

Ibn Muqarrab and Naynūh – A Folk-tale from Ṭīwī

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INTRODUCTION

Prior to the development of the modern educational sector, making formal schooling available in the entire Sultanate, oral history occupied a prominent place in handing down local history, folk stories and mixtures of both. Archaeological sites often figure as the settings of these accounts. Local inhabitants have furthermore always sought to explain ancient fortifications, tombs and other built or natural structures by assigning them to certain historical or literary groups or individuals. Sometimes they surrounded them with folk tales or myths, such as the myth about the creation of the *aflāj* (sing. *falaj*) by order of the prophet Sulayman (PBUH). In the Eastern Ḥajar area famous stories are told about the demon Kibaykib and the tower tombs of Šāir, which he is said to have constructed and to have guarded with his magic sword (Insall 2000: 100-101; Yule and Bergoffen 1999: 187-193)¹. In general it is difficult to detect the historical core concealed in many of these stories, unless the original events are fairly recent.² As in other parts of the Sultanate the inhabitants of Ṭīwī have a rich oral tradition, which they have passed from one generation to the next. The legends about two very different characters in particular figure prominently in the oral folklore of Ṭīwī: Ibn Muqarrab, a historically well-attested character, and Naynūh the female counterpart, for whom no match could yet be identified from written historical sources. In the following contribution attention is mainly drawn to those aspects of the folk-legends that relate to oasis life, its local perception and to myths surrounding irrigated agriculture and its installations. Due to its location at the mouth of a wadi with

an exceptionally strong and reliable flow of water, Ṭīwī as well as the other villages in the wadi, is a lush green place. The date plantations and orchards, irrigated by *aflāj* and wells, stretch almost uninterruptedly for more than 10 km upstream from the mouth of Wādī Ṭīwī to Mībām (Lorimer 1908: 1908). When Ibn Baṭṭūṭa visited the place in the 14th century AD he called it 'one of the most strikingly beautiful of all villages with flowing streams and plentiful orchards' (Ibn Baṭṭūṭa 1962: 397). Naturally such a place harbours folk tales evolving around themes related to water and oasis agriculture.

IBN MUQARRAB

Above the southern side of the mouth of Wādī Ṭīwī a settlement site is located which, through archaeological investigations (see Korn, Häser, Schreiber, Gangler, Nagieb, Siebert and Buerkert 2004: this volume), has been dated to the late Iron Age with continuous occupation into the Islamic period, when the citadel was built. A tower next to the citadel has been assigned to the late Islamic period. Local people associate this tower with Ibn Muqarrab, a well-known poet who is said to have immigrated to Oman from Bahrain in the early 13th century AD. His tomb is said to be under an inaccessible rock shelter high up on the opposite mountain (plate 1). It was mentioned by S. B. Miles who visited Tiwi in 1874: 'Up the valley is the reputed tomb of Ibn al-Mukaire (sic), a celebrated poet of al-Hasar(sic), who retired here and built his own tomb on the hill.' (Ward 1987: 177)

According to his biographers such as Al Mana'i (n.d.: 40), Ibn Muqarrab was born in Al 'Ayūn, a

