

ORIENTALIA CHRISTIANA ANALECTA

293

LE VIE DEL SAPERE IN AMBITO SIRO-MESOPOTAMICO
DAL III AL IX SECOLO

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EDITOR

Edward G. Farrugia, S.J.

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The Professors of the Pontifical Oriental Institute

MANAGING EDITOR

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*All correspondence concerning manuscripts should be addressed to the Editor;
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Carla Noce – Massimo Pampaloni, S.J. – Claudia Tavolieri

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Marco Demichelis

Baṣra, cradle of Islamic culture. An analysis of the urban area that was the early home of Islamic Studies

Introduction. Baṣra in the first Islamic centuries

Baṣra,¹ probably built on the site of an ancient village named Diriditis, is known to have been refurbished and enlarged under the Sassanid, and at that time it was named Vahishātābadh Ardasher in honor of the *Shahanshah*. Under the Arabs it was renamed Baṣra, the term probably derived from *Basāra*, which in Arabic means acutely aware, perspicacious, possessing knowledge or understanding, a name that could not have been more appropriate.

During the VI century the area in which Baṣra is situated was already inhabited by Arab Bedouin clans. These did not live specifically in the urban area, but probably spent their time in the surrounding region, which is geographically positioned in close proximity to the desert but is immersed in a marshy area that in time would come to be called the *Shaṭṭ al-'Arab*. Founded under 'Umār ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb, the initial establishment of a settlement was attributed to Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, a companion of the Prophet, a military general and the winner of the Qādisiyya battle. However, in the Early Islamic age, the rivalry between Baṣra and Kūfa over the allocation of their respective dates of foundation and the prestige of their founders encourage us to think that the true builder of the first military camp on the site of what was to become Baṣra was the Prophet's companion, 'Utba ibn al-Ġazwān in 638/17:

this city was founded in the lower part of Iraq, on that great river formed by the junction of the Euphrates and Tigris. The city was intended to protect the region conquered by the Muslims about the mouth of the Euphrates; to cut off the trade of India from Persia and to keep a check upon Ahwaz (a part of Ḥūzestān). [...] The city of Baṣra was founded in the fourteenth year of the hiġra. [...] It

¹ Ṣāliḥ al-'Alī, Ḥiṭaṭ al-Baṣra, in *Sumer*, 1952, pp. 72-83, 281-303; idem, *Al-Tanzīmāt al-idjtimā'iyya wa-l-iḳtiṣādīyya fī al-Baṣra*, Baghdād 1953; L. Massignon, *Explication du plan de Baṣra*, Wiesbaden 1954, pp. 154-174.

soon gathered within its walls great numbers of inhabitants from the surrounding country; rose rapidly in importance, and has ever since been distinguished as a center for the Indian commerce.²

The main problem during the first decade after Baṣra's foundation was providing drinking water for the inhabitants; the close presence of both the sea and the desert did not provide terrain suitable for finding potable water. This difficulty would eventually be resolved by using the Tigris as the main resource and building water tanks to collect rainwater as and when it became available. Other difficulties concerned the construction of a port for the retention and passage of groundwater, in a location where the local geology provided aquifers, at too low a depth for them to be of much use.

At the beginning, Baṣra was exclusively a military camp and military city, able to afford control over the trade routes of the Persian Gulf and to constitute a starting base for subsequent expeditions to Iṣṭaḥr, Fārs, Ḥurāsān and Sidjīstān (29/650). These military operations involved substantial forces, and Ṭabarī estimates the strength of the Baṣrian army which would fight in Ḥurāsān during the VII and VIII centuries at 40,000 men.³

At the same time the establishment and growth of this city contributed to the settlement of local Bedouin tribes who began to urbanize.

Before the Arabs arrived, the region was probably populated by Aramaeans, a semitic-Arab population which had earlier migrated northwards (they are usually associated with the Nabateans and the builders of the Palmyra reign). During the Islamic conquest, five Arab tribes reached the city: Ahl al-'Āliya, Tamīm, Bakr b. Wa'il, 'Abd al-Qays and Azd. It is possible that the Tamīm clan was dominant, preserving a degree of independence during the internal clashes of the early Islamic era. The process of sedentarization of a people within which a clan system operated, tended to strengthen the authority of the chief of each clan, and the chiefs maintained their autonomy and capacity for self-government. The main reasons for the transition towards a settled rather than nomadic life are probably connected with the recruitment of the Bedouin into the army, their wish to acquire money, and their subsequent dependence on it: enrolment into an army created a dependency on the high salary available during this historical period of military conquest. In addition, Arab merchants probably emigrated north and reached the towns of Kūfa and Baṣra following the decay of commercial activity in the Arabian Peninsula.

The chiefs upheld the order and created an internal aristocratic – familial system. Ch. Pellat, in *Le milieu baṣrien et la formation de Ġāhiz*, lists

² W. Irving, *Lives of Mahomet and his successors*, Ed. John Murray, London 1850, p. 419.

³ Ṭabarī, *Annales*, ed. De Goeje, Leiden 1879-1901, 15 vols., II, pp. 1290-1291.

a number of family authorities such as al-Muhallab, Muslim ibn ‘Amr al-Bāhili, Misma‘, al-Ġārūd, al-Anhaf ibn Qais, which represent the most relevant political figures emerging from a newly developing bourgeoisie.⁴

With several different tribes present in the area, a conflict over tribal status was to emerge. Under the Umayyads the policy of diminishing tribal independence led to the creation of further conflicts.⁵ The Arab nomads began to pursue two principal working activities, as soldiers or traders, following paths both anthropologically connected with nomadism. The process of social hybridization began with slaves and *mawālī* (clients of Arab clans) who had been brought directly with the Arab clans, and continued with the presence of Indians, probably Asāwira and originally from Sind (whose descendant was ‘Alī al-Uswārī, a Mu‘tazilite theologian), and also with the Persian military forces, who decided after their defeat to remain in the new army. Finally there were the *dahāqīn*, a Persianized local elite used to collect the Ḥarāğ (a tax on agriculture lands and production). This is one of the first examples of a situation in which the Arabs needed the support of a solid Sassanid administration class. The presence of other emigrants from India, specifically from Sind, is identified with a Tzigane population, the Zoṭṭ, integrated within Banū Tamim and sedentarized in Bašra. Although the presence of Malaysian traders is evidenced before the Arab conquests, their integration inside Bašra is highlighted by the role they played in securing the city Treasury against Ṭalḥa and al-Zubayr before the Battle of the Camel (656/36).

After the murder of ‘Uthmān in 656/35, the Bašrian population remained disoriented and unable to find a position within the *Fitna al-Kubrā*. The majority decided to remain neutral, with a group of limited size supporting the new caliph ‘Alī ibn Abū Ṭālib, while a third group, larger than the second, supported ‘Ā’isha, Ṭalḥa and az-Zubayr, in particular after their victory of al-Zabūga. During the Battle of the Camel (656/36), Bašra remained more proto-Sunni than Alid, and while Ṭabarī⁶ argued that 5,000 fighters from this city were killed during this quarrel, this figure is probably exaggerated.⁷

⁴ Ch. Pellat, *Le Milieu Bašrien et la formation de al-Ġāhiz*, ed. Adrien Maisonneuve, Paris 1953, p. 24s.

⁵ R. Bulliet, *Sedentarization of Nomads in the Seventh century: the Arabs in Bašra and Kūfa*, in P. Carl Salzman, *When Nomads Settle*, J. F. Bergin Publishers, New York 1980, p. 39.

⁶ Ṭabarī, *Annales* cit., I, pp. 3156-3224.

⁷ L. Caetani, *Annali dell’Islam*, Roma, IPO, IX, pp. 541-556; F. Gabrieli, *Sulle origini del movimento ḥariğīta*, in Rend. Acc. Lincei, Ser. VII/2, 1941-42, pp. 110-117; L. Veccia Vaglieri, *Le vicende del Ḥariğismo in epoca abbaside*, in *RSO*, 24, 1949, pp. 31-44; *Ibid.*, *Sulla denominazione dei ḥariğīti*, in *RSO*, 26, 1951, pp. 51-6; Al-Baghdādi, *Kitāb Farq bayna al-Firaq*, ed. Badr, Cairo 1910; al-Ash‘ari, Abū’l-Ḥasan, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, Istanbul 1929.

Many Ḥārījites from Baṣra, which at the time had probably more than 50,000 residents, participated in the battle of Ṣiffīn (657/37). During this skirmish the 'Alī's offer of arbitration provoked an internal division from which the Ḥārījites' movement emerged.

This urban area historically played a significant political role within the *dār al-Islām* during the Umayyad caliphate and the first century of 'Abbāsīd; its tendency to remain uncommitted in conflicts emerged particularly during the revolt of the anti-caliph 'Abd 'Allāh ibn az-Zubayr, in which the pro-Umayyad clan of Azdite was defeated by the Tamimite. During the ibn al-Ash'ath revolt of 701/81, again against the Umayyads, the political temperament of Baṣra became clearly different from that of Kūfa, which was openly pro-Alid. The spirit of Baṣra was opposed not only to Umayyad supremacy, but to all forms of external superiority.⁸ The *qurrā'*, the Qur'ān reciters, emerged as a group after the death of Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiya and were perceived symbolically and politically as a movement which would fight to ameliorate the world and the nature of human existence. The *qurrā'*, as reported by Ṭabarī,⁹ when Baṣra was defeated by the Umayyad troops and al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ came to power as governor, provided moral sustenance for the people who made up the group which were the main taxpayers (*Ahl al-Dhimma*) and who would suffer economic crises in post-conflict, and accompanying the *mawālī*'s ibn az-Zubayr fighters in their exile. After the 'Abbāsīds rose to power, Baṣra, which had never been a pro-Alid city, would rise up against the new dynasty, supporting the Alid Ibrāhīm ibn 'Abd 'Al-lāh ibn Ḥasan, and would be on the losing side again. With the building of a new capital, Baghdād, Baṣra evidently lost its status of an independent town, preserving a different level of supremacy, that of a home of the Islamic cultural record, and the birthplace of Islamic studies.

