaughter” (although Yāqūt, p. 536, has “daughter”).

<sup>66</sup> On the significance of marriage ties between scholars in al-Andalus, see Manuela Marín, “Parentesco simbólico y matrimonio entre los ulemas andalusíes”, *al-Qanṭara*, 16 (1995), 335-356. Within the context described by Marín, the relationship between Tha<sup>ʿ</sup>lab and al-Dīnawarī stands out because, far from strengthening these grammarians’ social status within the scholarly community, it is an embarrassment for both.

different individuals, and consequently between different sections of al-Zubaydī's book. Ibn al-Nadīm, who does not mention a rivalry between Tha'lab and al-Mubarrad, does not need to mention al-Dīnawarī. The same could be thought for Ibn Wallād, whose name appears in several biographical dictionaries, but without the mention of his connection to al-Dīnawarī. The only place where such relation will reappear is Yāqūt's *Mu'jam al-udabā'*, where it will be exploited to its full potential. Finally, it should be mentioned that Ibn Wallād's own book, the *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, is one of the two earliest books to treat arguments at the origin of the Kūfan-Baṣran debate<sup>67</sup>.

### *More Baghdadi discretion*

The reader of *Ta'riḫ Baghdād* is given a very different idea of the relationship between Tha'lab and al-Mubarrad, especially in the former's biography<sup>68</sup>, where al-Khaṭīb spends much space to convey that the two scholars were equally good. The poem which has already been seen in al-Sīrāfī and al-Zubaydī<sup>69</sup> is used here not to expand on the subject, but to introduce it altogether. Some prose follows the text instead, as a further explanation:

Between the two Abū l-ʿAbbās, Tha'lab and al-Mubarrad, there were many controversies, and people differed in their preference of one of them over the other<sup>70</sup>.

This sentence is very similar in structure to the one introducing the three poems in al-Sīrāfī, especially for the use of the word *munāfara* rather than the more commonly used *munāzara*. However, al-Khaṭīb's sentence has been purged of any bias in favour of al-Mubarrad.

Immediately after this, al-Khaṭīb mentions the same exchange of invective verses which is found in al-Zubaydī, although with a different *isnād*. Again, it is an exchange, therefore something balanced, although Tha'lab, having the last word, comes out slightly on top. In the next two *khābars* two prestigious witnesses, an aristocratic *dilettante* and a grammarian, consecutively vouch for the equality between Tha'lab and al-Mubarrad:

Abū Ṭāhir Aḥmad b. Najā b. ʿAbd al-Ṣamad al-Bazzāz transmitted to me: I heard Abū Aḥmad al-Faraḍī<sup>71</sup> say: I heard Abū Muḥammad ʿAbdallāh b. Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm b. al-

<sup>67</sup> Cf. footnote 6 above. The *Kitāb al-Intiṣār* is published in Arabic in Monique Bernards, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-212.

<sup>68</sup> *Ta'riḫ Baghdād* V, pp. 204-212.

<sup>69</sup> *Ta'riḫ Baghdād* V, pp. 207. Like al-Sīrāfī, al-Khaṭīb has the whole poem, while al-Zubaydī only quotes the last three lines.

<sup>70</sup> *Ta'riḫ Baghdād* V, pp. 208.

<sup>71</sup> D. 406/1016. See *Ta'riḫ Baghdād* X, pp. 380-2; Yāqūt, p. 2505.