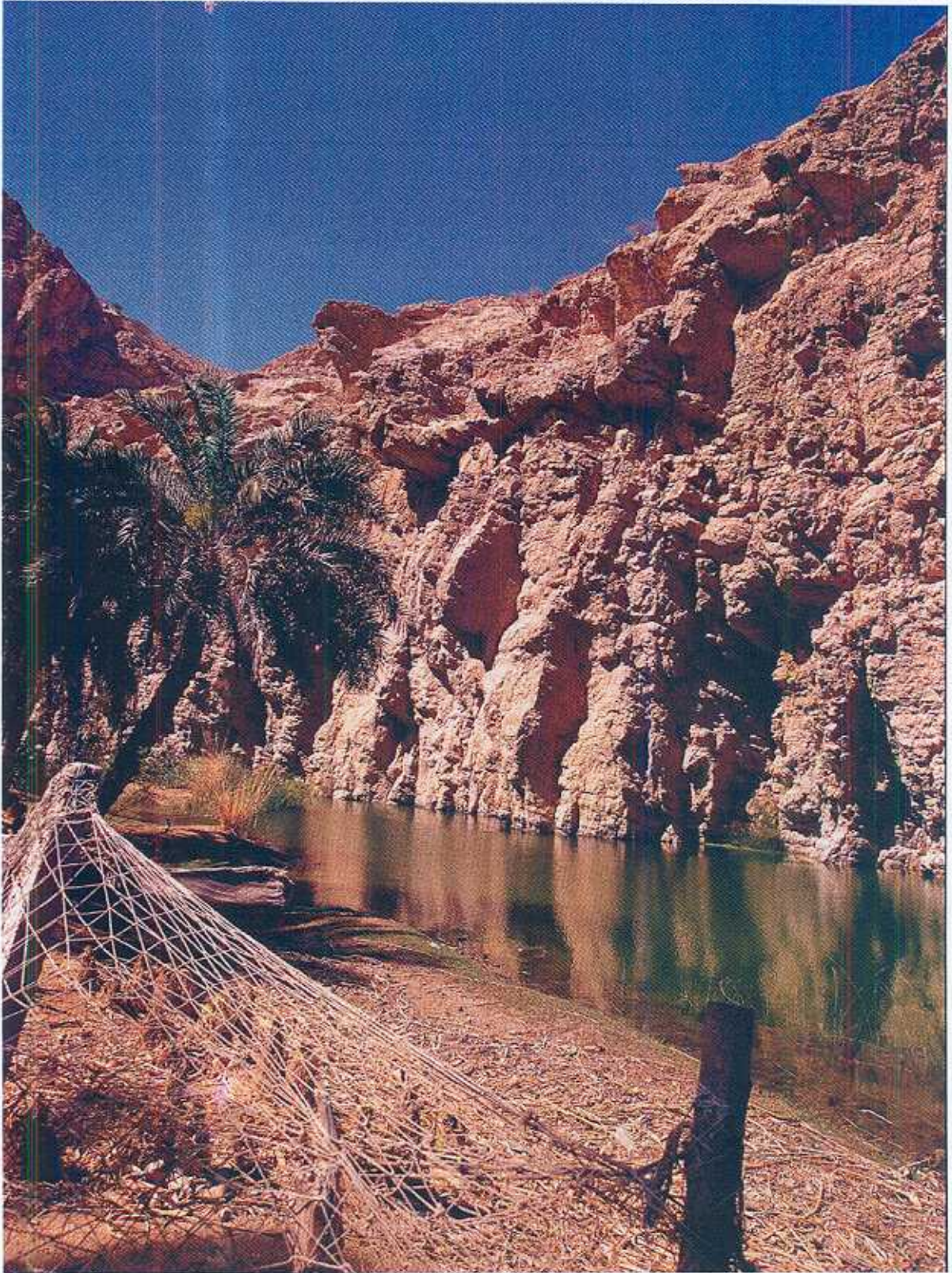


PLATE1. View of the rock well in Wādī Tīwī where Ibn Muqarrab's tomb is said to be located.

settlement belonging to Al Aḥsa in Al Bahrayn in the year AH 572/ AD 1176/7. He was a prince of the 'Uyūnī family, the ruling dynasty of the 'Uyūnī state. Nothing much seems to be known about the first 30 years of his life. It is said that he then got into trouble with his relatives, was imprisoned, deprived of his property and lands, and later fled to Iraq. Until the year AH 623/AD 1226 he is recorded to have spent time in Iraq on several occasions. As for the date and place of his death, there is no consensus among Ibn Muqarrab's biographers. Some mention the year AH 630/AD 1232/3, others the year AH 631/AD 1233/4, or AH 629/AD 1231/2 (Al Mana'i: 70). There is also disagreement as to whether he died in Bahrain, or in Baghdad, or in Ṭīwī where, as claimed by some, he came towards the end of his life. According to Al Mana'i (n.d.: 71) a 10th century AH/ 16th century AD manuscript relates that Ibn Muqarrab passed by this village on his way to India.