Ziyād b. Abī Sufyān (d. 673/53) became the Umayyad governor of Baṣra in 664/43 and was the first urban architect of this city. However, Ziyād is particularly remembered for the draconian methods he employed to maintain public order. His system and attitude are well expressed within this speech from the pulpit:

You are putting family ties before religion. You are excusing and sheltering your criminals and tearing down the protecting laws sanctified by Islam. Beware of prowling by night; I will kill everyone who is found at night in the streets. Beware of the arbitrary call to obey family ties; I will cut out the tongue of everyone who raises the cry. Whoever pushes anyone into the water, whoever sets fire to another's home, whoever breaks into a house, whoever opens a grave,

⁸ Pellat, *Le Milieu Baṣrien et la formation de al-Ġāhiz* cit., p. 45.

⁹ Ṭabarī, *Annales*, ed. De Goeje, Leiden 1879-1901, II, pp. 1122-23.

him will I punish. Hatred against myself I do not punish, but only crime. Many who are terrified of my coming will be glad of my presence, and many who are building their hopes upon it will be undeceived. I rule you with the authority of God and will maintain you from the wealth of God's umma. From you I demand obedience, and you can demand from me justice. Though I may fall short, there are three things in which I shall not be lacking: I will be ready to listen to anyone at any time, I will pay you your pension when it is due, and I will not send you to war too far away or for too long a time. Do not let yourselves be carried away by your hatred and wrath against me; you will suffer if you do. Many heads do I see tottering; let each man see to it that his own remains on his shoulders!¹⁰

After Ziyād, his son 'Ubayd 'Allāh ibn Ziyād became the next governor. He was forced to leave the city during the uprising led by 'Abd 'Allāh ibn al-Zubayr. In Başra, the leader of the Zubayrid phase of this insurrection was 'Abd 'Allāh ibn al-Ḥārith, who recognized ibn al-Zubayr's right to become Ḥalifa; however, in these years of anarchy, the governor's task was allotted to various supporters of al-Zubayr's family, such as 'Ubayd 'Allāh ibn Ma'mar (687-88/68) and finally to ibn al-Zubayr's brother, Mus'ab. The defeat of ibn al-Zubayr on the battlefield in 692/72 by the Umayyad general al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ brought Başra under the control of Damascus, and with this came the arrival of al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ as the new governor, a ruler whose draconian methods were no less inflexible than those of earlier Umayyad rulers. The new leader would go on to destroy the governor's palace previously built by Ziyād, and from that time until the beginning of the VIII century, the town would remain without a dedicated building from which the *walī* could operate. It seems that during the period of al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ's control as governor (692/72-714/95), he strove to reinforce his army through the enlistment of the Zoṭṭ, in preparation for his military adventure in Sind. Until that time, the Zoṭṭ had been famous for being completely disengaged from the fighting associated with the Arab conflicts at the time of the first *firaq* (sects).

Another anti-Umayyad uprising broke out under al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ in 701/81, the Umayyad general al-Ash'ath, was close to the clans of Kinda and Rabī'a and fought against those who were considered "bad" Muslims, but was easily defeated near Kūfa by the governor of south Iraq. The revolt of Yazīd al-Muhallab, in 719-20/101-02, erupted in response to the severity of the Umayyad governors in Iraq and the introduction of Syrian garrisons into that region. This is the clearest evidence of Iraqī resistance to Syrian centralized rule. Strong measures were necessary in order to control the Iraqis' striving for autonomy. Francesco Gabrieli¹¹ has pointed out that it was

¹⁰ Arthur Goldschmidt, Jr., Lawrence Davidson, *A Concise History of the Middle East*, Westview Press, Boulder 2006, pp. 65-66.

¹¹ Francesco Gabrieli, "La Rivolta dei Muhallabiti nel Iraq e il nuovo Baladuri," in: *Atti*

the Muhallabid attempt to intertwine their personal fortunes with Iraqī regional feeling that caused the Umayyads to exterminate this important family with Ibāḍī and Ḥariġite affiliations. He goes on to say that the attempted identification of interests gives the Muhallabid revolt its historical significance.

Under the ‘Abbāsids, Baṣra lost its independence, becoming a provincial town. From the time of the early decades of ‘Abbāsid rule, the process which had already started under the Umayyads began to gather momentum, and the ‘aṣabiyya of the Arab clans began to loosen, with the *mawālī* outnumbering the peoples from the Peninsula. With this development the emergence of the *shu‘ūbiyya* civilization process becomes apparent. Under one of the first ‘Abbāsid governors, Sulaymān ibn ‘Alī, a definitive palace was built on the Mirbad, which was the commercial and cultural center of Baṣra. In the same years as the palace was constructed, the mosque was restyled, to become the great mosque of the city.

The revolt of the Zoṭṭ in 820-835/220 and, after this, the Zanj in 871/257 caused an economic collapse in the entire region from which Baṣra could not remain immune. The aftermath of the revolt of the Zoṭṭ, a people of Indian extraction recognized as an integrated community, is not clear. Al-Ġāhiz reports in the *Kitāb al-Buḥlā’* that they became outlaws, creating some predatory groups which would be defeated only by al-Mu‘taṣim, in 834/219. Finally, the Zanj uprising, involving a Sub-Saharan African population probably from the West coast who as slaves were used in the extraction of salt from the agricultural land around Baṣra, is a famous rebellion which destroyed the economy and the relevance of this city. L. Massignon has considered this event to be effectively a social war against Baghdād, highlighting the extreme poverty of this African population.¹²

Baṣra reached a cultural predominance during the VII-VIII centuries and also the first half of the IX century; its population reached between 200,000 and 600,000 inhabitants as it became a metropolis for the Early Islamic age; it also became a commercial town with a river port, *al-Kallā’*, and a financial center with a presence of both Christian and Jewish communities, an industrial town with facilities including an arsenal, and also an agriculturally important center for the production of dates. Baṣra grew to be a rich town from the beginning and during the Umayyad caliphate, the preponderance of the booty and tax revenues from the Persian empire

della Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. *Rendiconti: Classe Scienze Morali, Storiche e Filologiche*, ser. VI, vol. XIV, 1938.

¹² L. Massignon, *La Passion de Husayn ibn Mansur Hallāj: martyr mystique de l’Islam, exécuté à Bagdad le 26 mars 922: étude d’histoire religieuse*, Gallimard, Paris 1973, p. 29s.

being distributed by Damascus to Kūfa and Başra, the two most important urban areas within their empire.¹³

Before analyzing the role played by Başra in Arab and Muslim culture, it is important to define the meaning of Islamic studies more closely.¹⁴ This is an intellectual construct, a formal umbrella in which studies directly concerning Islam are predominant. However, it is relevant, from my point of view, to emphasize that Islamic studies are not solely confined to “religion” or “civilization,” but are connected with hybrid aspects, and are also related to historical, linguistic and literary topics. The Muslim expansion which took place originally in the VII and VIII centuries, and also in a second phase in the XI and XII centuries (for the Indian subcontinent) and in a third phase during the time of the Ottoman empire, enabled Islam to reach different geographical areas in which the amalgamation of the various cultural traditions produced a degree of hybridization which had previously been unthinkable. Ibn Rushd’s philosophy is considered to be within the bounds of Islamic *falsafa* (philosophy), but it is not possible to judge the main works of this relevant author without taking into account his profound knowledge of Greek philosophy. Could al-Birūnī’s astronomical theories be so pertinent today without his knowledge of Indian premises? What would Arabic grammars be today without the contribution of pre-Islamic Persian culture and Persian authors? If we are to define Islamic studies, encompassing everything related to Islam, we also need to consider this concept in a more open-minded way. The history of our approach to Islamic studies is that of a secular encounter with everything geographically associated with Muslim communities. History, philosophy, theology, mysticism, jurisprudence, art, architecture, literature, sociology and economy are all actors within the umbrella of Islamic studies. However, behind these actors there is a process of elaboration that is not primarily Islamic, because, as we have described above, the cultural influences have not been subject to barriers, and secondly, because a worldly *intelligentsia* had worked on Islamic studies topics in the past, as in the present. To give a modern-day illustration, a Japanese who has studied Islamic studies at university level probably has a better knowledge of Islam than a Muslim believer who lives in Afghanistan, one that will permit him to contribute to the field of Islamic studies even though he has originated from a completely different cultural background.

¹³ R. Bulliet, *Sedentarization of Nomads in the seventh century: the Arabs in Basra and Kufa*, in: *When Nomads Settle*, Philip Carl Salzman, Bergin Publishers, New York 1980, p. 37.

¹⁴ Jean J. Waanderburgh, *Muslims as actors: Islamic meanings and Muslim interpretation in the perspective of the Study of Religion*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 2007.

The Cradle of Islamic culture

Fifteen years after the reproduction of the first copies of the 'Uthmānian *muṣḥaf*, the first codex comprising all the various sheets of the Qur'ān, one of these would reach Baṣra. It is probably for this reason that Koranic sciences were to become so relevant during the VII and VIII centuries within this town. Other, different *muṣḥaf* seem to have emerged soon after, and still during the early period of Baṣra's history. The companion of the Prophet Abū Mūsā al-'Aṣ'ari, when he was governor here, reassessed the source material and produced a different version of God's message, while Abū Nu'aim, who under 'Umār ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb, had the task as religious expert of answering the questions concerning religious matters that the local community posed to him, produced yet another *muṣḥaf*, as did Abū ar-Raḡā' al-'Uṭāridī and 'Abd 'Allāh ar-Raḡāshī. It is hard to discover in which way these *muṣḥaf* differed from each other; however, the existence of more than one official religious text posed a risk, in particular to the political-religious stability of the government. Further refinements were initiated by the governor al-Haḡḡāḡ, who pushed for the improvement of the *graphia* of the text, and the grammatical expert Yaḥyā ibn Ya'mur (d. 746/129), who invented the diacritical points of Arabic, integrating these with the text. From the beginning, Baṣra was involved with discussion concerning the dogma of the created Qur'ān: the conservation of the text as was prophesied by Muḥammad; some relevant religious authorities such as Qatāda ibn Dī'āma and Ibn Sirīn opposed the decision to add diacritical points within the written version of the Qur'ān, and these discussions probably took place when Qatāda followed Ḥasan al-Baṣrī as the main authority of the Murḡi'te sect¹⁵ (after 728/109-730/111). The increasing number of copies of the Qur'ān had the effect of decreasing the role played by *qurrā'* (Qur'ān and Sunna readers/reciters). However, from this group of ḥadīth (singular Tradition) declaimers (a *qārī'* sing. of *qurrā'*, was a performer of Koranic verses and singular traditions) would emerge the significant figure of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, whose role we will analyze later in this study.

