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More than *One Thousand and One Nights*

Framing Narratives within the Premodern Textual Production in Arabic and Adjacent Literary Traditions

Report on the Conference "Framing Narratives: New Perspectives on Premodern Textual Production in Arabic," Freie Universität Berlin (Germany), November 18–19, 2021*

Premodern Arabic literature includes one of the most important archetypes for frame tales: *One Thousand and One Nights*. Using the *Nights*, authors such as Gérard Genette (1980, 233), Mieke Bal (2009, 53), and William Nelles (1997, 132 and 139) have established models of the different levels of narrative framing. The *Nights* appears as a prime example of the nesting of stories within stories. Other well-known frame narratives that have passed through Arabic literature, including *Barlaam and Josaphat*, *Kalila and Dimna*, and the *Book of Sindbad*, have been examined less frequently in conceptualizations of narrative framing.[1] This was to change with this conference at the Freie Universität Berlin. Scholars working on Arabic, but also on Persian and Hebrew literary traditions, discussed framing as a concept of literary analysis, combining it with historical and philological questions.

In order to develop an approach to premodern narratives by taking Middle Eastern traditions as a starting point, the organizers suggested the rarely used concept of "framing narratives" (Abbott 2002, 25f). Intended to be more inclusive than the classical narratological concept, this term builds on recent efforts to reconsider *framing* as an umbrella term for both material and narrative practices as well as various processes of making meaning (Wolf 2006; Bös / Peikola 2020; and Schmid 2021). As demonstrated by this terminological choice, one goal of the conference was to reach a broader understanding of complex premodern narrative texts. A further goal was to broaden the framing concept so as to encompass texts otherwise not studied as narratives that frame other texts. Such texts include anthological and encyclopedic writings, as well as works in which different texts are inserted and at times referred to as quoted speech.[2] The participants mainly dealt with the following questions: To what extent is the universalist category of the framing narrative as a story within a story fruitful for our understanding of premodern texts from Middle Eastern traditions? What functions do framing narratives have, especially in a preprint context? How can narrative framing dynamics in premodern Middle Eastern texts best be described?

Raising these issues, the organizers of the event, *Johannes Stephan* and *Beatrice Gruendler*, connected two research contexts within literary studies at Freie Universität Berlin. In the Cluster of Excellence 2020 "Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective," Gruendler serves as a research area moderator. In the second research context, the ERC-funded project "Kalīla and Dimna – AnonymClassic," Gruendler is the principal investigator and Stephan a postdoctoral researcher. "Temporal Communities" aims at establishing new approaches to literary history, developing new concepts of literary exchange, and exploring new avenues of approaching literary history with digital tools. The "AnonymClassic" project, hosted by Arabic Studies, deals with the history of one of the globally most widespread textual traditions, known as *Kalīla and Dimna*, a mirror for princes of mostly Indian origin containing fables, which the state scribe and convert to Islam Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ translated in the eighth century through the intermediary of Middle Persian (Pahlavi).

As a frame narrative, *Kalīla and Dimna* is conspicuously different from the *Nights*. It contains an extensive apparatus of prefaces which relate the story of the "Indian book" and its translation from Sanskrit, through Middle Persian, to Arabic, forming a different framing than the inner nesting of stories. Being part of the Arabic literary canon, *Kalīla and Dimna* has been copied frequently and translated into dozens of languages, beginning with the eleventh century. However, similar to *One Thousand and One Nights*, *Barlaam and Josaphat*, and *The Book of Sinbad*, it must be read as an open textual tradition in terms of its incorporation of narrative material from different provenances and its ongoing reconfiguration through rewritings and translations.

All these framing narratives appear to be traveling narrative works that were adapted to different places, languages, and cultures. Studying such textual traditions, therefore, helps us to better understand transregional literary communities. In the process, we find new starting points for writing the history of narrative before modernity. The conference had two main outcomes: first, to emphasize the material dimension of narrative analysis in a context of manuscript production and second, to provide a fresh perspective on the functionality of framing narratives. I will return to these two outcomes after the summary of the participants' papers, which I shall group according to both their methodological and thematic foci.