In the Gulf and particularly in Ṭīwī several popular episodes and legends are narrated about Ibn Muqarrab's life and death. Accounts about his life usually start with the story about how he came to be a fugitive of Bahrain after he had made his enemies perish during a meal he gave for them as guests in his home town of Al Aḥsa. The story is told as follows by the people of Ṭīwī:

'Ibn Muqarrab, [for some reason not exactly known to the narrators] was in a feud with a group of people, either of his own kin or from another tribe'. However, he was able to outwit and destroy his enemies. To this end he built a most splendid palace surrounded by irrigation channels. The foundations of this palace however, were built from salt. Once the building was completed he invited his enemies for a festive meal. While his guests were eating Ibn Muqarrab opened the water outlets into the irrigation channels and flooded the foundations of the palace. Within minutes the salt had melted. The walls of the castle collapsed and buried the people attending. Most of them died.'

This story is reminiscent of other stories and historical episodes. The ruse of inviting one's ene-

mies for a meal in the course of which they will be slaughtered is not uncommon. For example the account of how the Persian occupation of Oman in the 18th century received its final blow features a similar story'. One might argue that Ibn Muqarrab's use of salt foundations makes the crime even graver, given that hospitality in the Arab world is considered sacrosanct and salt is an ancient symbol of friendship. In fact, to eat someone's salt and bread is to put oneself under this person's protection.

Therefore it comes as no surprise that following this incident Ibn Muqarrab had to flee his country and those who had survived the disaster were on his track to take revenge. With all his movable belongings he set off to Oman. Considering the good relations between the Bahraini 'Uyūnids and the Nabḥānī dynasty of Oman, together with the traditional population movements between Oman and Bahrain (Wilkinson 1987 : 80f), the account of Ibn Muqarrab migrating to Oman is not at all implausible.

The people of Ṭīwī take pleasure in elaborating on how Ibn Muqarrab came to choose Ṭīwī, which he called Ṭībī, as his new home whence he recited his famous verse: '*Ṭīwī, ya nafsi ṭībī, hadhihi dār al gharībī*' (Ṭīwī- the blessed land - home of the strangers). The narration is as follows:

'Ibn Muqarrab came to 'Ibrī, and then to Ad Dakhiliyah. He came to Šūr and to Qalhāt. But wherever he stopped he didn't like it; in particular it is said that he was unhappy with the social relations among the people in Oman, until he arrived in Ṭīwī. Here he let his beloved female camel go grazing. Later when he went to search for her he found she had been killed by a local resident. The man confessed to the killing and explained that the camel had been grazing in the farm of his neighbour, causing damage to his crops. Ibn Muqarrab was furious and asked him what he had to do with the garden of his neighbours. The man replied that harm done to his neighbour was as bad as if it had been done to him. Ibn Muqarrab was overwhelmed with such neighbourly loyalty, and he decided on the spot that Ṭīwī was the place where he wanted to settle down.'

Somehow he came to rule Ṭīwī, and with the property he had brought with him built a castle, 'Ḥuṣn Ibn Muqarrab' on a high mountain above Jurayf, which the local people believe to be one of the oldest quarters of Ṭīwī.⁶

The two stories show Ibn Muqarrab as a man of a rather conflicting personality: in this latter episode he is depicted as proponent of social values such as neighbourly relations, even though these had brought about the death of his camel. In the former story however, he is shown to act in complete defiance of the traditional rules of hospitality, in particular the host's responsibility for the welfare of his guests.