Khurāsānī al-Muʿaddal<sup>72</sup> say: Abū l-ʿAbbās Muḥammad b. ʿUbayd Allāh b. ʿAbdallāh b. Ṭāhir told me: my father<sup>73</sup> told me: I was present at the *majlis* of my brother Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh b. Ṭāhir. Thaʿlab and al-Mubarrad, the two grammarians, were also present. My brother Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh told me: “These two *shaykhs* have attended, and I would like to find out who is the more knowledgeable”, or something to the same effect. Sit in the apartment so-and-so (he named it) and these two *shaykhs* will come in your presence and discuss”. I did as he ordered, and the two were there and discussed on something concerning grammar which I knew, and I participated in the discussion until they became too specific and I did not understand. I returned to him after the end of the *majlis*. He asked me and I said: “They talked of something I knew and I joined their [discussion] for as much as I knew, then they became too specific and I did not know what they were talking about. By God, my lord, the only one who knows who is the more knowledgeable is he who knows more than they, and I am not the man”. My brother said: “You did well by God, this is better” (i.e. my acknowledgement of this). The judge Abū l-ʿAlāʾ Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Wāsiṭī<sup>74</sup> informed me: Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar al-Tamīmī<sup>75</sup> informed me in Kūfa: Abū ʿUmar (i.e. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wāhid)<sup>76</sup> told me: I asked Ibn al-Sarrāj<sup>77</sup>: “Who is the more knowledgeable, Thaʿlab or al-Mubarrad?” He answered: “What shall I say of two people who have the world between them?”<sup>78</sup>

Two other narrative units in this biography bring the relationship between Thaʿlab and al-Mubarrad even further from the idea of personal rivalry and closer to that of amicable contest. The first of these units, which immediately follows the anecdote above, is a piece of poetry composed on al-Mubarrad’s death. These are verses of praise, despair on the loss of such a valuable scholar, and encouragement to learn as much as possible from the only matching talent, Thaʿlab:

[Abū ʿUmar Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wāhid] said: when al-Mubarrad died, a man got up [in front of] Thaʿlab[’s circle] and said (*kāmil*):

<sup>72</sup> ʿAbdallāh b. Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm Abū Muḥammad al-Muʿaddal Ibn al-Khurāsānī, d. 349/960-1. See *Taʿrikh Baghdād* IX, pp. 414.

<sup>73</sup> ʿUbayd Allāh b. ʿAbdallāh b. Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 300/913), the brother of Thaʿlab’s employer and a poet and *adīb* in his own right. See *Fihrist*, p. 131; *Taʿrikh Baghdād* X, pp. 340-4; *Wafayāt* III, pp. 120-3.

<sup>74</sup> A Baghdadi judge, Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Yaʿqūb, who is also mentioned in Yāqūt, p. 2849.

<sup>75</sup> Abū l-Ḥasan Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar, known as Ibn al-Najjār, d. 402/1011. See *Taʿrikh Baghdād* II, pp. 158-9.

<sup>76</sup> Abū ʿUmar Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wāhid al-Baghawī al-Zāhid, known as ghulām Thaʿlab because he remained Thaʿlab’s main disciple and continuator, d. 345/957. See al-Zubaydī, p. 229; *Fihrist*, pp. 82-83; *Taʿrikh Baghdād* II, pp. 356-9; Yāqūt, pp. 2556-60; *Wafayāt* IV, pp. 329-33.

<sup>77</sup> Muḥammad b. al-Sarī Abū Bakr, d. 316/929. See al-Zubaydī, p. 122-125; *Fihrist*, pp. 67-68; *Taʿrikh Baghdād* V, pp. 319-20; Yāqūt, pp. 2534-7; *Wafayāt* IV, pp. 339-40.

<sup>78</sup> *Taʿrikh Baghdād* V, pp. 208-209.

The house of philological sciences, half of it is  
destroyed, and the other half will be  
al-Mubarrad is dead, and his days elapsed  
with al-Mubarrad, Tha‘lab will soon be  
I consider it good for you that you write down his words  
here, these are [the kind of] words which [should be] written<sup>79</sup>

The last relevant reference is found in a section devoted generally to the praise of Tha‘lab, and it is a peace offering on al-Mubarrad’s part:

Al-Tārīkhī<sup>80</sup> said: I heard al-Mubarrad say: “The most knowledgeable among the Kūfans is Tha‘lab”. They mentioned al-Farrā’ to him, but he said: “He does not add up to a tenth of him”<sup>81</sup>.