The first group of papers concentrated on framing in the tradition of classical narratology, in Genetteian terms, looking at the internal dynamics and also the history of this narrative form. *Said Yaktine* (Université Mohammed V de Rabat) provided the keynote presentation, "Frame Story and Narrative Response in *Kalila and Dimna*." Before arriving at his analysis of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿs translation of *Kalīla and Dimna*, Yaktine traced the possible origins of such modes of narrative to different social settings of storytelling, known from the Arabo-Islamic tradition. First, he described the institution of the rural "assembly narrative" (*al-sard al-majlisi*), which involves an associative telling of stories by a group of storytellers. Second, he mentioned the discursive genre of the courtly and urban

"questions and answers" (*al-suʾālāt wa-l-ajwiba*) which is storytelling upon the request of an authority (such as a ruler). Relating the frame narrative topic to Genetteian notions of *transtextualité*, Yaktine showed that *Kalīla and Dimna*'s chapters and substories are introduced with a question by the king to his advisor and often closed with a maxim. Hence, the book's structure around embedding tales can be ideally described as a succession: paratext (question) – text (elaboration / story) – metatext (final comment). While supporting the function of the question-answer model, the connection between stories and substories also recalls the assembly-narrative type, which is based on associative memory. The ongoing introduction of tales from a similar thematic range evokes, Yaktine concluded, the idea of a possibly infinite moral knowledge.

A more critical elaboration of a Genetteian take on framing narratives was presented by *Zina Maleh* (Université de Genève) in her paper "Narrative Levels and Implausible Stories: Three Uses of the Frame in Tanūkhī's *Faraj baʿd al-shidda*." Maleh studied the relationship between framing and fictionality in Abū ʿAlī al-Muḥassin al-Tanūkhī's (d. 994) work, the title of which translates as "Deliverance after Hardship." The *Faraj* is an anthological work that contains quotes from various, mostly narrative sources, all addressing the existential motive expressed in the book's title. Maleh questioned an assumption uttered in recent discussions on the nature of premodern Arabic fictionality: that the narrative framing of a story indicates fictionality. Nuancing the framing-fictionality nexus, Maleh argued that the use of narrative frames should not be seen as a signal. Rather, narrative frames can be used as a tool to negotiate the plausibility of stories, to direct meaning, to generate certain expectations, or to introduce unfamiliar diegetic worlds to the reader.

In a similar vein, in his paper "A Phenomenology of the Middle Eastern Frame Tale," *Ulrich Marzolph* (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen) contested a universalist notion of the frame tale. Among the main characteristics of this narrative form, he stated, is that the famous texts from the Indo-Persian realm should be called "frame tale collections" because they contain several stories, which are otherwise independent. Indeed, sometimes these stories become themselves frame tales. This is most notably the case for *One Thousand and One Nights*, which, especially in its modern history, incorporated other frame narratives, such as the above-mentioned *Book of Sindbad*. Another characteristic, according to Marzolph, is that these frame tale collections tend to be texts without an author. Regarding the functionality of narrative framing, he critiqued the existing enumerations of functions of frame tales and cautioned against overestimating the purpose of entertainment. Since frame tale narrators interact with their audience within specific socio-political contexts, one should rather think of framing as a technique employed to address new topics or to introduce new viewpoints.

The second group of papers stressed the flexible nature of known frame narratives, mainly *Kalīla wa-Dimna* and *Barlaam and Josaphat*, by focusing on examples of rewriting. Whereas in some cases, rewriting is due to a political agenda or the logic of cultural appropriation, in others it remains enigmatic. In his talk "The

Serpent's Tale and Lost Inscriptions," *Guy Ron-Gilboa* (Bar-Ilan University) presented two versions of an undated story that features the mythical figure of Solomon. One is in Hebrew, the other in Arabic, while it remains unknown which version is older. In one instance in the story, Solomon is confronted with an illegible tablet hanging on the wall of a palace he is about to seize. The tablet has to be deciphered – depending on the Arabic or Hebrew version – either with the help of a serpent or an angelic youth from the desert, thereby serving as the opening of an embedded story. Building on this variation between the Hebrew and the Arabic text, Ron-Gilboa highlights the role of the enigma that provokes a telling by a different voice. He further interprets the different versions as different dealings with the *midrash* as a case of "narrative gap filling," adding narrative material to canonical narratives, in this case, Quranic narratives regarding Solomon.