We will now look in detail at three aspects of the development of Islamic studies in Baṣra.

¹⁵ W. M. Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, Oneworld, Oxford 1998; A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, Cambridge 1932; J. Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschara. Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*, 6 vols., De Gruyter, Berlin 1997; J. Schacht, "An early murci'te treatise: the Kitāb al-'Ālim wa l-Muta'allim," in *Oriens* 17 (1964), pp. 96-117.

Islamic Tradition in South Iraq

Islamic Tradition, in Başra, is strictly associated with the number of ḥadīth held there, which can be considered as a significant part of the religious roots and local heritage of this city. The Buḥārī collection, for example, is deeply influenced by the aḥādīth (pl. of ḥadīth) başrien tradition. Some 1334 aḥādīth attributed to al-Buḥārī by at-Ṭaḥṭawī in *Hidayāt al-Bārī*, 422 come from Başra; however, there is not a *Şaḥīḥ* (official collection of aḥādīth), historically considered by Muslim Tradition, that has a başrien origin. The oral transmission of ḥadīth continued in the town until the beginning of the VIII century, with Anas ibn Mālīk being one of the last başrien to elaborate a text of aḥādīth of the first century. This individual alone collected 133 traditions which were to be incorporated by Buḥārī into his *Şaḥīḥ*. The quality and the numbers of these specific aḥādīth provided evidence that the oral tradition in Başra was enriched by the presence of different authors directly linked with the primary source of the singular Tradition. After the first historical period, the Ḥalīfa al-Rashidūn age, in which the presence in Başra of many companions of the Prophet is certified by different sources, the clashes between the internal groups of the *Umma* (Islamic community) broke out, causing more confusion. During the Umayyad empire, authors such as Ḥasan al-Başrī, Ğābir ibn Zaid al-Azdī, Muslim ibn Yasār, and Bakr ibn ‘Abd ‘Allāh al-Muzanī, who played a significant role in the Islamic pre-mystic movement, were previously specialists and reviewers of aḥādīth. Entire families applied themselves in the search of ḥadīth, and the sons of Abū Bakra and Anas ibn Mālīk became experts in this field. A *mawlā* (a client), Muḥammad ibn Sīrīn (d. 728/110), well known for his ability to interpret dreams, was one of the first *muḥaddith* (ḥadīth scholar, or also searcher of traditions) to promote a critical analysis of some traditions which until that time had remained unclear.¹⁶ Qatāda ibn Dī‘āma, the successor to Ḥasan al-Başrī as chief of this cultural circle of religious intellectuals, was considered one of the main experts on aḥādīth exegesis. Ibn Sa‘d in his *Ṭabaqāt*¹⁷ argued that the *muḥaddith* during the first half of the VIII century were impressive not only because they were so numerous (from 54 to 63) but also because Başra sought to attract researchers from within the entire area of Iraq. Unfortunately, we have no information about the methodological collection and critical analysis of these authors. There is the possibility, even if there is no conclusive evidence, that the Ḥārīğites, proto-Shī‘tes, and secondly the Mu‘tazilite

¹⁶ Nawawī, *Kitāb taḥḍīb al-asmā’*, Ed. F. Wustenfeld, *The Biographical Dictionary of Illustrious Men*, Göttingen 1824-7, p. 510.

¹⁷ Ibn Sa‘d, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubra*, Dar al-Fakr, Beirut 1985, p. 54.

presence in Baṣra, were particularly influential in encouraging the critical analysis of local traditions.

The function played by Baṣra as the cradle of Islamic culture would not go on to result in her scholars taking a main role within the emergence of *tafsīr* studies (Qur'ān exegetical interpretation): first of all because, as we have previously described, the relevance of this city in the development of Islamic studies is most prominent in the VII, VIII and the first half of the IX century. It is not until the second half of the IX century that we see the production of the first exegetical analysis of the Islamic prophetic message. At the beginning, as supported by Ch. Pellat,¹⁸ the *quṣṣāṣ* played the significant role of storytellers and disseminators of moral religious stories as well as being a popularization of the Prophet Muḥammad and his message. The persuasiveness and eloquence of this group may have predominated over the quality of their argued religious analysis. At the beginning of the VIII century, more serious religious protagonists emerged, such as Abū al-'Āliya, Sa'id ibn Bashīr (m. 772-774/156-157), Qatāda ibn Dī'āma, and Abū Karīma Yaḥyā ibn al-Muhallab who was involved in *tafsīr* studies.

It is relevant to consider the role played by the *quṣṣāṣ*. These religious chanters became deeply involved in the formation and development of the spiritual character of Baṣra. There is probably a certain link between the Bedouin poetry of the *ḡāhiliyya* (the age of ignorance which preceded the advent of the Islamic message) and the professional activity of these *quṣṣāṣ*, who through public speeches, did not promote tribal sentiments, but instead expressed their religious feelings through the use of edifying stories.

The *quṣṣāṣ* emerged probably as a consequence of the *fitna* (internal Islamic clash) between 'Uthmān and 'Alī, which significantly affected the unity of the *Umma*, giving rise to religious disaffection from the revealed faith when, for political reasons, there was disagreement in the community. Becoming popular Qur'ānic exegetes, they tried to increase religious enthusiasm, and would be invited to exercise their professional activities within the mosques, although first 'Alī ibn Abū Ṭālib and later Ibn Sīrīn decided to expel them from the main *masājīd* (mosques) of Baṣra. Many of them would go on to become the main Imāms of mosques, mystics, creators of cultural circles, and exegetes. Among these people it is relevant to highlight the previously named Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Ğā'far ibn al-Ḥasan, 'Abd 'Allāh ibn Abī al-Sulaymān, an expert in pre-Islamic religious traditions, 'Abd 'Allāh ibn al-Waḍīn, who was the main religious authority within a mosque of Banū Shaybān and Mūsā al-Uswārī, one of the more eloquent, who, speaking Arabic and Persian, was able to recite and comment on the

¹⁸ Pellat, *Le Milieu Baṣrien et la formation de al-Ġāhiz* cit., p. 34 s.

Qur'ān in both languages. Louis Massignon points out that a specific characteristic of scholarship in the Early Islamic age was the ability of *quṣṣāṣ* and ascetics to refrain from separating the content of their sermons from the everyday life of Muslim community: "all ascetics are invited to exercise their duty of fraternal correction (*naṣiḥa*), all those who abstain are invited to become *qāṣṣ*. The second century was, in Basra, above all, the century of the religious chanters, which, without a warrant officer and before the 'Abbasid official regulation was implemented, pronounced the *Huṭba* (the sermon during the prayer) to arouse the support of believers. This spontaneous movement is at the origin of catechesis and Islamic apologetics."¹⁹ It is also relevant to highlight the role played by the Iranians Yazīd ibn Abān arRaḡāshī (d. 748-49/131), his nephew al-Faḡl ibn 'Isā and the son of the latter, 'Abd al-Ṣamad, who, as reported by al-Ġāhiz,²⁰ were not only charged with the task of celebrating the Islamic religion, but also with propagation of the opinion concerning the importance of free will, in contrast with Umayyad determinism. These capable propagandists, who behaved as perfect Muslim believers, never received any legal convictions even though their teaching was sometimes not entirely orthodox.

The relevance of *quṣṣāṣ* is not only due to the influence on early Islamic mysticism, on Qur'ānic exegesis and research of prophetic Traditions which is attributed to them. Taking into consideration the references to the Raḡāshī family, the possibility emerges that their Iranian background was a relevant influence on the theological thought of the first free-thinkers and Qadarites (the first group of theologians that in the VIII century supported human free will doctrine).

Mysticism and proto-Sufism

Mysticism followed Islamic Tradition as a second important field of Islamic studies in which Baṣra would develop a deep expertise. Preceded by two centuries of Sufism, mysticism in Baṣra still showed a deep commitment to early Arab Islamic piety and contemplative life. In the beginning these *nussāk* (ascetics) were the main authorities with which *quṣṣāṣ* and *bakkā'ūn* (those who weep) tried to amalgamate methodical introspection of religious experience and popular exegetical activities through the narration of edifying stories, in relation to the believer's normal orthopraxis approach (the Pillars of Islam). Asceticism, the abandonment of worldly pleasure, and the devotion of one's entire life to contemplation, were the most

¹⁹ L. Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la Mystique Musulmane*, Paris 1922, p. 141.

²⁰ Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr*, Ed. Sachau, Leiden 1904-07, VII, p. 93.

significant elements of practice for these *zuhhād* (ascetics), who decided to reject a commonplace and functional attitude to religion.²¹ The presence of women, which augmented the male *nussāk* consciousness, was a remarkable aspect of this early approach to transcendence in the VIII century. At the beginning, when Baṣra was still under the caliph ‘Uthmān, the methodology to enable the individual to better feel the presence of God was unequivocally focussed on the deprivation of the body; consumption of a more limited quantity of food and beverages, more hours passed in prayer or in contemplation, and also the protection of those *Dhimmī* (people of the books, usually Christians and Jews) who were being incorrectly treated, an aspect which showed their willingness to adopt a position contrary to that of the political authorities. ‘Abd al-Qais al-‘Anbarī was to be exiled in Damascus from Baṣra for this excessive protest to secure the rights of general believers. Muḥriz al-Māzinī (d. 693/74) was a *bakkā’ūn*, probably the first eremite of the baṣrien region, and it seems that he came out of his cave only for prayer. Harim ibn Ḥayyān al-‘Abdī was the first to preach about the love for life after death, and Ibn Sa’d²² described him as a shouting mystic walker who probably had direct influence over Ḥasan al-Baṣri.

