

4 Būrān, the Wife of Caliph al-Ma'mūn

Summary 1 Būrān's Historical Figure. – 2 The Development of the Character: the Postponement of the Union Due to the Bride's Indisposition.

1 Būrān's Historical Figure

Apart from the daughter of Khusraw Parvīz, another historical personage was called Būrān or Būrān-dukht: the daughter of the powerful Ḥasan b. Sahl,⁶⁴ and wife of Caliph al-Ma'mūn (198-218/813-833).⁶⁵ As is shown below, it is especially to the latter Būrān that the characteristic features of Turandot are probably to be referred: rejection, or postponement of the wedding, and the presence of riddles or enigmatic expressions. As in the case of Darius's daughter, some sources assert that Būrān was a nickname – or possibly a title elevating her to the rank of the other Būrān – the true name of Ḥasan b. Sahl's daughter being Khadīja.⁶⁶ In a tale from *The Thousand and One Nights*, the wife of caliph al-Ma'mūn appears under the name 'Khadīja'.⁶⁷ However, nothing of Khadīja in this story recalls the Turandot character except, perhaps, for her being a clever and learned woman, fond of music and poetry; as if the

⁶⁴ On Ḥasan b. Sahl see Sourdel, *Le vizirat 'Abbāsīde de 749 à 936*, 1: 215-18. He belonged to a Zoroastrian family converted to Islam under caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (see al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, 7: 319-20). He was a poet and a man of letters, and patronized the translation of Pahlavi texts into Arabic, also personally taking part in this task himself; see Zakeri, *Persian Wisdom in Arabic Garb. 'Alī b. 'Ubayda al-Rayḥānī (D. 219/834) and his Jawāhīr al-kīlam wa-farā'id al-ḥikam*, 1: 11-12.

⁶⁵ Cf. Ihsan Abbas, s.v. "Būrān".

⁶⁶ Ibn Khallikān, *Biographical Dictionary*, 1: 268.

⁶⁷ Cf. *Arabian nights*, 4: 119-25, nights 279-82.

characteristic features of the character were only appended to the name Būrān-dukht.

Būrān/Khadīja (192-271/807-884) married Ma'mūn in 202/817, when she was ten years old (the sources say that the caliph *tazaw-waja* her); but the consummation of the marriage (*binā'a*) took place only eight years later, in Ramazan 210/December 824-January 825:⁶⁸ a long period that may have given birth to the legend of the woman who escapes from or postpones marriage.

The wedding or, better, the celebrations for the consummation of the marriage became famous in Islamic sources for their pomp and magnificence. They even passed into proverb, being referred to as “the invitation of Islam” (*da'wat al-Islām*).⁶⁹ Nabia Abbott has given a full account of the event, based on Arabic sources.⁷⁰ Sources highlight Ḥasan b. Sahl's generosity in hosting the caliph and his retinue for the period – seventeen days in most sources – when they stayed in Fam al-Šilḥ, the residence of Ḥasan on a tributary of the Tigris, north of Wāsīt; and describe the precious and extravagant gifts he bestowed on the guests.⁷¹ In the account of the celebrations, what strikes the reader is the emphasis given to the financial side of the wedding, and the minute details in the report concerning the sums spent by the main participants: apart from Ḥasan and the caliph himself, Ḥamdūna, daughter of Hārūn al-Rashīd and half sister to al-Ma'mūn, and Zubayda, wife of Hārūn al-Rashīd and step-mother of al-Ma'mūn.⁷²

Among the women present at the celebration was also Būrān's grandmother. When the caliph enters Ḥasan's palace and meets his bride, Būrān's grandmother pours a tray full of precious pearls over him. Again – in the historians' report – the accounting aspect of the matter takes over: the caliph asks how many pearls have been scattered. We are told, a thousand. The caliph orders they to be gathered and counted: ten of them are found to be missing, having been taken by somebody, a servant or someone else present at the ceremony. Ma'mūn buys back the ten pearls from the person and offers Būrān the thousand pearls as his personal wedding gift.⁷³

68 Historical sources with an annalistic structure, such as the *Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa'l-mulūk* by Ṭabarī (*History*, XXXII: *The Reunification*, 82 and 153-9) and the *Kāmil fī'l-ta'riḫ* by Ibn al-Athīr (*Ibn-el-Athiri Chronicon*, 6: 248, 279) mention the marriage between Būrān and the caliph under the year 202 (or 203 in Ṭabarī); and, then, under the year 210, they say that the marriage was consummated or the wedding celebrated.