This insistence on al-Mubarrad in Tha‘lab’s biography is not mirrored in the entry on al-Mubarrad, where the only reference to the rivalry is the remark of Ibn Mujāhid which has been seen in al-Sirāfi, followed some remarks by al-Zajjāj on how al-Mubarrad changed his life; these are much less detailed than the story reported by al-Zubaydi:

Abū Ishāq al-Zajjāj said: when al-Mubarrad arrived in Baghdad, I went to see him to debate with him. At that time I was the best student of Tha‘lab and I sympathized with [the Kūfans’] ideas, so I decided to be harsh on him. When I addressed him, he silenced me with the evidence and asked me for the weakness [in this evidence]. He showed me the necessary things to which I had not been guided, and I clearly saw his superiority and valued his intelligent to be very great; so I attached myself to him<sup>82</sup>.

Thus, in al-Mubarrad’s biography Tha‘lab is quickly dismissed as an inferior grammarian, whereas in Tha‘lab’s entry many *khbars* insist on the two scholars being equal. That the transmitters of anecdotes on Tha‘lab’s life feel they need to insist so much on this equality is somehow suspicious; al-Khaṭīb, however, as is his style, does not elaborate and leaves the reader to draw her own conclusions. The image which al-Khaṭīb provides certainly lacks the tensions and frustration which we can perceive in al-Zubaydi’s accounts; it also lacks any reference to specific points of dispute.

<sup>79</sup> *Ta’rikh Baghdād* V, p. 209.

<sup>80</sup> This is Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Malik Abū Bakr al-Sarrāj al-Tārīkhī (d. 330/942), a grammarian who studied with Tha‘lab and al-Mubarrad, author of a *Kitāb Ta’rikh al-naḥwīyyīn*. See *Fihrist*, p. 95; *Ta’rikh Baghdād* II 348; al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1362), *Kitāb al-Wāfi bi l-wafayāt. Das biographische Lexikon des Ṣalāḥaddīn Ḥalil ibn Aibak aṣ-Ṣafadī*, ed. Helmut Ritter, Sven Dederling et al., Leipzig-Wiesbaden-Beirut: Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, 1962-, IV, pp. 45-46.

<sup>81</sup> *Ta’rikh Baghdād* V, p. 210.

<sup>82</sup> *Ta’rikh Baghdād* III, p. 381.

### Greek sophistication

Yāqūt's approach, in his *Muʿjam al-udabāʾ*<sup>83</sup>, is very similar to that of al-Zubaydī, but more refined. His biography of al-Dīnawarī contains the same elements of that in al-Zubaydī, apart from the book titles: the episode outside Thaʿlab's house, al-Dīnawarī's opinion on Thaʿlab and al-Mubarrad, and his moving to Egypt. As in al-Zubaydī, this last remark mentions the movements of two people, al-Dīnawarī and al-Akhfash, who are not said to have met, and who were not so well known to be points of reference for certain years. A link is provided in Thaʿlab's entry, where the episode of al-Dīnawarī going out of Thaʿlab's house is repeated, and it is followed by a very similar story, this time with al-Akhfash as protagonist:

[Abū l-Qāsim al-Zajjājī<sup>83</sup>] transmitted: ʿAlī b. Sulaymān al-Akhfash informed me: I was one day in the presence of Thaʿlab, and I was in a hurry to leave before the conclusion of the *majlis*. Thaʿlab asked: "Where are you going? I see you can't stay away from the *majlis* of al-Khuldī", i.e. al-Mubarrad. I told him: "I need to do something". He said: "I see he places al-Buḥturī before Abū Tammām<sup>84</sup>. If you go to see him, ask him: what is the meaning of this verse by Abū Tammām (*wāfir*)<sup>85</sup>?"

Beloved of the noble one, how many separations  
will happen again, which are the herald of reunion?

Abū l-Ḥasan said: when I went to see Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Mubarrad I asked him about that line and he answered: "The meaning of this is that the lovers are separated and parted freely but not for a decision to separate [definitively]. When the [moment of] departure draws near and they perceive that they will be separated, they return to affection and share the fear of separation, and the fear that it will be a long time before they meet again. So, separation becomes the cause of reunion, as another says (*khafif*)<sup>86</sup>:"

<sup>83</sup> ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Ishāq, d. 337/949. See al-Zubaydī, p. 129; *Fihrist*, p. 87; *Wafayāt* III, p. 136. The *khavar* is found in al-Zajjājī's *Amālī*, ed. ʿAbd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, Cairo: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿarabiyya al-ḥadītha, 1962, pp. 56-58.