Mu’arriq al-‘Iḡlī²³ was a *muḥaddith* who probably also worked in the commercial field. Taking into consideration the impossibility of reconciling these two activities, the hagiographic sources argued that he delivered all his commercial goods without being paid.

The list of these ascetics could continue, taking into consideration authors such as Yazīd ibn Abān al-Raqāsī (d. 748-9/131), Muḥammad ibn Ḡābir, Mālik ibn Dīnār and others. However, the main goal of setting down this inventory is only to show the evidence of the Islamic cultural prosperity of Baṣra between the VI and the VII centuries. It is relevant to underline that this activity was not exclusively a male preserve; in the same period, the *charisma* of Ḥafṣa bint Anas, Hind bint Ma’qil, Ḥafṣa and Karīma, daughter and sister of Ibn Sirīn and finally Umm Shabīb al-‘Abdiyya and Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya confirmed a mystic understanding which is difficult to find in other urban centers at that time.

Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya, the “Saint” for the Sunnite hagiographic sources, rejected the opportunity to be married and refused many offers, the last of these directly from the governor of Baṣra Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān; she declined to accept the services of a slave, as reported by al-Ḡāhiz,²⁴ to

²¹ I underline specifically the Islamic religious approach to trading activities which showed a more practical approach to religion.

²² Ibn Sa’d, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr*, VII, pp. 95-97.

²³ Ibid., pp. 155-157.

²⁴ Al-Ḡāhiz, *al-Bayān wa-t-tabayīn*, Ed. Sandubi, Cairo 1926-27, III, p. 86.

enable her to undertake a more intensive involvement in her ascetic activities. Her response to the offer of a slave, according to the text in French by C. Pellat, was as follows: “Par Dieu, aurait-elle répondu, j’ai honte de demander les biens de ce monde à Celui à qui ils appartiennent; comment les demanderais-je à ceux à qui ils n’appartiennent pas.”²⁵ Rābi‘a al-‘Adawīyya has to be recognized as the first Muslim mystic able to dedicate her entire life to trying, with success, to enter into spiritual union with God. The complete abandonment within the transcendence of ‘Allāh without asking, because the love of God is enough, is indicative that her complete rejection of a material life was realized in response to her feeling of absolute, unbiased love for ‘Allāh. Her beatific vision of God was only reported by relevant authors such as al-Hallāğ, two centuries after her lifetime.

Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, on the male side, is still considered today as one of the most prominent authors of the first centuries. His ascetical and mystical work marked him out as a main protagonist of his age. “Oh homme, vends ta vie présente pour la vie future et tu les gagneras toutes les deux: ne vends pas ta vie future pour ta vie présente, tu les perdrais toutes les deux.”²⁶ Ḥasan’s thought, however, is also rooted in a constant intellectual reflection addressed towards an examination of conscience that recognises the tendency to debasing thoughts and urges their rejection, as typified by these words from the French text of Al-Ġāhiz: “Tenez bien en laisse vos âmes charnelles qui s’égaillent, et résistez-leur, car si vous leur cédez, elles vous entraîneront à la ruine. Aiguisez-les (le mot “cœurs” manque, ici) avec la récollection (*dhikr*), car elles sont promptes à perdre leur tranchant”.²⁷ The same author adopts a position that could be considered as pre-Mu‘tazilite (a rationalist theological school born in Baṣra in the first half of the VIII century), and also supports the view that God gave humans the power to act, while asserting that this investiture of power (*tafwīd*) becomes real and fecund only when humans have submitted to the conditions of the covenant (*mīthāq*). For Ḥasan, the perceptible conflict between predestination and responsibility, order and precept, could be resolved through the personal achievement of a mystical state, *riḍā*, which brings the acceptance and gives rise to a reciprocal relation between our soul and God. This *riḍā* was also the name given by the Qur’ān to that “state of grace” pursued by the ancient Christian monks in their *rahbāniyah* (monastic life).

However, there is one of his ḥadīth qodsī (the divine sayings, the most

²⁵ Pellat, *Le Milieu Baṣrien et la formation de al-Ġāhiz* cit., p. 105.

²⁶ Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la Mystique Musulmane* cit., p. 168.

²⁷ Al-Ġāhiz, *al-Bayān wa-t-tabyīn* cit., I, p. 162.

famous and relevant traditions) that reveals to us the main target of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's preaching activities:

There are servants of God who are already elected in Paradise forever and damned in hell tortured; their hearts are contrite, their evil ills without problems, their needs soft, their souls serve continence. They endure their lives with patience, knowing near-term, as a long rest. As for the night, they pass silently attentive ... (in prayer), tears running down their cheeks, they implore their Lord Rabboni! Rabboni! During the day, they appear wise, learned, pious and experienced. Whoever takes to examine them, considers them as sick, but they are not ill. Or, if they are suffering for something, it is for future life, meditated, which has deeply affected them."²⁸

This ḥadīth clearly describes what a human being should aim for and ardently desire, which needs to be more ardently craved by the Muslim. This private attitude must be shown outwardly by the believer when confronted by the pleasures of life. In comparison with the attitude of Rābī'a al-'Adawīyya, there is an important difference here, which emphasizes that for her, the love of God allows total abandonment in the transcendence of holiness; for Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, it is the firmness of a continence of behavior which permits the believer to reach the paradise of future life and the love of 'Allāh.

Baṣra, early Islamic theology and politics

A third relevant area in which Baṣra emerged as a beacon of Islamic studies concerns the political and theological field. As the VII century was a period in which political clashes would permeate the *Umma*, contributing to the establishment of political-religious *firaq* (sects, groups), the distinction between what was considered political and what was religious, needed to be clearly drawn. During the decades in which Ḥalīfa al-Rashidūn held power, political mistakes were made. Not pursuing persecution for the killers of a Ḥalīfa/Imām, for example, could be deeply influential in religious decisions concerning the status of the main *Umma* authority as that representing the Muslim believer. Islamic equality underlined that legally what applied to the caliph should also apply to the simple believer. However, the *Fitna al-Kubrā'* (the great clash) openly declared the unity of the community as being something utopian, in contrast to an Arab clan system that still remained more rooted in Arabia than in the Prophet's Islamic "pan-Arabism". The crumbling of the process of Muslim unity led to changes;

²⁸ Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la Mystique Musulmane* cit., pp. 174-175 (tr. from French into English by the author of this article).

the *Šūrā* (pre-Islamic form of political consensus) system for the determination concerning the *Ḥalīfa/Imām* would have been supplanted by a more Realpolitik system of clan/family inheritance; the arrangement of different political *firaq* allowed the spreading of different stories concerning the *Fitna al-Kubrā* in support of their chief; the setting up of these groups allowed them to religiously support their decisions, seeking support from some Quranic verses. Baṣra, up until the IX century, played a significant role in these changes, for many reasons that we will analyze in the third part of this article.

The group that holds the view which Ch. Pellat defines as *‘Uthmānisme*,²⁹ after the murder of ‘Uthmān, demanded justice for this regrettable act, declaring their support to ‘Ā’isha when she made an approach to Baṣra requesting an alliance; militarily defeated, this group would continue to refuse to consider ‘Alī as legitimate, maintaining an increasingly quietist position, particularly after the battle of Ṣiffīn (657/36). It is plausible that some of them would go on to become those who, first as *quṣṣāṣ* and secondly as members of the *murjī’a* sect (a theological school founded in Baṣra and famous for his quietist approach), would try to maintain an equal distinction between the different political positions which emerged in the first *Fitna*. Al-Ġāhiz in the *Kitāb al-‘Uthmāniyya* and al-Mas‘ūdi in his *Les Prairies d’Or* reported that a member of this group argued: “the most worthy to obtain the Imāmat was Abū Bakr. The majority of Muslim authorities recognized that his conversion to Islam preceding that of Zayd ibn Ḥāritha and of Ḥabbāb. [...] for some ‘Alī was older within Islam of Zayd and Ḥabbāb, for others, these preceded him. However, we could still not compare ‘Alī and Abū Bakr because the former converted himself when he was too young; we could not compare a young conversion to that of an adult man. [...] The merits of Abū Bakr’s conversion reside in the fact that before, he was rich and well-considered within Mecca, while afterwards, he abandoned his financial fortune and his friends too.”³⁰

It is historically documented that the ‘Uthmānites, after the third caliph had been murdered, politically supported Mu‘āwiya. However, this coalition did not imply the acknowledgment of the Umayyads. Ibn Abī Ḥadīd in *Shah nahḡ al-balāḡa* echoes the opinion of different Mu‘tazilite authors: “All the main Mu‘tazilite authorities of the beginning and the contemporary age, from Baṣra and Baghdād, agree in saying that the access of Abū Bakr to the caliphate is regular and legal. The old baṣrien authors such as ‘Amr

²⁹ Pellat, *Le Milieu Baṣrien et la formation de al-Ġāhiz* cit., p. 188.

³⁰ Al-Mas‘ūdi, *Murūj adh-dhahab wa ma‘ādin al-jawāhis*, tr. *Les Prairies d’Or*, by Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille, Paris 1861-1877, VI, p. 57 (tr. from French into English by the author of this article).

ibn Ubayd, al-Nazzām, al-Ġāhiz, Thumāma, Hishām ibn ‘Amr al-Fuwaṭī and others support that Abū Bakr was higher (*afḍal*, as the best) than ‘Alī; the baghdādi argued that ‘Alī was superior to Abū Bakr and are followed by some of the baṣrien young disciples.”³¹

However, the majority of Baghdād Mu‘tazilite members followed the zaydite theory of *Imāmat al-mafḍūl* in which the legality of the first two (in some cases three) Ḥulāfa al-Rashidūn is upheld, even if ‘Alī remained the *afḍal*.