69 Al-Tha'ālibī, *Latāifo'l-ma'ārif*, 73.

70 Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 231-4.

71 Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdād*, 116; Ṭabarī, *History*, XXXII: *The Reunification*, 156; al-Ya'qūbī, *Historiae*, 2: 559; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīḫ Baghdād*, 7: 321.

72 See Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdād*, 116; Ṭabarī, *History*, XXXII: *The Reunification*, 156-7.

73 Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdād*, 115; Ṭabarī, *History*, XXXII: *The Reunification*, 154-5.

Būrān is not a real presence in the narrative. She only appears on the scene when the caliph invites her to ask him whatever she desires. “But Būrān – I quote here Nabia Abbott’s words – modestly refrained from any request until her grandmother encouraged her with, ‘Speak to your lord, and make your wishes known as he has commanded’”. So Būrān, “who had, no doubt, been schooled for this very moment”, made two requests in the interest of Zubayda and of Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī:⁷⁴ nothing interesting in view of the development of her character.

Būrān is further remembered for having been present at the death of caliph al-Ma'mūn near Ṭarsūs in 218/833, during his expedition against Byzantium, only eight years after their wedding;⁷⁵ and concerning the famous palace, at first called al-Qaṣr al-Ja'farī (after the former minister Ja'far Barmakī), then al-Ma'mūnī, and finally, after Ma'mūn donated it to Ḥasan b. Sahl, al-Qaṣr al-Ḥasanī, where she lived out her long life.⁷⁶ No offspring of their union are recorded.⁷⁷

If it were not for her name, or nickname, Būrān, and for the historical fact of the long delayed consummation of the marriage, nothing in the account given by the Arabic historians would let us pre-empt the development of her character in literature, as the prototype of the misogynist and learned woman falling back on enigmatic expressions to keep her groom or suitor at bay.

2 The Development of the Character: the Postponement of the Union Due to the Bride's Indisposition

It is in works outside historiography that we can best follow the development of the figure of the historical Būrān, the daughter of Ḥasan b. Sahl, as it progressed over time. In a work devoted to figurative expressions (*kināyāt*), by the shafiite jurist Abū'l-Abbās Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Jurjānī (d. 482/1089), two anecdotes are reported at the end of a very short account of the marriage between Būrān and Ma'mūn.⁷⁸ They are to be found in the chapter entitled: “On figurative expressions relating to what comes out of human beings, be it excrement (or impurities: *ḥadat*) or flatulence (*rīḥ*)”.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 233. On the Abbasid prince Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī, for a short period proclaimed (anti-)caliph in Baghdad under al-Ma'mūn's caliphate, see Sourdel, *Le vizirat Abbāsīde*, 1: 209.

⁷⁵ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 234.

⁷⁶ See Le Strange, *Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate*, 244-6, 248-9; Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-buldān*, 1: 807-8.

⁷⁷ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad*, 234.

⁷⁸ Al-Jurjānī, *Kināyāt al-udabā' wa-ishārāt al-bulaghā'*, 170-1.

⁷⁹ Al-Jurjānī, *Kināyāt*, 169.

The first anecdote, whose source is Muḥammad b. Khalaf b. al-Marzubān (d. 309/921),⁸⁰ who quotes it from 'Umar b. Shabba (173-262/789-878),⁸¹ is also reported by Ibn Khallikān (608-681/1282-1211) in his *Biographical dictionary (Wafayāt al-a'yān)*. If the anecdote is to be ascribed to Ibn al-Marzubān, and before him to 'Umar b. Shabba, it must be dated to before 262/878. I quote it in the version by Ibn Khallikān and the English translation by William Mac Guckin de Slane.