<sup>84</sup> Disputes between the supporters of al-Buḥturī and those of Abū Tammām were a classic theme of discussion among the critics of modern poetry. We know from al-Ṣūlī's *Akhbār al-Buḥturī* (ed. Ṣāliḥ al-Ashtar, Damascus, 1958) that the poet was a friend of al-Mubarrad's. In one episode (p. 56), al-Mubarrad praises al-Buḥturī for his modesty in refusing to be thought better than Abū Tammām.

<sup>85</sup> Abū Tammām (d. 232/846), *Dīwān Abī Tammām bi-sharḥ al-Khaṭīb al-Tibrizī*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbduh ʿAzzām, Cairo: Dār al-maʿārif, 1951, poem no. 92, v. 3 (vol. 2, p. 337).

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Ibn al-Muʿtazz, *Ṭabaqāt al-shuʿarāʾ*, ed. ʿAbd al-Sattār Aḥmad Farrāj, Cairo: Dār al-maʿārif, 1956/1375, p. 446. Here these lines are attributed to the early ninth century poet Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Ṣīnī, whose biography can be found in the same work, pp. 304-5.

On the day they parted, parting was to be their comfort  
 although they sought protection in crying and embracing  
 How many times they kept their passion secret from people out of precaution  
 and how many times did they hide their ardent desire and yearning!  
 Separation offered them shelter, and they encountered in it  
 a separation which brought them agreement  
 How can I imprecate destruction upon separation  
 when [our] reunion was on the morning of the day of separation?

[Abū l-Ḥasan] said: when I went back to Tha‘lab he asked me about it and I repeated to him the answer and the lines. He said: “He is so wrong! He didn’t do anything [to explain the line]. The meaning of the verse is that man separates from his beloved in the hope of gaining wealth by going away, going back to his beloved with no need to seek further employment, so that he can be with her for a long time. Don’t you see? In the following line he says (*wāfir*):

Only he who has suffered the grief of parting  
 can experience the joy of returning

And this is similar to what the other said, but in fact Abū Tammām took the idea from him (*tawīl*):

I seek to dwell far away from you, so that you may draw near  
 and my eyes shed tears only so that they maybe dried

This and that mean the same<sup>87</sup>.

This *khābar*, besides highlighting Tha‘lab’s interest in modern poetry, brings together two rivalry themes which we have already encountered: al-Mubarrad stealing students from Tha‘lab, and Tha‘lab’s success being described in minute technical detail. The repetition of not only the themes, but also the side remarks (as the mention of Egypt) in different points, seems to create a net of cross-references which come back in unexpected ways. Yāqūt has also a brief entry for Ibn Wallād, which is very similar to that found in al-Zubaydī’s book:

He was famous with this name but it was said that he was called Ibn al-Wallād Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Tamīmī the grammarian. He studied in Egypt with Abū ‘Alī al-Dīnawārī, Tha‘lab’s son-in-law; then he travelled to Iraq and studied with al-Mubarrad and Tha‘lab [...] al-Dīnawārī married his mother<sup>88</sup>.

All the above passages guide the reader through a complex but consistent net of references. The circle starts in Tha‘lab’s entry, with al-Dīnawārī marrying

<sup>87</sup> Yāqūt, p. 548. Tha‘lab is claiming to be more expert on modern poetry than al-Mubarrad: al-Mubarrad also prefers the moderns, but knows less than Tha‘lab about them. A vivid portrait of Tha‘lab as not only a poetry expert, but as a “grammairien d’*Adab*”, is painted by Vadet, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-187.

<sup>88</sup> Yāqūt, p. 2674.