But more than anything Ibn Muqarrab is known for his cunning and prudence. The following story⁷ is told of how he tricked those who came to take revenge on his corpse:

'When he felt that his life was approaching the end and that he was soon going to die, he was afraid that his old enemies would still seek revenge even after his death. So he ordered that a tomb be built for him high upon a ledge in a wall of rock opposite his castle (pl. 1). To reach this inaccessible spot a staircase had to be built all the way up to the ledge. This was finally accomplished with great effort⁸. Underneath every single step of the staircase he had a gold coin buried. Not long thereafter Ibn Muqarrab died as predicted and, according to his wishes, was buried in his tomb. After the corpse had been brought up the stairs to its final rest, the participants and attendants to the burial started to knock down the steps in search for the gold. They started with the highest steps and went down until the whole staircase was destroyed. A short time after his death his prosecutors arrived. Hearing that he had died and had been buried, they tried to reach his cave-tomb to get hold of his remains, but without the stairs this was an impossible undertaking. Eventually they left having achieved nothing.'⁹

NAYNŪH

Naynuh plays the role of the female protagonist in

local lore. Allegedly she was a sorceress and queen ruling Ṭīwī at the time Ibn Muqarrab settled down in this town. Some people in Ṭīwī believe that she was the sister of the queen of Palmyra. In the episodes narrated about Naynūh her character reveals supernatural traits evoking ancient Near Eastern goddesses of fertility and agriculture. People generally associate Naynūh with the Fahda quarter located in the shade of the plantations on the south side of the mouth of Wādī Ṭīwī. Locally assumed to be the oldest quarter of the town, it is here where Naynūh is said to have resided. She is renowned for both her cleverness and her magical powers. Several episodes are told to confirm her supernatural qualities. It is said that she possessed a turkey that she could load with tons of dates without bothering him in the least. It is also told how she put the *furs* ('Persians') to flight by throwing burning arrows made from palm-fronds towards the attackers who approached Ṭīwī from the sea. The place from where she put them to flight is said to be on a sea-facing promontory at the mouth of Wādī Shāb, the spot with dark soil, at an archaeological site known as GAS1, investigated by the Joint Hadd Mission since 2001 (Tosi and Usai 2003: 8). The site, which includes a fireplace among other features, dates mainly to the 4th millennium BC, but 3rd millennium artefacts and late Islamic sherds and beads point to later occupation as well. It is not clear which historical period the story refers to, as the term *furs* is used in association with structures or events that are beyond the memory of oral history or foreign invaders of any nationality. The episode could either relate to Persian assaults against Oman and Omani ships in the 18th century, Portuguese assaults of the 16th century, Seljuk and Hormuzi activities in the 13th century, or else to the Sasanid period in the 1st century.

The account of Naynūh's death is highly allegorical:

'When a heavy flood endangered the plantations and settlements in Wādī Ṭīwī¹⁰, she sought to bring it under control by building a dam in the wadi. Her building material was neither stone, nor mud-bricks, but dates and nothing more. To achieve her aim, she had her roosters

bring sack after sack of dates from all over the place while she started to build the dam. Tons and tons of dates were used in the construction of the dam. However, when she had at last completed the work, an enormous flash flood occurred which caused the dam to collapse and Naynūh to die in the flood.'

Thus, unlike Ibn Muqarrab, who remained undefeated even after his death, Naynūh was defeated by nature and washed away by the flash flood.

IBN MUQARRAB AND NAYNŪH: THE MASTERY AND CONTROL OF WATER

Whereas Naynūh, the sorceress and queen of Ṭīwī, seems more like a straight mythical personage, Ibn Muqarrab in these stories has been transformed from the historical figure of the 13th century Bahraini poet into the mythical antipode of the female protagonist. It is more than likely that the narrations about Ibn Muqarrab and Naynūh were originally two distinct strands of oral tradition. Each figure actually belongs to a different historical horizon: the historical Ibn Muqarrab to the 13th century, whilst Naynūh, if we want to follow the explanation given by some of my oral sources that she was the sister of the queen of Palmyra, would have lived more than a thousand years earlier. However, the episodes about their lives in Ṭīwī have now become entwined. Ibn Muqarrab is said to have married Naynūh at some point after his arrival in Ṭīwī.