1. Baṣra would never have been an Alid town, either before ‘Alī’s murder, or afterwards during the imāmate of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. In the uprising of al-Muḥtār ibn Abī ‘Ubaid al-Thaqafī in support of Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafīyya, the baṣrien Ṣurad al-Ḥuzā‘ī accused himself of having permitted the murder of ‘Alī’s son without intervening, starting a process of self-criticism that led him to form the first group of *tawwābūn* (those who weep and repent). The revolt of Zayd ibn ‘Alī in 739/121 would not have received any support from Baṣra, even though the sect that was to reclaim the thought of this Imām, zaydism, would gather an increased audience at this time.

Under the early ‘Abbāsids, and specifically before the time of al-Manṣūr, Ibrāhīm ibn ‘Abd ‘Allāh, the brother of an-Nafs al-Zakiyya, led a revolt against the new dynasty, obtaining for the first time the support of a more substantial part of the Baṣra population. However, it is hard to discover why, in this specific circumstance, our city decided to become more involved in the Alid-‘Abbāsīd conflict. Al-Ġāhiz in the *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* reports that in Baṣra there arose many different small heretical sects, particularly during the early ‘Abbāsīd historical period, and that these are partially connected with proto-Shī‘ite movements. These included the Muġiriyya, a sect which practiced strangulation (*Ḥannāqūn*) and awaited the *parousia* of the Imām; the Manṣūriyya, whose main authority was Abū Manṣūr of the ‘Abd al-Qais, who advocated the idea that the imamite inheritance continued through the successor of Abū Ġa‘far al-Bāqir; the Kāmiliyya, whose members considered the soul’s transmigration after the death of the body; the Kaisāniyya, which profoundly believed in the Alid figure of Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafīyya. “The religion consists in obedience to respect the human being so well that this conception leads them to interpret allegorically the requirements for canonical prayer, fasting, etc., and turn them towards men. Some of them even neglect the legal prescription after reaching the obedience of man; others have a feeble belief in resurrection

³¹ Ibn Abī Ḥadīd, *Shah nahḡ al-balāġa*, Cairo 1329, IV vol., I, p. 3 (tr. from Arabic into English by the author of this article).

while some members of this sect believed in metempsychoses, incarnation and *parousia*.³²

Al-Shaharastāni³³ points out that Muḥammad ibn al-Nu'mān, who hailed from Kūfa, also lived in Başra, as did his compatriot Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam (d. 814-815/199), who would try to resolve with the Mu'tazilite authors the problem concerning the Attributes of God.

Other relevant proto-Shi'a sects originating in Başra were the Nūwāsiyya, which considered the sixth Imām Ja'far al-Şādiq as being still alive as *qā'im* (he who arises) and *mahdī* (the well guided) and the Zaydite doctrine, which was founded by al-Qāsim al-Rassī (d. 860/246) and to whom al-Ġāhiz dedicates many pamphlets.

2. The Ḥariġite presence in Başra is attested from the beginning of Islamic history; their abstention during the Battle of the Camel is explained by their wish not to encourage divisions within the community; however, 'Alī would invite al-Aḥnaf ibn Qais, one of the first Ḥariġite actors, to fight at Şiffin, and he decided to take the field while remaining doubtful about the Alid cause. One of the most notorious aspects of their thought is the definition concerning a grave sin (*kabīra*), as that attributed by 'Alī when he decided not to continue to fight against Mu'āwiya at Şiffin. The theory which banishes (from the *Umma*) all the believers who carry out a grave sin was not accepted by the Murġi'ite and Mu'tazilite schools; for the Azraqites (an under-sect of Ḥariġism), a sinner is considered a *mushrik* (idolater) and so are their sons; the Şufrites (an under-sect of Ḥariġism) argued that the offender is *kāfir* (unbeliever), but not their sons; the Naġadāt (an under-sect of Ḥariġism) judged *mushrik* anyone who committed a sin that the entire community considered a *kabīr*, if there is not agreement, a judgment would be reached through *iġtihād* (juridical effort in taking a decision) pursued by lawyers; the ibādite (a under-sect of Ḥariġism) considered an individual who performs reprehensible behavior a *kāfir ni'ma* (disobedient), not a *kāfir shirk* (sinner of idolatry). Al-Ġāhiz indicates the presence of many Ḥariġites in Başra from the beginning (after the battle of Nahrawān in 658/37), and the Mu'tazilite author specifically underlines the presence of many women, some of them more important than others, such as al-Balġā', who was martyred under the governor 'Ubayd 'Allāh ibn Ziyād. Under the Umayyads, many Ḥariġites were killed; it is probably for this reason that Nāfi' ibn al-Azraq (d. 682/65) elaborated an extremist theory against his opponents encouraging the abandonment of a quietist phase followed by

³² Al-Sharastāni, *Kitāb al-Milāl wa al-nihal*, ed. and tr. by W. Cureton in Books of Religion and Philosophical Sects, II vols., Otto Harrassowitz, Leipzig 1923, I, p. 196.

³³ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 23-24.

the killing of all his enemies' sons and women and the *Takfīr* (apostasy) for Muslims who do not accept him as main authority. The Azraqites were the most violent sub-sect of Ḥariġites, and were bitterly fought against by Damascus around Baṣra and in the entire *dār al-Islām* (lit. the world of Islam, the geographical areas under Muslim control). 'Abd 'Allāh ibn Ibād al-Murri al-Tamīmī, who lived in Baṣra during the second half of VII century, assumed a more quietist position, breaking the unity of the Ḥariġite organization and founding Ibādism, whose thought would later be influenced by Mu'tazilism. Within the membership of this sect it is relevant to note the presence of al-Muḥtār ibn 'Auf al-Azdī, who wrote a history of early Islamic events prior to that of Yazīb ibn Mu'āwiya, as reported by al-Ġāhiz in his *Bayān*.³⁴ The third sub-sect of Ḥariġites, the Ṣufriyya, was founded in Baṣra in 683-83/64; as a moderate sect, they rejected the damnation of the infidels' sons and sought to legitimize the *taqiyya*, the dissimulation.

It is likely that the Ḥariġite presence in Baṣra played a relevant role within the formation of the quietist political-religious approach of Murġī'a sect and in the first phase of Mu'tazilism until the death of 'Amr ibn Ubayd (d. 761/143)

3. The *zandaqa* is defined by Ch. Pellat as all kinds of heresies or religious attitudes frowned upon by the orthodox.³⁵ The former presence of the Sassanid empire in the Mesopotamian region preserved the faiths of this rule even after he had been completely defeated by Arab conquerors. Zoroastrianism, manichaeism and mazdakism remained present and active certainly up to the X century; among these religions only Zoroastrianism is officially recognized as rooted in the Baṣra region at the beginning of the Islamic age. Under the Umayyad, the presence of Ḥālid ibn 'Abd 'Allāh al-Qasrī is considered an expression of this faith, however, it is under the 'Abbāsīd that the existence of Zoroastrianism is attested. 'Abd al-Karīm ibn Abī al-'Auġā' was one of the first who emphasized the need to transcend the literary beauty of the Qur'ān, however, it would be especially in Baghdād that the *zandaqa* would come into contact with the Islamic theological schools of his age. It was, in particular, the theological rational school of the Mu'tazila, which originated in Baṣra and then partially emigrated to the capital that would be in contact with Zoroastrianism and manichaeism.

4. 'Abd al-Ḥāhir al-Baghdādi in the *Farq bayna al-Firaq*³⁶ mentions a significant number of members of the Murġī'a sect as originating from Baṣra during the VII and VIII century; this theological school was in clear

³⁴ Al-Ġāhiz, *al-Bayān wa-t-tabyīn* cit., II, pp. 99-104.

³⁵ Pellat, *Le Milieu Baṣrien et la formation de al-Ġāhiz* cit., p. 217.

³⁶ Al-Baghdādi, *Kitāb Farq bayna al-Firaq*, ed. Badr, Cairo 1910/1328, p. 190.

contrast with Ḥariğism, for it taught that the Imām who was guilty of mortal sins did not cease to be a Muslim and must be obeyed. Muḥammad ibn Abī Shabīb al-Başrī, Ḥasan al-Başrī and Muwais ibn ‘Imrān were some of the başrien exponents of this group whose place of birth remains unclear. Murğī’a’s influence on the main theological groups that were forming and developing in Başra was relevant, and his quietist political position influenced the adoption of a similar approach by the Mu‘tazila and by the qadariyya başrien branch of this school. Until the ‘Abbāsīd age, Murğī’a’s role and thought remained dominant, and Başra provided the independence he needed to maintain this detached theological and political approach.

5. The Mu‘tazilites, by contrast, were natives of Başra. Theirs can be considered the most important theological school of the Early Islamic period until the affirmation of Āš‘arism in the X and XI centuries.