After having recounted, mainly from Ṭabarī's work, the story of the magnificent ceremony of Būrān's marriage to Ma'mūn, Ibn Khallikān then adds: "Another author says: 'When al-Māmūn sought to enter in to Būrān, he was refused admittance, on the pretext that she was indisposed, but he would not retire; and when his bride was brought forth to him, he found her unwell, and left her. The next morning, when he gave public audience, the *kātib* Ahmad Ibn Yūsuf⁸² entered and said to him: 'Commander of the Faithful! May God accord you happiness and good fortune in what you have undertaken; may you be great in prowess and victorious in combat!' To this al-Māmūn replied by reciting the following verses:

Eques impetuusus, cum hastā suā promptus in confossionem
in tenebris, praedam suam sanguine inficere voluit; sed eum
prohibuit illa, cum sanguine, a sanguine suo.⁸³

Ibn Khallikān, in reference to Ma'mūn's enigmatic words, adds: "In this, he made allusion to the nature of her indisposition, and the figure he employed is perfectly appropriate".⁸⁴

Al-Jurjānī, in his book on figurative expressions, had been more explicit than Ibn Khallikān in relating this anecdote: Ma'mūn utters the two lines quoted above in reply to an outspoken question by Aḥmad Ibn Yūsuf: "Did you profit from what happened (last night)?" Then, after the quotation of Ma'mūn's verses, al-Jurjānī explains: "He (Ma'mūn) was referring to the fact that she (Būrān) got her menstrual period, and he had not deflowered her".⁸⁵

⁸⁰ On al-Marzubān and his works see Zakeri, *Persian Wisdom in Arabic Garb*, 1: 31-8.

⁸¹ On this personage, "an expert in *akhbār* on history as well as poets and poetry, very important source for some of the most prominent works of Arabic literature", see Leder, s.v. "'Umar b. Shabba".

⁸² On him see Sourdel, *Le vizirat 'Abbāsīde*, 1: 225-31.

⁸³ "The fiery horse, ready to sink his rod into the darkness, wanted to stain his prey with blood. But, with blood, she prevented him from shedding her blood". It is interesting to note the translator's choice of rendering these lines in Latin, according a common usage, in Oriental studies in the past, of translating obscene expressions into Latin.

⁸⁴ Ibn Khallikān, *Biographical Dictionary*, 1: 270.

⁸⁵ Al-Jurjānī, *Kināyāt*, 171.

The second brief anecdote quoted by Abū 'l-'Abbās al-Jurjānī in his book on *Kināyāt al-udabā'* is as follows: "Another person relates that he (al-Ma'mūn) met Būrān to deflower her. When he was about to, Būrān got her period. She told him: '*God's commandment comes, therefore do not desire to hasten it*'.⁸⁶ Al-Ma'mūn understood what she meant and moved away from her".⁸⁷ The same anecdote had already been narrated in another work also devoted to figurative expressions and allusions (mainly concerning tabooed objects and actions), by al-Tha'ālibī (d. 429/1039);⁸⁸ and is to be found in a great number of other works, both in Arabic and in Persian.

In Persian literature, the second anecdote is briefly reported in the *Mujmal al-tavārikh*. In the section concerning the history of Ma'mūn's caliphate, the anonymous author gives a description of Būrān and the caliph's sumptuous wedding. At the end he laconically adds: "When Ma'mūn stretched his hand towards his bride, a state appeared in her (*ū-rā ḥāl-ī zāhir gasht*). She said: '*O Commander of the Faithful! God's commandment comes, therefore do not desire to hasten it*'.⁸⁹

In the *Mujmal* no explanation is given as to the kind of state which appeared in Būrān. Perhaps the anecdote was so famous that the author thought it was pointless to provide further explanations. However, for the uninformed reader, Būrān's phrase could have been simply taken as a way of asking for the deferment of the consummation of the wedding.

The two anecdotes reported by Abū 'l-'Abbās al-Jurjānī in his book on figurative expressions are centred on the fact that, on the night of the consummation of the wedding, Būrān had got her period and therefore the consummation was further delayed. In both cases, Būrān's physical state is expressed through a figurative expression. These anecdotes are therefore relevant to both lines of development of Būrān's character in literature: her transformation into the misogynist woman type, who delays the consummation of marriage; and the association of her character with allusive or enigmatic expressions, and finally true riddles.

⁸⁶ Koran XVI,1.

⁸⁷ Al-Jurjānī, *Kināyāt*, 171.

⁸⁸ Al-Tha'ālibī, *Kitāb al-kināya wa 'l-ta'rīd*, 43.

⁸⁹ *Mujmal al-tavārikh*, 355.