Whereas Ron-Gilboa focused on internal dynamics, *Pegah Shahbaz* (University of Toronto), in "Frame Narrative and Its Function in the Persian *Bilawhar wa Būdhasf*," situated variation within a political context, while also comparing two linguistic versions of the same tradition. Her paper explored the *Barlaam-and-Josaphat* tradition, or *Bilawhar wa-Būdhāsaf*,[3] with its Persian title, also known as the life story of Buddha. The paper evolved around the analysis and contextualization of an abridged fourteenth-century Persian translation (from Arabic), composed by ʿAlī b. Muḥammad Niẓām Tabrīzī, who served at the Jalāyirid court in Baghdad.[4] Shahbaz showed the translation from Arabic to be anything but a mere reproduction. As can be seen in the structure of the narrative, unlike previous copies from this tradition, Niẓām chooses a more circular over an otherwise linear emplotment. This version of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, moreover, pursues a pragmatic use for the addressee, the king, offering him an Islamic Mongol legitimacy. The text is both Buddhist, proliferating through Mongol rule, and a direct translation from the Arabic.

Isabel Toral (Freie Universität Berlin) examined the topic of variation within a lens of cultural appropriation. Her paper, "Framing and Conversion: The Rhetorics of Framing in the Arabic *Bilawhar wa-Būdhāsaf,*" investigated other versions of *Barlaam and Josaphat*. She explained that the tale's structure consists of a conversation, mostly carried as a recitation of parables (*amthāl*), between the experienced master and Būdhāsaf, the young prince. Toral highlighted the replaceability of sub-stories within this specific frame tale collection that travelled along the Silk Road, concentrating on the Arabic "Ismāʿīlī" version, alongside with two "Christian" versions: Georgian and Greek. She illustrated her point with images of "the man in the well" allegory. The allegory is also found in one of the prefaces to *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. On different levels – both as an image and a narrative – the allegory picks up the metaphor of framing in this preface.

Rachel Peled (Universidad de Alcalá de Henares) attempted to grasp the nature of variation, which differs depending on a narrative that is either translated or copied. Her paper, titled "Framing Narratives as a Socio-Political Device in the Hebrew Versions of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, *Kalila and Dimna*, and *The Tale of Sendebar*: A New Perspective," looked at the dynamics of cultural appropriation

by studying translations from Arabic into Hebrew during the thirteenth century. Examining these rewritings, Peled advances the metaphor of a jazz composition-cum-improvisation to capture the overall dynamic between framing and embedding in such narrative texts. The process of translation encompasses the function of stabilizing a certain narrative, while keeping it open for additions and subtractions. This internal flexibility makes narratives adaptable to diverse socio-political contexts.

The last rewriting in this group of papers was Naṣrallāh Munshī's *Kalila and Dimna*, which was the topic of *Theodore Beers*' (Freie Universität Berlin) presentation titled "Scripture as Frame." Munshī's twelfth-century translation of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ's Arabic version, which is an early milestone of the so-called New Persian literature, adds a diverse intertextual and bilingual layer. It consists of Quranic verses, traditions from the Prophet Muḥammad, and quotations from both Arabic and Persian poetry – all absent in the Arabic version. While Munshī embeds this material in *Kalīla and Dimna*, he adds nuances to the meanings of the advice perpetrated by the stories. Similar to Shahbaz, Beers emphasized the need for a broadened legitimacy, in this case of the ruling Ghaznawīd dynasty (tenth to twelfth century) as the backdrop for such rewriting.

