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Quss Ibn Sa'ida al-Iyadi (6th–7th cent. A.D.), Bishop of Najran: An Arabic and Islamic Cultural Hero

Studia Ceranea : journal of the Waldemar Ceran Research Centre for the History and Culture of the Mediterranean Area and South-East Europe 2, 127-135

2012

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Marek M. Dziekan (Łódź)

QUSS IBN SA'IDA AL-IYADI (6TH–7TH CENT. A.D.), BISHOP OF NAJRAN AN ARABIC AND ISLAMIC CULTURAL HERO

The half-legendary Quss Ibn Sa'ida from an ancient North Arab tribe Iyad was probably (according to Arabic sources only, he is not mentioned in any ancient texts) a bishop¹ of the Yemeni (today in Saudi Arabia) city Najran² (Ar. *Usquf Najran*), one of oldest centers of Christianity (Ar. *Nasraniyya*)³ in the Arab World and at the same time a monk/ascetic (anachorete). He is

pictured as the greatest orator of all the tribes [...] and whose eloquence has become proverbial [...] He is also an heroic figure, describing as being also the poet, sage, judge, etc. par excellence of the Arabs of his time

– states the eminent French Arabist Charles Pellat⁴. Abu Hatim as-Sijistani (d. about 869) writes that, he reached the age of 380 years, being one of 'long lived'

¹ This piece of information was discussed in detail by western Arabists (a presentation of this discussion see in: M.M. DZIEKAN, *Quss Ibn Sā'ida al-Iyādī. Legenda życia i twórczości*, Warszawa 1996, p. 14–22). Sozomen (5th cent. A.D.) in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* (VII, 19) wrote: *They faithfully and justly assumed, that those who accorded in the essentials of worship ought not to separate from one another on account of customs. For exactly similar traditions on every point are to be found in all the churches, even though they hold the same opinions. There are, for instance, many cities in Scythia, and yet they all have but one bishop; whereas, in other nations a bishop serves as priest even over a village, as I have myself observed in Arabia, and in Cyprus – The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen*, <http://www.freewebs.com/vitaphone1/history/sozomen.html> [6 III 2012]. It means, that Arabic *Usquf* might have actually been the equivalent of a rector, and for this reason he is absent in any official list of Bishops prepared by the Eastern Church, cf. J.S. TRIMINGHAM, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, London–Beirut 1979, p. 214. This problem, however, is not the topic of the present article.

² Cf. I. SHAHID, *Naǧrān*, [in:] *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, CD-ROM Edition, v. 1.0., Leiden 1999 (cetera: *El*); IDEM, *The Martyrs of Najran. New Documents*, Bruxelles 1971; A. WEISS, *Arabia*, [in:] *Encyklopedia Katolicka*, vol. I, Lublin 1989, col. 848.

³ The problem of Christianity in Pre-Islamic Arabia is fairly well developed in Arabic studies, see e.g. the „classical” study of J.S. TRIMINGHAM, *op. cit.*; in Polish: K. KOŚCIELNIAK, *XX wieków chrześcijaństwa w kulturze arabskiej. Tom pierwszy. Arabia starożytna. Chrześcijaństwo w Arabii do Mahometa (†632)*, Kraków 2000.

⁴ CH. PELLAT, *Kuss Ibn Sā'ida al-Iyādī*, [in:] *El*.

– *mu'ammarrun*⁵. Other classical Arabic writers state, that he lived 600 or 700 years (he knew the Apostles of Jesus!). According to my own detailed analysis of Arabic sources, he died about around 610 A.D. Many stories mention the place where he was buried – it should be Jabal (called also Qalat) Siman in north Syria, the place connected also with Simeon the Stylite (Ar. *Siman*). Stories on Quss can be found in numerous works of classical Arabic religious, historical and didactical literature (Ar. *adab*). There exists also a short and until now unedited *Hadith Quss Ibn Sa'ida* ('The Story of Quss Ibn Sa'ida'), transferred by Muhammad al-Hasan Ibn Muhammad al-Hafidh and preserved in the Adh-Dhahiriyya Library in Damascus (№ 3754)⁶ as well as another one, by Ibn Durustawayh (d. 957), preserved in Chester Beatty Library in Dublin (№ 5498).

The stories show that the Prophet Muhammad probably heard his sermons at the famous market at al-Ukadh near Mecca before the Revelation in 610 (or before the Hijra in 622 – it is not clear).

At 'Ukadh, we are told, the youthful Muhammad listened, as though spellbound, to the eloquence of Quss b. Sa'ida, Bishop of Najran; and he may have contrasted the discourse of the Christian preacher with the brilliant odes chanted by heathen bards.⁷

The Prophet Muhammad is even said to have exclaimed: *I hope that at the Day of Resurrection he will return to life and form the people of his own*.⁸ The relations between Quss and the Prophet are very well known and stories on this topic can be found in several classical Arabic works⁹.