It is still difficult to fix a precise date to the birth of this theological school: in fact, if the split within the study circle of Ḥasan al-Başrī was due to the different opinions regarding the status of the sinner, the primary sources do not enable us to determine with precision the exact time of this disjoining. Some additional information, however, emphasized that the conflict between Wāṣil ibn ‘Atā, ‘Amr ibn ‘Ubayd and the Ḥasan al-Başrī’ circle became active only after the death of their master, under Qatāda, his main disciple. However, within the different Mu‘tazilite historical phases, the first one is properly related to the influence exerted by al-Başrī and Murğī’te thought on their rationalist elaboration. The analysis that Shahrastānī undertakes in his *Kitāb al-Milal* gives some information on the situation prevailing in the VIII century; Wāṣil ibn ‘Atā worked on analysis of the relationship between God and his attributes (*Ṣifāt ‘Allāh*) and the doctrine of justice of ‘Allāh and the freedom of human action, but preferred to focus the main part of his study on the intermediate state of the sinner and the promise and the threat, *al-w‘ad wa al-wa‘id*. At this point, a major question arises: in such predicaments the presence of the Murğī’te influence was significant for the emergence of Mu‘tazilite thought, which seems, at least in the beginning, not really properly connected as an expression of rational analysis. This point, as stated by J. Van Ess,³⁷ is clearly linked to the initial Islamic ethical approach prevailing within the Iraqī region; Wāṣil, unlike ‘Amr, who was not a great spokesman, was able to use dialectic skills to bring out some of the Uṣūl al-Ḥamsa’s assumptions, a task which was later taken over by Abū al-Hudayl. Initially, the Mu‘tazilites based their thought on two aspects, inherited from Ḥasan al-Başrī, of the clarity of the

³⁷ J. Van Ess, *Une Lecture à rebours de l’histoire du mu‘tazilisme*, Albin Michel, Paris 2002, p. 66.

rule: first, insofar as it refers to heaven and hell as expressions of an ultimate stage, the only good a Muslim can achieve is to see God, figuratively speaking, while the second one is related to the status of the sinner, as a manifestation of a behavior that classifies the man according to his attitude and his actions. The concept of *Tawḥīd* (God's uniqueness), according to J. Van Ess, became significant in later times, when the Mu'tazilites came to acquire a rational and analytical capacity not yet available at the beginning. It is relevant to underline that, until the second half of the VIII century the baṣrien Mu'tazilite school retained an apolitical attitude, without being committed to one side or another within the Islamic clashes, even when the 'Abbāsids toppled the Umayyad's role in 750/132. We need to wait until 762/144 and the an-Nafs al-Zakiyya uprising to quote a member of the Mu'tazila, Bashīr al-Rahḥāl³⁸ who, in contrast with al-'Amr ibn al-'As, joined the battle against the 'Abbāsids on the baṣrien side. However, the information concerning him is quite limited: "the information we have about this rare Mu'tazilite author highlights on one hand, his asceticism, and on the other, his high propensity for social criticism; as an ascetic and quietist movement, the Mu'tazila could certainly not be satisfied with the evolution that the rebellion against the 'Abbāsids had undergone."³⁹ This would be the first time in which a Mu'tazilite author would support an insurrection against the holder of political power. It is evident indeed that at the beginning, the Murḡīte influence and a more quietist approach interested the Mu'tazila and their ethical and rationalist elaboration.

The role of Baṣra in Literature

It is finally important to briefly investigate the role acquired by Baṣra within fields on the fringe of Islamic studies: Arabic grammar, and history and poetry, specifically political poetry.

1. It is reported in the *Fihrist* of Ibn Nadīm⁴⁰ that the formalising of Arabic grammar needs to be attributed to Abū al-Aswad al-Du'alī, working under the auspices of 'Alī ibn Abū Ṭālib, however, this tradition probably is a shī'ite invention; the most famous grammarian, Sībawaih, argued within his *Kitāb* that the first Arabic grammarian was probably 'Abd 'Allāh ibn Abī Ishāq (d. 735/117), a baṣrien. From this beginning, the subsequent Arabic grammar of Baṣra would become well established and durable.

A. Ibn Abī Ishāq's disciple, 'Isā ibn 'Umar al-Taqaḥī (d. 766/149), wrote

³⁸ Al-Isfahāni ibn 'Alī al-Ḥusayn, *Maqātil at-Ṭalibiyyīn*, Cairo 1949.

³⁹ J. Van Ess, "Une Lecture à rebours de l'histoire du mu'tazilisme," in *Revue des Études Islamiques* 46-47 (1978-1979), pp. 164-240, pp. 19-69: 62.

⁴⁰ Ibn Nadīm, *Fihrist*, al-Maktabat al-Tijariyyah, Cairo 1929/1348, pp. 60-61.

the first formal rules concerning the Arab language; however, it is probable that all of these have been absorbed by the main text produced by Sībawaih, an Iranian, who is the author of al-Kitāb, the *opera omnia* of Arab grammar, the foundation on which all subsequent grammars have been produced. Al-Sībawaih (d. 793/177), who lived the majority of his life in Baṣra, had many disciples who continued to maintain the grammatical tradition in this town.

2. The main reason that induced Arabs to endorse the activity of historical studies is probably connected with the clarification of some historical Ḥadīth, the studies concerning the life of the Prophet and the bibliographical sources connected with the Arabs' clan genealogies and tribe affiliation. Al-Ġāhiz in his *Bayān* focuses attention on the figures of Abū 'Ubayda (who was also his professor) and Abū al-Ḥasan al-Madā'inī, both of them based upon the Ġāhiliyya, but also on the first and second Islamic centuries author Abū 'Ubayda (728/110-824/209), a *mawlā* (a client) of Mesopotamian origin, who investigated the tribal clan traditions in detail, writing a considerable number of essays, including a book on Ḥurāsān (*Kitāb al-Ḥurāsān*), some books on the tribe of 'Abd al-Qais, Azd, Ġaṭafān, Banū Asad, Banū Aws and Banū Ḥazraġ, bibliographies on the governor al-Ḥaġġāġ, Salm ibn Qutayba, the Prophet Muḥammad in relationship with Ibrāhīm, and such historical events and battles as the *Kitāb maqal 'Uthmān*, *Kitāb al-Ġamal wa Şiffīn*, *Kitāb Marġ Rāhīt*, and on the Islamic conquests, *Kitāb futūḥ Armaniya*, *Kitāb futūḥ al-Ahwāz* and *Kitāb as-Sawād wa fathih*.

Goldziher described Abū 'Ubayda as the first significant historian of his age, culturally linked with the *Shu'ūbiyya*, and for this reason, not susceptible to accusations of historical falsification. On the contrary, Gibb argued that Abū 'Ubayda's works, focused in particular on Arab topics and showing his genuine interest on the Early Islamic period, cannot be judged as regards partiality.

Al-Ġāhiz stresses that his professor of history was a Ḥārīġite, and his attention to Arab history, even if through a *mawlā* approach (without an Arab background), underlined the historical fact concerning VIII century Islamic history that the 'Abbāsīd were a dynasty already connected with the predominant Persian culture while the Umayyads were symbolically regarded as an expression of Arab Bedouin culture.

Abū al-Ḥasan al-Madā'inī (d. 840-845/225-231) is a Baṣrian historian and *Adab* author who would leave his city for Baghdād, showing that from a specific period of the IX century, the capital reveals a clear role in attraction of the intelligentsia of Baṣra. Ibn Nadīm⁴¹ lists a number of essays

⁴¹ Ibn Nadīm, *Fihrist* cit., pp. 147-152.

which can be certainly attributed to this author: 27 monographs concerning the Prophet, 30 about relevant protagonists of the qurayshite families, 22 brochures that Ibn Nadīm classified as “histories of marriages of nobles and histories of women,” 7 texts on Early Islamic history, one of which is entitled *Aḥbār al-Ḥulafā’ al-kabīr*, 35 brochures concerning the Islamic conquests, 46 books specifically related to Baṣra: the *Qudāt* of Baṣra, *Mufāḥarat ahl al-Baṣra wa ahl al-Kūfa*, *Mafāḥir al-‘Arab wa-l-‘Aḡam*, and others.

3. Baṣra’s poetry remained rooted in the Arab Bedouin *qaṣīda* structure until the end of the VIII century; as reported above, the presence in this city of a considerable degree of political hybridization (pro-‘Uthmān authors, pro-Alid supporters, first Ḥarījites etc.) fuelled the emergence of real-satirical poetic writings used to denigrate opponents or, conversely, exalt them. Abū Miḥnaf, for example, in the *Kitāb waq‘at al-ḡamāl*, focalized the opinion of someone who supported the role played by ‘Ā’isha; ‘Imrān ibn Ḥiṭṭān (d. 703/84) a ṣufriyya Ḥarījite author gives praises instead for the murder of ‘Alī: “What was once worn by a beautiful devotee who wanted only earn the satisfaction of the Master’s throne by bringing it to him / I’m thinking about it and I hope that close to God there are the most loyal men”.⁴² However, ‘Alī did not only have opponents in this city, Abū Aswad al-Du‘alī (m. 688/69) for example, wrote an entire *dīwān*, celebrating his piety; al-Ġāhiz considers this author as capable, a master of elegant language, talented to promote fine poetry and gifted of a lively spirit.

In the Umayyad period, Baṣra would appear as significant indeed for the presence of Bedouin poets such as al-Walīd ibn Ḥanīfa al-Tamīmī, Hilāl ibn As‘ar and Murra ibn Maḥkān; nature and descriptive poetry, erotic and Bacchus poetry as that of Muḥammad an-Numairī, Ibn Mufarriḡ, Ibn Badr al-Ġudani and al-Aḥnaf ibn Qais. All these poets could be considered as minor lyricists; in spite of this, Baṣra can boast the primacy of relevant Umayyad poets, such as Farazdaq, Ġarīr, al-Rā‘ī, Dū r-Rumma, Abū Nawās and al-Aḥṭal, however, for brevity this document leaves the provision of more detail on these poets to other sources.

During the ‘Abbasid age political-religious poetry was more associated with the main authors of specific theological sects, members of the *zandaqa*, Manichaeans who focused attention on the increasing conflict between the caliphs and the main authorities within the Baghdād bureaucracy.