Tha‘lab’s daughter and going out of Tha‘lab’s house to study with al-Mubarrad. If from this anecdote one is driven to look up al-Dīnawarī’s entry, one will find that he came and went to Egypt at opposite times to al-Akhfash. Going back to Tha‘lab’s entry, one will find, next to al-Dīnawarī’s episode, another occasion of frustration for Tha‘lab, this time with his other student al-Akhfash. Finally, in the entry of one of al-Dīnawarī’s students, Ibn Wallād, one will find enumerated all the elements mentioned above. This small net of connections is the perfect illustration of how Yāqūt’s *Mu‘jam* is closely woven, and how his system of cross-references works. It also shows how, within this net of cross-references, non prominent individuals can have the very important role of connecting tissue, non intrusive reminders. Such an interpretation assumes, of course, that Yāqūt aims at being consistent with his material and does not limit himself to throwing all the information pell-mell into each biography. His originality, as that of many so-called compilers, lies not in providing new material, but in arranging old material so that it hangs well together, giving a very strong idea, in this case, of what sort of pair Tha‘lab and al-Mubarrad were.

Other references to the rivalry are consistent with this portrayal of the rivalry. Tha‘lab’s entry contains the same episode found in al-Zubaydī, where Tha‘lab wins an argument over al-Mubarrad in the presence of Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. Ṭāhīr. However, Yāqūt adds a brief comment which rejects Tha‘lab’s interpretation and therefore turns the victory into a defeat, a long lasting defeat because it is henceforth going to be reported together with the *khabar*, and will make Tha‘lab’s answer look ridiculous:

‘Abdallāh al-Faḥr said: “I do not know why this should be impossible; I do not think anybody forbids a sentence like: *ra‘aytu l-farasayni markūbay Zayd*, or: *al-ghulāmayni ‘abday ‘Amr*, or: *al-thawbayni darrā‘atay Zayd*, and so also: *marartu bi-l-Zaydayni zarīfay ‘Amr*, because it is in construct with ‘Amr which is a *ṣifa* of Zayd. This is clear to everyone who thinks about it”<sup>89</sup>.

Yāqūt uses the same technique on a larger scale in two other *khabars*. He begins by reporting another occasion in which Tha‘lab shows a better knowledge than al-Mubarrad on a certain line of poetry:

<sup>89</sup> Yāqūt, pp. 538-539. The same story, with the final comment, appears also in al-Qifṭī (d. 646/1248), *Inbāh al-ruwāt ‘alā anbāh al-nuḥāt*, ed. Muḥammad Abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Cairo, 1950-1955/1369, I, pp. 145-146. Here, however, the comment is attributed to a general *al-Baṣriyyūn*, and a little detail is modified, so that Tha‘lab sounds completely ridiculous: the example which Tha‘lab uses is changed from *zarīfay* to *ṣadiqay*, which makes the sentence very simple and straightforward and not fit for such an example.

Al-ʿAjūzī said: I went to see al-Mubarrad together with al-Qāsim and al-Ḥasan, the sons of ʿUbayd Allāh b. Sulaymān b. Wabh<sup>90</sup>. Al-Qāsim told me: “Ask him something about poetry”. I said: “What do you say, God make you mighty, on this line by Aws [b. Ḥajar]<sup>91</sup> (*tawīl*):

*wa-ghayyarahā ʿan waṣliḥā l-shaybu innahu shafiʿun ilā bayḍi l-khudūri  
mudarrabu*<sup>92</sup>,

He said, after pausing, taking his time and smacking his lips: “He wants to say that women like his company and go to him unveiled”. Then we went to Thaʿlab, and when the *majlis* was crowded I asked him about that line. He said: “Ibn al-Aʿrābī told us: the *hāʾ* in *innahu* refers to youth even though it is not mentioned, because it is understood”. I turned to al-Ḥasan and al-Qāsim and I said: “Where does our master stand, in comparison with yours?”<sup>93</sup>.

Besides illustrating Thaʿlab’s superiority in interpreting pre-Islamic poetry, this *khabar* also displays different approaches to it: al-Mubarrad provides a general interpretation of the line, whereas Thaʿlab comments on a specific detail, from which it is possible to understand his reading of the line.