The third group of papers focused on the anthological dimension and on the aspect of interaction with classical Arabic literary heritage. *Wen-chin Ouyang* (SOAS University of London) presented a paper titled "Coincidence and Entanglement: Wonder and Framing in *The Thousand and One Nights*." Ouyang remained within the realm of typical frame narratives, looking at the "Hunchback's Tale" that unfolds across multiple layers within the oldest manuscript copy of the *Nights*. Ouyang argued that the framing technique in the *Nights*, and notably in the "Hunchback cycle," serves as a means to interweave, through the encounters of characters and their telling, different localities and religious communities along the Silk Road, between Kashgar (China) and Baghdad (Iraq). Being a frame narrative itself, both form and content portray a connectivity, incorporating the places into a pluriverse inhabited by overlapping stories and a shared literary space. As Ouyang pointed out, framings serve to interact and reshape the perception of literary texts. She also showed that the *Nights'* Hunchback tale, usually classified as part of the so-called popular tradition, interacts with the realm of classical Arabic literature.

The entanglement of different spatiotemporal realms and varying notions of literature was also a focal point of *Enass Khansa*'s (American University of Beirut) talk titled "Interrupting Scholarly Lineage: Ibn Shuhayd's *Epistle of Attendant Jinn and Whirling Demons*." Ibn Shuhayd's *Epistle* was written in Islamic Córdoba during the beginning of the eleventh century and only survived in a later anthological work. It features a poet, the author himself, who repeatedly embarks on travels with his companion, a *jinn* (an inspiring spirit), to a mythical valley where both meet poets and writers of the Islamic East from a distant past. Several dialogical situations that occur in the valley function as framings, demonstrating the author's literary refinement. Moreover, Khansa explained, the narrative of the whole *Epistle* is framed by a dialogical situation with a silent interlocutor

called Abū Bakr which she reads as an attempt of generating literary authority. Ibn Shuhayd contends to be an inspired author who needs no books to participate in literary history. In Ibn Shuhayd's work, then, narrative framing is a tool to negotiate the status of literature either as written or non-written. Khansa's paper also investigated the combination of autobiography and anthology, which was also the topic of the last two papers.

In his paper "Frames and Framing in *Nafthat al-maṣdūr* (*The Expectoration of the Consumptive*) by Ibn Maʿṣūm al-Madanī (d. 1120/1708–9): A Once Lost Anthology on Migration and Homesickness," *James White* (University of Oxford) drew attention to the material dimension of embedding texts within texts in a manuscript culture. In so doing, White propounded that the concept of framing narratives, notably in contexts before the age of print, has to be connected to intertextual and material practice. His work is part of an ongoing edition project of this anthology, composed by Ibn Maʿṣūm, who traveled from the Arabian Peninsula to the Indian subcontinent in his youth. In his writings, Ibn Maʿṣūm inserts literary quotes and interrelates them with personal experiences. Through narrating his own biography, Ibn Maʿṣūm attempts to situate himself within a complex literary tradition. By highlighting intellectual, narrative, and material aspects, White addressed different dimensions of framing.

Richard van Leeuwen (Universiteit van Amsterdam) also canvassed a broadening of the frame narrative category in his paper, "Early Modern Ḥajj Accounts as Framed Narratives." He suggested different notions of framing, specifically when examining Arabic accounts of pilgrimage to Mecca from the seventeenth century. For van Leeuwen, the notion of narrative framing is both a narrative strategy and a method of study. In fact, this perspective can be taken to consider the trope of the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) as an incentive for a particular type of writing that subsumes different events and subjects under one teleology. Moreover, van Leeuwen discerned two main interrelated reference frameworks. First, the frame of the journey is the representation of the pilgrim's individual observations and experiences. Second, the textual frame is anchored in the Islamic tradition, which includes Quranic verses and quotes from the prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*). The connection of the *experienced* with the *textual* shows, again, as adumbrated by Khansa and White, that framing is more than a strategic or aesthetic device; it is also a means for self-situating. Furthermore, as Leeuwen stressed in the discussion, framing has both a restrictive and an open dimension. For example, a pilgrimage account is defined by the aim of the journey, which at the same time allows for addressing a variety of topics.