The Mu‘tazilite poetry of Ṣafwān ibn Ṣafwān al-Anṣārī, for example, is the source of information about the founder of this theological school, Wāṣil ibn ‘Aṭā’, Bashshār ibn Burd (d. 784-785/168), who was, at the begin-

⁴² Al-Ġāhiz, *al-Bayān wa-t-tabayīn* cit., I, p. 258.

ning of his career, a close friend of Wāṣil ibn ‘Aṭā’ and became later on a member of the kāmiliyya, a proto-shī‘ite sect, that accused all the companions of the prophet of being wicked because they had not declared their support for the figure of ‘Alī. However, the same affiliates also maintained that ‘Alī was wicked too for having given up the fight against his opponents at the Battle of the Camel but especially at Siffin. Ṣāliḥ ibn ‘Abd al-Quddūs (d. 783/167) was the author of the *Kitāb al-Shukūk* (the book of doubts), and for this reason was accused of membership in the zandaqa and executed. Ibn Nadīm reported an encounter between this poet and the Mu‘tazilite Abū al-Hudhayl: it was said that when a son of Ṣāliḥ ibn ‘Abd al-Quddūs died and [the father] grieved for him, Abū al-Hudhayl came to mourn with him. Upon finding him distraught Abū al-Hudhayl told him, “I do not know the reason why you grieve for your son if man, according to you, is like what is planted (*al-zar‘*: sow the seed).” Ṣāliḥ replied, “Oh, Abū al-Hudhayl, I grieve for him because he never read the *Book of Doubts* (*Kitāb al-Shukūk*).” Then he [Abū al-Hudhayl] asked him, “The *Book of Doubts*, what is that, oh, Ṣāliḥ?” He answered, “It is a book which I have written, in order that whoever reads it will be doubtful about what exists, imagining that it is non-existent, and about what does not exist, imagining that it is existent.” So Abū al-Hudhayl responded: “Be doubtful about the death of your son, acting as though he did not die, even though he has passed away. Be uncertain about his reading the *Book of Doubts*, even though he never read it.”⁴³

The lists of baṣrian poets during the early ‘Abbāsīd age shows, as for the previous century, a profusion of authors who were not only writing political verse. Wālība ibn Ḥubāb al-Asadī could be considered as the author of libertine verse: “Life resides only in the wine and kisses/In pursuit of a novice gazelle who is wondering what is not lawful”. ‘Ukkāsha ibn ‘Abd al-Ṣamad al-‘Ammī and Ibn Abī ‘Uyaina are writers of love poems, while Ḥakam ibn Qanbar and al-Mu‘addal ibn Ġailān are known for their work as satirical poets.

The main aim of this preceding review of partly secular activity has been to show that the propensity of Baṣra for religious studies had not impeded in any way the profusion of investigation in areas not strictly related to mysticism or Islamic tradition. The cultural and interdisciplinary approach of this city is symptomatic of a set of characteristics that we will consider shortly.

The cultural decadence of Baṣra is not properly related to the lack of a renewal of the intelligentsia. On the contrary, during the IX century, as

⁴³ Ibn Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, al-Maktabat al-Tijariyyah, Cairo 1929/1348, p. 387 (tr. from Arabic into English by the author of this article).

claimed in the Encyclopaedia of Islam: “the intellectual degeneration is not so clearly marked as the political and economic decline and, thanks to Ibn Sawwār, the town was endowed with a library whose fame has endured; the Ikhwān al-Şafā’⁴⁴ and al-Ĥarīrī made their contribution to the maintenance of the ancient city’s prestige, but Arab culture was in general already decadent, and Baghdād, as well as other provincial capitals, tended to supplant al-Başra completely.”⁴⁵

There were three contributing factors that led Başra to a gradual decline: the strong centralization of power in Baghdād, which also became the main cultural center, with a Mu’tazilite school, for example, that partially emigrated to the ‘Abbāsīd capital; the decline of trade within the entire economic area, where a sharp deterioration in agricultural production, due to increasing salinity of the water backflow from the Gulf, was coupled with this reduced trade; and the increasing prominence of the coastal Persian cities and the main centers of the Arabian Peninsula. The revolt of black slaves in the second half of the IX century, the Zanj, further aggravated the situation at a time when the economy was deteriorating beyond repair.

Reasoned analysis on Başra’s primacy in Islamic Studies

The distinction between what could be considered the objective causes of Başra’s primacy in Islamic studies and the main propelling forces associated with particular attributes that concern history, social/anthropological motivations and geography, need to be explored in this final section.

The evidence shows Başra to be one of the first urbanized areas to emerge during the historical period of Muslim conquest; before the growth of the centers of Yemen, Mecca, Medina and Ṭā’if it represented the highest level of urbanization reached by Arabs in the Peninsula. If we look at a map and take into consideration the Iraqī-conquered part of the Persian-Sassanid empire, observing the main three founded or re-founded towns of Başra, Kūfa and Moşul, the Islamic attempt to control the entire region and then proceed to the Iranian plateau becomes evident. For all three of these towns, situated in the northern, central and southern part of Mesopotamia, communications were made through overland routes and also via the navigable parts of the Tigris and Euphrates. At the beginning of the development of these Arab urbanized centers, the Islamic presence was numerically predominant. However, if Moşul was far away from the Pen-

⁴⁴ Ian R. Netton, *Foreign influences and recruiting Ismā’īlī motifs in the rasā’il of the brethren of purity*, Convegno sugli Ikhwān al-Şafā’, Roma, 25-26 Ottobre 1979, edited by Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Roma 1981.

⁴⁵ Ch. Pellat, “Başra,” E.I., 2nd ed., II, p. 1086.

insula, Kūfa became a politically and religiously deployed town, while on the Alid side, Başra materialized as a more culturally hybrid urban area.

If we take into consideration the main cities founded, or conquered, by Arabs in the VII century, Başra is the only one in which the elaboration of Islamic studies could be established without intellectual constraints due to the presence of different political-theological *fīraq*, numerous Umayyad forces and an intermediate geographical distance from Medina and the Peninsula, where Islamic Tradition acquired, from the beginning, great importance.

There is an Arab warrior aristocracy, which lives by the revenue of the fees distributed to those who participated in the campaigns of conquest, being projected in a state of affluence very different from the difficult life of the sandy lands of the Arabian Peninsula. There is a rich merchant class formed by the Muslims of the first hour, from neo-converts, and not Arabs, but also by Jews and Christians who were often well placed in administration. This active and rampant class was to quickly replace the religious sense of *tawakkul*, trust in God's providence inculcated by the Qur'ān, with an ambitious collection of material resources for personal use. Finally there is the populace, among whom stands the category of entertainment personalities, a wide array of musicians and singers, clowns and street charlatans.⁴⁶

The hybridization of the first Arab community, the *mawālī* (the clients), and the rich commercial social class, allows the affirmation of an un-orthodox Islamic thought, although in the VII century it is still early to assert the presence of an unconventional Muslim norm. The toughness that permitted laboring men, most of whom were not Arabs, to triumph over their natural surroundings and to make Başra into a big city, a harbor and a fertilized agricultural area; the realist approach which materialized within a sophisticated structure of traders; the use of a reason to order the daily working life through the search of an ongoing amelioration, and finally, the Islamic piety with the rejection of deployment on the Alid or Umayyad side, maintaining a detachment from the Islamic politicization of the VII century — all these factors underpinned the special circumstances and resources of this town.

The welfare and prosperity of Başra, moreover, permitted investment in culture and in free time to spend on the elaboration of un-orthodox Islamic approaches, or, on the contrary, to stimulate the pietistic faith of the first mystics. It seems that Başra was able to show its real nature particularly after the Zubairides phase (683-691/64-72). The opportunistic and

⁴⁶ I. De Francesco, *La Ricerca del Dio Interiore*, Ed. Paoline, Torino 2008, p. 21 (tr. from Italian into English by the author of this article).

independent Bedouin political-religious approach, split its religious interests on one side through the role played by *qurrā* and *quṣṣāṣ*, while on the other side authors contributed to the building process of an orthodox theory through the use of a rational criterion, represented by *qiyās* (deductive analogy). With the beginning of the VIII century, Baṣra elaborated a first mystical approach focusing on God's transcendence and blind confidence in the divine, but also a first orthodox doctrine in which a utopist Ḥārīḡite and proto-Shī'a thought converged in a process of homogenization between faith and reason. The initial compatibility between the Murḡī'a and Mu'tazilism, even if the second school was already willing to reach a higher rationalist approach, emphasized that this early Islamic melting pot was already searching for a structure which was independent, rational, ethical, but also pure Islamic in its attitude.

The presence of Ma'bad al-Dḡuhanī (d. 703/83), one of the first Qadarite authors and forty other members of the same sect,⁴⁷ underlines the depth of penetration of the free-will concept in this city. However, if the Qadarites' role in Syria came out as the member of an internal political-religious opposition to the Umayyad dynasty, in Baṣra, they still remained affiliates of a theological school, which for the first time argued that one must not ascribe evil to God. From it the moderate wing of the Qadariyya drew its argument: God creates only good; evil stems from men or from Satan. Man chooses freely between the two; but God knows from all eternity what man will choose. He only "leads him into error" (*iḍlāl*) if man has first given him occasion for this through his sin.⁴⁸ This theory was considered by Ḥasan al-Baṣrī as "orthodox"⁴⁹ even if it was being expounded for the first time; this aspect shows that between 694/75 and 699/80, when the *Risāla* was probably composed, the voice of moderate Qadarites clearly emerged from the text, in Baṣra itself. The ascetic 'Aṭā' b. Yasār al-Hilālī (d. 103/722 or 104/723) is symbolic of this moderate form of Qadarite doctrine, showing its rule of practical piety. The Qadarite sect played a different political role in Damascus, where many affiliates were killed by Umayyad authorities: Ghaylān al-Dimashqī was murdered as 'Umār ibn Hānī' al-Ansī and Ma'bad al-Dḡuhanī, another Qadarite, Abū al-Mughīra, was sent to exile in the Red Sea isles of Dahlak. In Baṣra they continued to remain quietist, and inside

⁴⁷ J. Van Ess, "Qadariyya" E.I., 2nd ed., IV, p. 368. H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalām*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1976; M. S. Seale, *Muslim Theology: a study of origins with reference to the Church Fathers*, Luzac & Co., London 1964. L. Gardet, *Dieu et la destinée de l'homme*, L. Philosophique J. Vrin, Paris 1967; S. Bouamrane, *Le problème de la liberté humaine dans la pensée musulmane*, L. Philosophique J. Vrin, Paris 1978.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 369

⁴⁹ Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, *Risāla* on Qadariyya in J. Obermann, *JSOAS* (1935), p. 138, and in M. Schwarz, *Oriens* 20 (1967), p. 15.

the Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's circle, were subsequently led by Qatāda ibn Di'āma (d. 735/117). "Militant characters, especially refugees from Syria, were finally integrated with the arrival of the 'Abbasids, and theological antagonisms intensified. For a long time a moderate wing survived, which, following Ḥasan and Qatāda, exempted sin from predestination, and obviously derived its arguments from qur'anic exegesis"⁵⁰