However, no sooner is this episode over than the balance is put straight. The next passage claims to uncover the lies which Thaʿlab and his partisans employed to diminish al-Mubarrad. This gives a new dimension to the rivalry, highlighting the real ground where the battle was fought: the memory of following generations.

Ḥamza<sup>94</sup> said: when al-Māzinī died, al-Mubarrad succeeded him. [Al-Māzinī’s] fame was established in Baghdad and Samarra, without anybody diminishing it, until Ibn al-

<sup>90</sup> ʿUbayd Allāh b. Sulaymān b. Wabh, who was vizier for al-Muʿtaḍid from 279/892 until his death in 288/901. His son al-Ḥasan, who held official posts during his father’s vizierate, died in 284/897, while al-Qāsim succeeded his father from 288/901 until his own death in 291/904, at first under al-Muʿtaḍid and later under al-Muktafi. On their vizierate, see Sourdel, *Vizirat* I, pp. 329-357; II, p. 737 and C.E. Bosworth in *EP* (“Wabh, Banū”). On the *persona* of al-Qāsim, see L. Osti, “al-Qāsim b. ʿUbayd Allāh - The vizier as villain: on classical Arabic gossip”, in J. Montgomery (ed.), *ʿAbbasid Studies*, Leuven: Peeters, 2004, pp. 233-245, where it is also explained why al-Qāsim and his brothers were students of al-Mubarrad.

<sup>91</sup> One of the major pre-Islamic poets. The line is found in his *Dīwān* (ed. Muḥammad Yūsuf Najm, Beirut: Dār ṣādir-Dār Bayrūt, 1960/1380), poem no. 3, v. 2 (p. 5).

<sup>92</sup> “My old age changed her [attitude] regarding her favour, indeed [youth] is a skilled advocate to women’s compassion”. While al-Mubarrad interprets the line as saying that when a man is old women let him go to them because he does not pose a threat to their virtue, Thaʿlab’s interpretation is the exact opposite: women will not let an old man visit them, because they only bestow their favours on young men.

<sup>93</sup> Yāqūt, p. 540.

<sup>94</sup> Probably the historian and grammarian Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, d. 360/970. See *GAS* I, pp. 336-337; VI, pp. 210-211; VIII, pp. 200-201.

Anbārī<sup>95</sup> mentioned him in some of his writings, with the aim of diminishing him and raising his own master, Abū l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā *Thaʿlab*. He proceeded according to his habit of supporting (*ʿaṣabiyya*) the Kūfans against the Baṣrans, saying: I heard Abū l-ʿAbbās (meaning *Thaʿlab*) say: “I decided to go to al-Māzinī to debate with him, but my companions stopped me saying: ‘It is not good that the like of you should go and see a Baṣran: tomorrow they will say that you are his student!’ I did not want to disagree with them”. Ibn al-Anbārī wanted to raise *Thaʿlab*, but he diminished him. He did not limit himself to this detraction of al-Māzinī, but he did the same with al-Khalīl<sup>96</sup>, claiming that *Thaʿlab* recounted to him that Abū Jaʿfar al-Ruʿāsi<sup>97</sup> made a book on grammar and called it *al-Fayṣal*; that al-Khalīl sent for it to borrow it and he duly sent it to him; [Ibn al-Anbārī] said: this means that al-Khalīl learned grammar from the book of al-Ruʿāsi for those passages which can be found in *Sībawayh* introduced with his mention when he says “*qāla al-kūfi*”. When this was heard, it was known that Ibn al-Anbārī only spoke out of partisanship<sup>98</sup>.

This *khbar*, which is different in format and content from most others analysed here, is crucial in illustrating the mechanisms governing the more general Baṣra vs. Kūfa grammatical debate: Ḥamza, and Yāqūt with him, project the beginning of the rivalry back to before *Thaʿlab*’s times; at the same time, Ibn al-Anbārī is attributed the main responsibility for spreading false rumours and slander against the Baṣrans. This passage takes the context completely away from al-Mubarrad and points towards a general animosity against the Baṣrans on the Kūfans’ part.