In some sources we can also find a story describing the meeting of Quss with the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (ruled 610–641). Many authors mention this visit. They cite the discourse between the two or at least its part, like e.g. Ibn Abd Rabbihi (d. 940)¹⁰ and Abu al-Hasan al-Masudi (d. 956)¹¹, who cite only small excerpts from the discourse without mentioning the name of the emperor, or like Ibrahim Muhammad al-Bayhaqi (10th cent.)¹², whose relation is the longest one, or Abu Hayyan at-Tawhidi (d. 1020)¹³, who mentions the name of emperor Heraclius himself¹⁴.

⁵ ABU HATIM AS-SIJISTANI, *Das Kitāb al-Mu'ammarrin des Abū Hātim as-Siġistānī*, [in:] I. GOLDZIEHER, *Abhandlungen zur arabischen Philologie*, vol. II, Leiden 1899, p. 78–79.

⁶ Cf. www.mahaja.com [4 III 2012].

⁷ R.A. NICHOLSON, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, Cambridge 1969, p. 135–136.

⁸ CH. PELLAT, *op. cit.*

⁹ See in detail M.M. DZIEKAN, *Quss...*, *passim*.

¹⁰ IBN ABD RABBIHI, *Al-Iqd al-Farid* [The Unique Necklace], vol. II, p. 105, Bayrut 2005.

¹¹ AL-MASUDI, *Muruġ adh-Dhahab* [The Golden Meadows], ed. Ch. PELLAT, Bayrut 1965, vol. I, p. 70.

¹² I.M. AL-BAYHAQI, *Al-Mahasin wa-al-Masawi* [Advantages and Disadvantages], Bayrut 1960, p. 326–329.

¹³ ABU HAYYAN AT-TAWHIDI, *Al-Basa'ir wa-adh-Dhakha'ir* [Insights and Supplies], vol. V, pars 7, p. 198–199, ed. W. AL-QADHI, Bayrut 1988.

¹⁴ All the texts ascribed to Quss and connected with this encounter were translated into Polish and edited in my above-mentioned book. As far as I know, not all of them were translated into English.

The story transmitted by At-Tawhidi is relatively late, but it helps us to put the events in their place (remembering, of course, that what we have to do with is probably only a legend). The conversation embraces some medical (mainly ethical) explanations, containing several monotheistic ideas concerning the life on the Earth and in Hereafter. Some of these apophthegmata became “hackneyed quotations”, living to our days in the Arabic language, as for example: *ahmadu al-balagha as-samt* – i.e. ‘the best eloquence is silence’. This is the answer which Quss gives, when the Emperor asks what is the best eloquence. As for the best wisdom – it is *marifat al-insan bi-qadrihi*, i.e. when the man knows his capabilities. It is worth mentioning, that some of these apophthegmata are prescribed also to other personalities from pre-Islamic or early Islamic times, like the preacher and judge Aktham Ibn as-Sayfi, the fourth caliph Ali Ibn Abi Talib, or the Prophet’s first wife, Khadija. Therefore it is clear that at least part of these texts should be treated as apocrypha.

Though Quss maybe didn’t exist at all, he is present in the history of Islam and in the history of Arabic literature. Until recently, a sermon of Quss recited at Ukadh was one of texts which pupils in Arabic schools learned by heart. In Najran the memory about Quss is living also today – on March 2012 the “Festival of Quss Ibn Sa’ida” took place in this city¹⁵.

Each society has some rites that differ from others in their general homogeneity. It seems that such a clear consistence can be explained only by their common origins. So it was imagined that each such a group of similar rites was established by one common ancestor who revealed it to the entire tribe.¹⁶

This statement of Emile Durkheim corresponds exactly with the tendencies that most probably influenced the emergence in the Arabic culture of the quasi- studies of “pioneers” (Ar. *awa’il*, sing. *awwal*)¹⁷. It is worth noting, that a similar kind of knowledge was also known in other cultures, such as the Hellenic, medieval Europe and China¹⁸.

The list of *awa’il* of Quss Ibn Sa’ida looks quite impressive as for a rather unknown Christian monk of the *Jahiliyya* (the pre-Islamic period in the Arabic culture, covering about one and a half century before the beginning of the Islamic era, 622 A.D.). In what follows I want to present and analyse the *awa’il* of Quss

Only small pieces exist in the French, German and Czech language.

¹⁵ ALI AL-HAYYANI, *Masrah li-Malhamat al-Ukhdud fi Mahrajan Quss Ibn Sa’ida* [The Theatre for the Epos of Al-Ukhdud during the Festival of Quss Ibn Sa’ida], “Ash-Sharq”, 2012/03/03, www.alsharq.net [4 III 2012].