The relationship between Ibn Muqarrab and Naynūh, as apparent in the narrations, seems to have been characterized by a struggle for power, ultimately solved by Ibn Muqarrab's marrying Naynūh: Naynūh's territorial base was in Fahda, Ibn Muqarrab's in Jurayf. On one occasion, when Naynūh planned to develop a farm in the vicinity of Jurayf and to build a *falaj* to serve it, she approached Ibn Muqarrab and asked for his permission. She suggested that she would build the *falaj* and would only want to use the water for 'a night and a day', whereupon he would be entitled to use the water. The Arabic '*laylan wa nahāran*'

however, is ambiguous, meaning 'one night and one day' or 'during night- and daytime'. When he found out that she was planning to cheat him, he stopped the enterprise. Thus Naynūh, lady of the date-palm plantations, remained without *falaj*'¹¹.

The story revolves around pairs of opposites such as male versus female, man as the subject and master of irrigation, woman as the object of natural forces. The parallels and contrasts between Naynūh's death and Ibn Muqarrab's trick of flooding the salt foundations are striking. Whereas Ibn Muqarrab uses deliberate flooding to destroy his enemies, Naynūh is destroyed by a natural flood. In both cases the structures collapse because the material used to build them is unsuitable. In both cases the combination of water and unsuitable foundations bring death. In Naynūh's case, her attempt to control the force of water fails, a natural flood making her date-built dam collapse. In one case the perilous effect of water is released deliberately; in the other it occurs involuntarily. Here the water acts as a natural force, whereas in the former case water appears in a culturally mastered form, as a small man-made irrigation channel, which in combination with human ingenuity is as powerful as the feared wadi floods.

Looking at these aspects of the story in terms of traditional irrigation systems it should be emphasized that the *ghayl* flow of large wadis does constitute one of the major traditional sources for irrigation in Oman's oases. Control of the *ghayl* through dams certainly is one of the most ancient methods of irrigation in Oman and archaeologically documented. In a recent study of the dam in Al 'Uqayr, Al Ghāfāt, it was shown, that 'the catching of rainwater and the prevention of soil runoff through dams built across wadis were part of Bronze Age cultivation in Oman more than 1000 years before the *qanat/falaj* system came into existence. There can be no doubt that there were a great number of these gabarbands all over Oman' (Weisgerber and Yule 2003: 38f).

Even Naynūh's recourse to magical practices when building her dam has archaeological precedents in Oman. In Al 'Uqayr votive offerings in the form of anthropomorphic copper objects have been revealed within the dam wall (Weisgerber and Yule 2003:39-50)

However, because the *ghayl* flow is so important for agriculture, any monopolizing of this resource is considered as socially unacceptable by both shari'a and customary law, and cases are documented where communities would react strongly upon an individual's attempt to divert the flow of the wadi into a *falaj* for his own benefit and in neglect of the community's irrigation needs for plantations located downstream. (Mershen 2002: 110-115). A traditional method of building more temporary structures from mud, boulders and palm fibre as dams, which often leak deliberately, was brought to my attention by David Insall (pers. comm.). Such dams avoid the above problem as they can respond to seasonal abundance of water and on the other hand do not deplete resources in times of draught. Naynūh's date dam might then be interpreted as an allusion to a traditional and sustainable method of scarce resource management.

The fact that the two strands of oral tradition have been combined and interlinked seems to present a discourse and reflection, clad in a folk-tale, on the dynamics of indigenous knowledge and cultural change, personified in Naynūh and Ibn Muqarrab.

CONCLUSION

Although very little is known about the pre-Islamic religious concepts of Oman¹², we may assume that there were gods in Southern Arabia, which 'were inextricably linked to oases, and that many of their attributes were directly related to agriculture and irrigation' (Breton 1998: 117).

Two striking themes dominate the episodes told about Naynūh and Ibn Muqarrab: the sacrosanctity of the plantations, and the ambivalence of the element water.

Both are of crucial importance as the basis of oasis life and the recurrent motives in the stories. The correlation between the striking abundance of dates and Naynūh the sorceress, who is not yet in full mastery of the element water, might point to an Islamic reinterpretation of an older substratum of the story. It could refer to a myth in which Naynūh would have corresponded to a pre-

Islamic Mother and fertility goddess, rooted in the distant past before the *falaj* system brought about revolutionary developments of oasis agriculture.¹³

The martial aspect of her character, in the story about the burning arrows made of palm-fronds, reflects the best Near Eastern tradition¹⁴. In the Islamic reinterpretation her divine status is challenged and she is turned into the sorceress. As if to emphasize the withdrawal of such divine attributes as invincibility and immortality and to demonise her, the story lets Naynūh die.