During the first 'Abbāsid decades, in Baṣra, there were two Qadarite groups, one, where we confirm *muḥaddithūn, quṣṣāṣ*, but also such authors as Sa'īd ibn Abī 'Arūba al-'Adawī (d. 773/156), Sallām ibn Miskīn al-Namarī (d. 781/164), 'Abd al-Wahhāb, and 'Aṭā al-Ḥaffāf (d. 204/820 or 206/821-2), the Qadarite quietist supporters. There is, however, another group, more rooted in theological topics, that have increasingly began to ally themselves with the Mu'tazilite school, such as 'Amr b. Fā'id al-Uswārī, Ḥamza b. Nadġīḥ, Bashīr al-Raḥḥāl, 'Abd al-Wārith and Sa'īd al-Tannūrī (d. 796/180). Their theological elaboration is strictly connected with the justice of God instead of human freedom to do evil; God must keep his Word. This theory previously emerged in Kūfa, where Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's piety never gained the internal community, rising in Baṣra during the second half of the VIII century which gradually became polarised. The Mu'tazila and Qadariyya became increasingly conscious of themselves, while on the other side, belief in a strict determinism was strengthened. It is important to emphasize that the theological opposition between supporters of human free will and determinists would have been the foundation for subsequent conflict between Mu'tazilism and jabrism (or the jahamite school). It is symptomatic that the trend towards disapproval of Qadarism emerged with the "production" of many ḥadīth against them, while pro-Qadarite traditions were limited in number. By the beginning of the IX century the Qadarite quietist approach in Baṣra had disappeared.

The short analysis of the Qadarite movement emphasizes the point that the city of Baṣra was not only a center where Islamic studies were born, but also a town that attracted experts from Iraq and Syria who were escaping from less tolerant places. Abū Nuwās, Sibawaih, Ma'bad al-Dġuhānī, Wāṣil ibn 'Atā and many others reached this town for working and cultural reasons, probably aware of the relevant role played by Baṣra at the beginning of the Islamic Era. The main reasons for this attractive function are as previously described; there are geographical and commercial motivations, agricultural and pre-industrial causes, but on the cultural side, two are predominant: the actual distance from the capital Damascus (until 750) and the lack of any form of censorship.

⁵⁰ J. Van Ess, "Qadariyya" E.I., 2nd ed., IV, p. 370.

The first is geographically evident, even if during the VII and VIII centuries Umayyad armies would reach this town to put an end to major riots, going as far as to besiege Medina, while the military presence in Baṣra was usually less apparent. Ziyād b. Abī Sufyān and al-Haḡḡāḡ were violent and authoritarian governors but completely inexperienced on religious topics and unable to judge them, and in addition the first quietist religious phase of Baṣra after the Zubayrid period did not require the presence of any form of censorship. The lack of censorship permitted the existence of different theological schools that were religiously rooted in the knowledge of *qurrā'* and *quṣṣāṣ* (Qur'ān and early Tradition) of the first decades, and were also able to go further, on one side towards the early mystic Islamic field, while on the other towards a more fideistic rational approach.

It cannot be considered accidental that the first Islamic Freethinkers came from the Baṣra community. D. Urvoy in *Les Penseurs libres dans l'Islam classique*⁵¹ emphasizes the figure of Ibn al-Muqaffa, describing him as one of the first Islamic freethinkers. Sarah Stroumsa,⁵² in a relevant essay on the same topic, considers Ibn al-Rāwandī, a baṣrien Mu'tazilite author, who rejected the rationalist dogmatic approach, one of the main protagonists of this faction too.

This provides further support for the idea that the lack of censorship at Baṣra that permitted the development of Islamic studies during the Umayyad period and then under the 'Abbāsīd. If we compare this cultural blossoming with that of other relevant towns of the Early Islamic age, Damascus, Kūfa, and Medina, the type of Islamic sciences that we can find in Baṣra is greater in scope and quality. Damascus, for the presence of the Umayyad dynasty, Kūfa for its anti-Umayyad role and for the excessive presence of Alid supporters and Medina, relevant for the Prophet's traditions but politically and economically decadent, were all left behind in this race.

The cultural hybridization of Baṣra, the presence of Arab Bedouin clans, Iranians, Greek Syrians, habitants of Sind, Malays and Hebrews, produces an environment with a range of different cultural backgrounds and religious sensitivities; however, at the beginning, in the VII century, the process of linguistic Arabization and religious Islamization did not permit external influence. Until the 80's of that century, the clash within the Islamic *Umma*, had occupied the main authorities, the companions of the Prophet, the armies and the Arabs in general. We need to wait until the end of the

⁵¹ D. Urvoy, *Les penseurs libres dans l'Islam classique: l'interrogation sur la religions dans les penseurs arabes indépendants*, A. Michel, Paris 1996.

⁵² S. Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam. Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and their impact on Islamic thought*, Brill, Leiden 1999.

century to see the focus of greater attention on Islamic topics in general, although some aspects had already emerged during the *Fitna al-Kubrā* (the great upheaval). It would be the cultural hybridization between the Arab element and its *mawālī* that would forge the earliest Islamic thought. While remaining deeply Islamic, Baṣra was able to begin a limited exegetical analysis of Qur'ānic verses and traditions without this work running the risk of being denigrated as a novelty and an expression of *bid'a* (religious innovation), but allowing a new claim reflected in the Word of God. As expressed by Van Ess in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*⁵³ the Qur'ān is not clearly for or against determinism, and it would therefore be unthinkable and inappropriate that Islamic history would reveal the dominance of one theory on the other. Baṣra's Age is one in which novelty was not innovation (considered in a negative way), and reason could still be amalgamated with God's transcendence, with the human being able to choose evilness. While 'Allāh may not be inclined to badness, the moderate political theories of Ḥārīḡism could be discussed without censure. To sum up, Islamic thought was free and without political restrictions.

In conclusion it is relevant to summarize the main reasons concerning Baṣra's supremacy on Islamic studies that clearly emerge from this article:

- The lack of censorship. The initial quietist approach of *qurrā'*, *quṣṣāṣ*, mystics, Murḡī'te, Ḥārīḡites and Qadarite affiliates who, politically uncommitted, were able to enjoy the survival for more than a century of the original relationship between Islam and belief, orthopraxis and faith, spirituality and rationalism without any political hidden motivations.
- The Bedouin and *mawālī* cultural roots. Their politically independent character and their religious Islamic outlook emphasizes the temperament of Baṣra as a sovereign city-state, that autonomously decided which position to assume in any conflict within the Islamic Umma.
- The mixed cultural background. Arabs, *mawālī* of Iran, Sind, Malaysia, Christians, Jews, and others. Their singular religious feelings underwent a process of Arabization and Islamization promoting a cultural-religious hybridization in Baṣra that has no equal elsewhere in the early Islamic age.

The first characteristic, is, in my point of view, much more relevant than the others; it is as if a universal Islam has become established in Baṣra, even if it is well rooted in the Arab Bedouin system. This is an Islam which has been depoliticized, in opposition to the prophetic role played by Muḥammad to build the *Umma*. It is an Islam deeply rooted in tradition, but also

⁵³ J. Van Ess, "Qadariyya" E.I., 2nd ed., IV, pp. 369-370.

willing to go beyond it, a religion which encourages non-violence, and the sanctity of good conduct and honesty, in spite of the commercial status of Baṣra as city of traders. Finally, it is an urban center in which supporting something new is not deprecated as innovation, but where on the contrary, it is recognized that Islam needs to be studied in great depth.

It is natural that a city so focused on Islamic studies would encourage the acceptance of a more central role of the individual human being and of a rational approach, especially under the ‘Abbāsids, who stimulated even more studies on religion; it is nevertheless appropriate to emphasise that rationalization does not directly imply the politicization of religion. Baṣra still remained as the symbolic cradle of Islamic studies, retaining its exclusive affiliation with the Muslim faith. In the IX century, when important baṣrien Mu‘tazilite theologians such as al-Naẓẓām, al-Ġāhiz, Hishām al-Fuwaṭī, Abū al-Hudayl etc. were invited to Baġhdād, they never accepted any political-administrative functions they might have been offered, developing instead a quite utopian political thought while still retaining their connection with Ḥariġite principles.

Abstract

Several factors account for the primacy of Baṣra in Islamic studies, some attributable to objective reasons, some to prevailing anthropological, historical and political conditions.

Baṣra is the only VII-century town that can be considered really free from external constraints, an urban area that had always tried to make its decisions alone. For this reason, it had been defeated often by Umayyad or ‘Abbāsīd armies, as during the Zubairid phase (683-691/64-72) or throughout al-Nafs al-Zakiyya uprising in 762/145. Baṣra’s defeat as a political factor in the first century, however, allowed it to gain instead a significant role in the rise of early Islamic studies, greater even than that of the capital, Damascus.

The Arab Bedouin urbanization process and the simultaneous phase of Islamization brought the appeasement of the Arab pre-Islamic feeling of freedom and independence along with the first Muslim elaboration of religious studies. Baṣra’s primacy in Islamic studies underlined the lack of distinction concerning the orthodoxy and the un-orthodoxy of the singular religious contribution and without censorship because novelty and freshness do not directly imply undesirable innovation (*bid’a*).

This situation fostered, on the one hand, the emergence of a significant process of elaboration within cultural and religious-Islamic studies, which initially was not able to distinguish the mystics from Tradition, or Quranic studies from theology, and, subsequently, the attempt to elaborate an Islamic ethical society which rejected the division of the Umma (the Islamic community after the *fitna al-Kubrā*) and, as such, could promote a process of social moralization completely detached from political intrigue.

This quietist approach is exemplified by Baṣra’s pre-Sufism movements, early theological schools, the presence of violent and non-violent Ḥariġites sects and the lack of *aḥādīth* makers against religious adversaries. Finally, Baṣra is the urban area in which free will had been reconciled within God’s transcendence without having considered disrespectful of ‘Allāh’s power, but in full compliance with his justice.