The concluding discussion, which included the scholar of medieval German literature, *Jutta Eming*, as well as the philosopher *Simon Godart* (both from Freie Universität Berlin), addressed similarly broad topics of narrative framing that relate to material and historical dimensions. Eming emphasized the relevance of studying the medieval circulation of framing narratives from Eastern literatures, such as *The Book of the Seven Sages* (Book of Sinbad), as one of the most popular

textual traditions in medieval (German) literature. Godart emphasized the openness of the concept of framing, which implies both a formal and a semantic dimension and a proximity to the concept of narrative. In his view, framing as an activity of presenting a work can accommodate a variety of interrelated narrative and non-narrative materials, including textual and non-textual layers.

In a nutshell, the different perspectives proposed in the conference substantiate the need to take framing seriously as a conceptual framework to study literature beyond its function as a complex set of techniques. They also urge us to rethink our methods in dealing with premodern and early modern literary cultures. More specifically, I shall mention two broader outcomes. First, mindful of the different material conditions of textual production in a context before the age of print, as supported by previous studies (Bös / Peikola 2020, 1–31; Wolf 2008), some papers have shown that clear distinctions between frame narratives and intertextual notions such as paratexts or metatexts cannot always be upheld. Reading prefaces, comments, marginalia, and other such parts of texts as framings leads to the question of how exactly the boundaries of a work should be defined and, consequently, from what angle a narrative text is to be interpreted. In this sense, as the conference has shown, framings emphasize the relationship with the reader, enabling texts to function in new social and intellectual environments. The re-embedding of previously known materials may also explain why extensive features of *mouvance* seem to be inherent to the textual history of the most famous frame tale collections. Therefore, the main frame tale traditions, such as *Kalīla and Dimna* and *Barlaam and Josaphat*, are to be read as anthological rewritings, from their onset, which time and again require new paratexts, hence, new framings for new audiences.

This brings me to the second result of the conference, which is related to the question of functionality. Narrative framing in the context of premodern literary traditions, as a few papers pointed out (see for example Maleh, Marzolph, and van Leeuwen), is not necessarily indicative of fictionality, or particular aesthetic purposes. Rather, framing serves both an ethical and an epistemological function, and these are closely related. Considering that framing is a means of ordering knowledge in narrative terms, be it in a vertical (story within story) or horizontal (story after story) way, it also implies the establishing of relationships. Therefore, the concept of framing narratives offers a take on reality in which stories and texts do not exist by themselves and in which experience is shaped by previous narratives. This relationality is both a way of understanding the world, which is preconditioned by social and textual interdependence, and a means of defining one's appropriate conduct or position.

The proceedings of the conference will be published as a special issue in the *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*.

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How to cite this article:
Stephan, Johannes: "More than One Thousand and One Nights. Framing Narratives within the Premodern Textual Production in Arabic and Adjacent Literary Traditions [Conference Report on 'Framing Narratives: New Perspectives on Premodern Textual Production in Arabic,' Freie Universität Berlin (Germany), November 18–19, 2021]." In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research / Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 11.2 (2022). 120–128.
URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20221213-120007-8
URL: https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/450/640

* I would like to thank Beatrice Gruendler and Amin Ehteshami for reading and commenting on this report. This publication was made possible through funding via the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize 2017 (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft), research project "Arabic Literature Cosmopolitan," and the European Research Council (ERC), project "*Kalila and Dimna* – AnonymClassic" (Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement 742 635), both hosted at Freie Universität Berlin. I am grateful to the EXC 2020 "Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective," for funding the conference.

[1] With some recent exceptions such as Uhlig / Foehr-Janssens 2014 and van Leeuwen 2017.

[2] This is already the case in early Muslim historiography and the reported traditions of the prophet Muhammad (*ḥadīth*), where accounts are juxtaposed and presented as speech transmitted by earlier narrators who are quoted directly.

[3] The different transliterations of the name are due to the rendering in different languages and the variety of renderings in the manuscripts.

[4] The Jalāyirids were a dynasty of Mongol descent that used Persian as their administrative and literary language.