¹⁶ E. DURKHEIM, *Elementarne formy życia religijnego* [Polish translation of *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*], trans. A. ZADROŻYŃSKA, Warszawa 1990, p. 274.

¹⁷ Cf. M.M. DZIEKAN, *Searching for the origins of things. On the ‘ilm al-awā’il in the culture of the Arabic Middle Ages*, SAI 4, 1996. The present article is partially based on this study.

¹⁸ The oldest book of this kind is *Shi Pen* (‘Book of the Beginnings’), cf. J. NEEDHAM, *Wielkie miarozkowanie. Nauka i społeczeństwo w Chinach i na Zachodzie* [Polish translation of *The Grand Titration. Science and Society in East and West*], Warszawa 1984, p. 299–300; also: F. ROSENTHAL, *Awā’il*, [in:] *EL*.

according to *Kitab al-‘awa’il* (“The Book of Pioneers”, written ca. 1005) by Abu Hilal al-Askari (d. ca. 1010), a renowned Arabic writer and philologist¹⁹. The list of the *awa’il* of Quss Ibn Sa’ida is almost the same in the various records that convey it²⁰.

Quss was the first to believe in the Only God in Mecca before the coming of Islam; the first to believe in Resurrection (*Bath*)²¹. Al-Askari cites various statements relating to the priority in this area. In addition to Quss, Waraqa Ibn Nawfal²² and Zayd Ibn Amr Ibn Nufayl are mentioned. Ash-Shahrastani (d. 1153)²³ also mentions Quss and Zayd among the first Arab monotheists. Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti (d. 1505) repeats these versions much later in his work on *awa’il*. Al-Askari adds: *Even if Quss was not the first, his standing is risen by the fact that he was mentioned by the Prophet – let the God save Him – and this is sufficient glory for him*²⁴. Quss is also mentioned, e.g. by Al-Masudi, among “the people of the interval” (*Ahl al-Fatra*, people living between Christ and Muhammad) who were also Christians or generally monotheists.

According to Al-Askari, our hero was also the first to lean on a staff (*asa*) during the sermon (*khutba*)²⁵. Basically the term *asa* was used by the Arabs to designate a stick used by nomad herdsmen in the Arabian Peninsula²⁶. The function and symbolism of the staff found their confirmation in the Arabic tradition as well, mostly through the staff of Moses (Ar. *Musa*). In Arabic legends its story begins with Adam who transferred it to Seth; after that, it was inherited in succession by: Idris, Noah, Salih, Abraham, Shu’ayb²⁷ and finally Moses²⁸. Besides, Moses’s staff was not a sheep-hook only, as is told in the *Quran*: *It is my rod; on it I lean; with it I beat down fodder for my flock; and in it I find other uses* (XX, 18)²⁹. It was kind of a magic wand, as the Quranic legend has it further on.

It is the gospel legend, beside the Quranic and the *Old Testament* tradition, which in the case of Quss may have some significance, too. In the *New Testament*

¹⁹ ABU HILAL AL-ASKARI, *Kitab al-Awa’il*, ed. M. AL-MISRI, W. QASSAB, Dimashq 1975; about the author see e.g. H.A.R. GIBB, *Arabic Literature. An Introduction*, London 1966, p. 88; FUAT SEZGIN, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, vol. II, Leiden 1975, p. 614; vol. VIII, 1982, p. 183–185; vol. IX, 1984, p. 183.

²⁰ In detail see: M.M. DZIEKAN, *Searching...*

²¹ AL-ASKARI, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

²² Waraqa Ibn Nawfal (d. about 611) was a Christian, an uncle of Khadija, Prophet Muhammad’s wife. In the Muslim tradition he is the first who translated the *Gospel* into Arabic.

²³ ASH-SHAHRASTANI, *Kitab al-Milal wa-an-Nihal* [Book of Religious and Philosophical Sects], Al-Qahira s.a., vol. II, p. 250–251.

²⁴ AL-ASKARI, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

²⁵ *L.cit.*

²⁶ Cf. A. JEFFERY, ‘*Asā*, [in:] *El*.

²⁷ Salih and Shu’ayb are Arabo-Islamic prophets mentioned in the *Quran*, Sura VII.

²⁸ A. JEFFERY, *op. cit.*; *The Holy Qur’an*, e.g.: II, 60; VII, 107, 117, 160; XX, 18.

²⁹ *The Holy Qur’an*, transl. by A.Y. ALI, Beirut s.a., p. 307.

the stick was an attribute of St. Peter's and Good Shepherd's³⁰, and also of St. John the Baptist, to mention the most characteristic examples only. In the context of religious (not only genuinely Arab) tradition then, the stick is, above all, an element which makes Quss Ibn Sa'ida resemble prophets and saints with whom, undoubtedly, he has much in common³¹.