Whether the Naynūh legend qualifies as a reinterpretation of the relics of an earlier belief – the translation of a pre-Islamic female deity related to fertility and agriculture into a sorceress or demon – cannot be proven. Yet, given the fact that so little is known about religious beliefs in pre-Islamic Oman, it is a tempting hypothesis.

NOTES

¹Two detailed versions of the story of Kibaykib (not Kabir Kabb as suggested by Yule) have been recorded and published by Insall (2000: 100-101). Yule (2001: 201) initially dated this character into the early Islamic period, i.e. 1000 years ago. He later revised the dating of the legend through another version according to which Kibaykib lived 175 to 200 years ago only (Yule & Bergoffen 1999; Yule 2001: 219). However, one should not exclude the possibility that two characters have been merged into one.

²Mershen 2002 proves the historical truth of a folk-narration about a failed *falaj* construction through archaeological methods.

³In the version told by Al 'Ammāri (n.d.: 157f) Ibn Muqarrab invited his own tribe for a luncheon to celebrate the finishing of the building.

⁴Cf. the *History of the Imams and Scyids* (Badger 1871: 153-154) on the alleged Barka' banquet, in AD 1741 to which Imām Āḥmad had invited the Persian officers, in the course of which they were slaughtered by the local people.

⁵Ibn Baṭṭūṭa in the 14th century AD also designates Ṭīwī as Ṭībī, and As Salimī (n.d.I: 362) corrects him.

⁶Based on archaeological investigations – Korn, Häser, Schreiber, Gangler, Nagieb, Siebert, Buerkert 2004, this volume – the quarter has been assigned to the middle Islamic period.

⁷This version of the story is practically identical to the one given by Al 'Ammāri (n.d.: 158).

⁸In many parts of Oman, traditional mountain foot-tracks or donkey-tracks often lead up the mountains via man-built stone steps. Some of the steps are thought by the local people to be of great antiquity and many other built structures which are not known to be part of the tribal heritage are considered to be of Persian origin. Such steps, often of considerable length and

technical quality, have always stimulated the imagination of local people and foreign travellers alike. S. B. Miles for example in his article 'Across the Green Mountains of Oman' about his 1876 journey to Jabal al Akhdar admires the quality of the stepped track leading out of Wadi Bani Kharūš (Ward 1987:351).

⁹ A different story of how Ibn Muqarrab dealt with his enemies after his death is quoted in Al 'Ammāri (n.d.: 157-9) based on what he was told by an elderly informant:

'Muqarrab had links to the barbers. He was in a blood feud with some group. Before he died he asked that upon his death every barber of the town should bring razor blades and knives and bury them with Ibn Muqarrab's body and cover his tomb with these objects. And when he died those who asked for his blood came searching for him and his grave, so that they could take out the body and mutilate it. But whenever they tried to dig, a knife or a blade hurt them. So they were forced to leave.'

¹⁰ Ṭīwī has periodically been struck by disastrous floods: inhabitants still remember the flood of the year AH 1374/AD 1954/55, which devastated gardens and *aflāj*.

¹¹ Again, the unaccomplished building of a *falaj* is another common subject in Omani oral history (cf. Mershen 2002).

¹² Cf. Yule (2001: 200) on substrates of star worship in Oman around 1900.

¹³ Naynūh is evocative of Ishtar, the Mesopotamian goddess of fertility, respectively the god Athtar of South Arabia, the mother goddess Annunitum in Mari or the Sumerian goddess Inanna.

¹⁴ This tradition applies to the Sumerian goddess Inanna, at once mother goddess, goddess of love and fertility, and goddess of war. It is also evident in the Babylonian perception of the ambivalence of Ishtar, goddess of the planet Venus as both mother goddess and goddess of fertility as well as goddess of slaughter (von Soden 1994: 180f).

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