The focus goes back quickly to the personal rapport between the two grammarians with a poem: Yāqūt reports some verses on the death of al-Mubarrad which are similar to those found in *Taʿriḥ Baghdād*:

<sup>95</sup> Another of *Thaʿlab*’s most prominent students, d. 328/940. See al-Zubaydī, p. 171-172; *Fihrist*, p. 82; *Taʿriḥ Baghdād* III, pp. 181-6; Yāqūt, pp. 2614-18; *Wafayāt* IV, pp. 341-3.

<sup>96</sup> al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (d. 175/791 or 170/786), a Baṣran grammarian who was the teacher of *Sībawayhi*. See R. Sellheim in *EP*.

<sup>97</sup> A grammarian who lived in the late second/eighth century and was allegedly (according a story perhaps invented by *Thaʿlab*) the founder of the Kūfan *madhhab*. See J. Danecki in *EP*.

<sup>98</sup> Yāqūt, p. 540. The question regarding the origin of al-Khalīl’s book and his alleged plagiarism of Kūfan ideas is addressed in Rafael Talmon, *Arabic Grammar in its Formative Age: Kitāb al-ʿAyn and its Attribution to al-Ḥalīl b. Aḥmad*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997. See also Ramzi Baalbaki, “A Possible Early Reference to *Sībawaihi*’s *Kitāb*?”, *ZDMG* 131 (1981), pp. 163-177.

The judge Ibn Kāmil<sup>99</sup> said: Abū Bakr Ibn al-‘Allāf<sup>100</sup> recited to me these verses of his when al-Mubarrad died (*kāmil*):

Al-Mubarrad is dead, and his days elapsed  
with al-Mubarrad, Tha‘lab will soon be.  
One house of philological sciences, half of it is  
destroyed, and another remaining quarter will be destroyed  
Cry for what time snatched away, and get yourselves used  
to a time in which there is mourning  
Al-Mubarrad went where you cannot hope to reach him  
ever, and the one whom you can reach is going to disappear  
Learn from Tha‘lab, as from the same cup  
from which al-Mubarrad drank, he will soon drink  
Squeeze milk from his words as if you were  
at his deathbed, and on it some reward were assembled  
I consider it good that you write down his [last] breaths  
if indeed they are breaths which should be written down  
He will certainly join who has departed, staying behind him  
[only a little]; he will go and we shall go

Despite these last conciliatory lines, Yāqūt leaves no doubt as to where his loyalty stands between Tha‘lab and al-Mubarrad.

Other sources of the same kind, as the biographical dictionaries of al-Qifī and Ibn Khallikān, do not seem to have anything to add to what has already been said, and mildly follow one or the other approach which we have found already, either reporting all anecdotes without discrimination or comment, or devoting very little attention to the theme itself. By now, it seems, the *topos* is fixed and stable, and we can look back to see what we have found.

### Conclusion

We have looked at how several biographical sources treat a topical theme, the rivalry between two famous scholars. We have found different approaches, ranging from indifference to partisanship. Whether the theme has developed over time is not easy to establish, as contemporary sources adopt different attitudes. It is certain, however, that interest in the rivalry depends on the compiler’s aims and intended audience as well as on his informers. Thus, a tutor like al-Zubaydī may try to make knowledge more palatable for his young student through the introduction of funny

<sup>99</sup> Aḥmad b. Kāmil b. Khalaf Abū Bakr al-Qāḍī (d. 350/961), the main disciple of al-Ṭabarī’s *madhhab* of law. See *Fihrist*, pp. 35 and 292; *Ta’riḫ Baghdād* IV, pp. 357-9; Yāqūt, pp. 420-21.

<sup>100</sup> This could be the poet al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī b. Aḥmad, who died in 318 or 319 at the age of 100. See *Ta’riḫ Baghdād* VII, pp. 379-80.



stories about teachers and pupils, a technique for which the bookseller Ibn al-Nadīm would have no use. Likewise, the *ḥadīth* scholar al-Khaṭīb will not be as interested in his subjects' value as grammarians as he is in their reliability as transmitters. Conversely, grammar is within Yāqūt's main interest in *Muʿjam al-udabā'* and will therefore be given prominence and attention.

Whatever the approach the compiler takes, references within the same source seem in most cases consistent, not only within single entries but also across biographies, and traceable through sophisticated nets of cross references: the compiler wants his reader to keep referring to the book, to find reasons to continue reading it. The later the source, the more seamless the approach.

The main question remains to be addressed: what is the contribution of the biographical genre to the history of the Baṣra vs. Kūfa debate, and can such contribution be trusted for accuracy? A few elements which are consistent across the sources can help towards a conclusion.

It has been noted during the course of the analysis that there seems to be a trend assigning victories to Thaʿlab in stories in which a particular word or phrase is discussed, whereas reports in favour of al-Mubarrad mention the grammarian's innovative method and skill at debating but do not go into the actual contents of discussions. This appears in agreement with the standard, later descriptions of Kūfan and Baṣran grammatical *madhhabs*.

At the same time, as has been seen, all sources maintain a schizophrenia, natural to the genre, between accounts concerning Thaʿlab and al-Mubarrad's rivalry and the lists of teachers in each entry. In these lists, Thaʿlab and al-Mubarrad appear side to side as signs of a good education. This seems to suggest that cases like that of Ibn al-Zajjāj were rare and that the accomplished pupil must have studied with both teachers, regardless of which is the better and regardless of personal rivalries or jealousies. Thus, the careful reader of even Yāqūt, the most pro-Mubarrad source examined here, will evaluate the importance of Thaʿlab compared with that of al-Mubarrad not only based on the accounts describing interaction between the two, but also (mainly?) based on the quantity and prestige of scholars who claimed them as their teachers. On this account, Thaʿlab and al-Mubarrad are equals.

In addition to all the above, it is quite clear that stories on and mentions of the rivalry between Thaʿlab and al-Mubarrad are firmly attached to biographical material on the former and only marginally present in connection with the latter. This suggests that there is genuine resentment on Thaʿlab's part towards al-Mubarrad, whom he probably sees as an impertinent parvenu who has invaded his territory and stolen his best students. It also suggests that such resentment has been inherited by Thaʿlab's followers. Al-Mubarrad's students, on the contrary, have not inherited al-Mubarrad's benevolent superiority but have instead opted to expose the Kūfans' petty tricks. In other words: the issue is certainly more deeply felt on the Kūfan side, who has spread a number of stories, some of which have backfired in later times.

This last element seems to be the unique contribution of the genre to the history of the Kūfa vs. Baṣra debate: connecting methodological and practical differences to feelings and emotions as well as to personal, concrete situations. Whether each and every *khavar* describing the rivalry is accurate or not, whether it is fact or fiction, is debatable. What is certain, and more important, is that biographical material plays an important role in giving a physical context to a scholarly debate. Likewise, it is debatable whether biography alone can explain the origins of the Kūfa vs. Baṣra debate; nevertheless, it is certain that it helps to understand how certain stereotypes were formed, and to which ends.

BASEL

#### SUMMARY

*This paper examines the theme of rivalry and jealousy between two renowned ninth century grammarians, Tha<sup>l</sup>ab (d. 291/904) and al-Mubarrad (d. 286/898) as it is portrayed in the biographical dictionaries of al-Sirāfi, al-Zubaydi, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, Yāqūt and Ibn Khallikān (fourth/tenth-seventh/thirteenth century). After illustrating its approach to the sources and identifying relevant passages, the paper analyses the means through which each biographer gives more or less importance to this proverbial rivalry: the use of certain stories within each scholar's entry, their repetition in other entries, the highlighting of individuals functional to the theme, and the construction of a net of cross-references. The conclusion summarises the different approaches to the theme found in the sources and comments on the significance of this kind of topos within biographical literature.*