Among the Arabs the stick was, from the pre-Islamic times onwards, a symbol of authority and an attribute of judges and orator. That is why, considering the tradition which surrounds this object it is hard to believe in the record saying it was Quss to be the first orator to lean upon the stick. It is just one of many elements in the process of mythologization of his person. Considered to be the most outstanding orator of the pre-Islamic Arabs, Quss Ibn Sa'ida was vested with this additional honour³². Quss was also the first to make a speech from the she-camel's back³³.

Furthermore, our Christian Bishop or monk was the first to say *amma bad*³⁴. The Arabic tradition disagrees on the priority in this area. The names most frequently mentioned in this context are those of Quss Ibn Sa'ida's, Kab Ibn Lu'is, Prophet Muhammad's ancestor, and of Prophet Dawud's (David).

In the Arabic rethorics, the *amma bad* phrase was used mostly in *khutbas* (sermons), *wasiyyas* (testaments) and *risalas* (letters). The expression is quite difficult to translate (lit. 'and next'), and in the old Arabian orations it appeared most frequently at the beginning of an issue, whereas in the Islamic texts it appeared either after the *hamdala* (the formula: *al-hamdu li-Allah*) or another relevant formula, or after the phrase *min Fulan ila Fulan* (cf. hereafter). According to Al-Askari, the first text in the Arabic literature to begin with this formula is a *wasiyya* by Quss Ibn Sa'ida. The fact that the priority in this area is ascribed, along with Quss, to Dawud and the Prophet's grandfather, indicates a really high position of Quss among medieval Muslim scholars. According to many Muslim authors, the formula was very frequently used by the Prophet and his Companions. Although the expression had already been criticized in the Middle Ages, it was still in use in the 19th cent. Sporadically the expression is still used nowadays.

As Al-Askari mentions that Quss was the first to write *min Fulan ila Fulan*³⁵. The *min Fulan ila Fulan* formula (lit.: 'from Such and Such to Such and Such')

³⁰ D. FORSTNER, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej* [Polish translation of *Die Welt der christlichen Symbole*], Warszawa 1990, p. 417, 321.

³¹ Cf. W. KOPALIŃSKI, *Słownik symboli*, Warszawa 1991, p. 192; J.C. COOPER, *Lexikon alter Symbole*, Leipzig 1986, p. 181.

³² A few specific works in Arabic literature were devoted to the function of the stick, mostly by classical authors. The most famous of them is the chapter titled *Kitab al-asa* [Book of the Stick] in *Kitab al-Bayan wa-at-Tabyin* [The Book of Eloquence and Good Style] by AL-JAHIZ (d. 869). A similarly titled work was written by Usama Ibn Munqidh (d. 1188), and separate sections on the subject can be also found in subject dictionaries, by Ibn Sida (d. 1066), or Ath-Thalibi (d. 1038).

³³ AL-ASKARI, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

³⁴ AL-ASKARI, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

³⁵ AL-ASKARI, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

constitutes the most popular way of opening letters in the Arab-Muslim epistolary art³⁶. According to a tradition conveyed by the author of *Kitab al-awa'il*, it was Quss Ibn Sa'ida who first used this formula in a letter written to an unfortunately unknown addressee (as the record has it: *min Quss Ibn Sa'ida ila Fulan Ibn Fulan*). The formula, simple and comfortable, had already been used in the Antiquity and was also very popular in more modern times in the European culture. Its actual spread in the Arabic language opens with the rise of Islam, which is connected with the spread of the written language and the custom (or necessity) of correspondence. Along with the *amma bad* formula which followed it and an introduction in the form of *Basmala – bi-ismi Allahi ar-Rahman ar-Rahim* ('In the Name of God Most Gracious, Most Merciful') or any other expression of Islamic character, preceding it, the *min Fulan ila Fulan* phrase was used by famous personalities of the Islamic history. This tradition was sanctified by Prophet Muhammad's example. Abu Bakr al-Baqillani (d. 1012) in his *Ijaz al-Quran* [Miracles of the Quran] quotes other cases, i.e. the Prophet's letters to Persian emperor Khosrow (Ar. *Kisra*) and Abyssinian King Negus (Ar. *An-Najashi*) in which, however, the Prophet restricts himself to the formula *min Muhammad Rasul Allah ila Kisra Azim Farisa* ('from Muhammad the Prophet of God to Khosrow, the Great of Persia')³⁷.

In the case of the Arabic stories on *awa'il* we deal with a clear fusion of history and legend. It is also the case of Quss Ibn Sa'ida, who is traditionally perceived as a demigod, or a cultural hero and creator of certain important rules of life (mostly literary, but in this case also religious) as well as the author of a legal rule accepted also by the Islamic law³⁸ (not mentioned by Al-Askari). In this way he can be easily put into the frame of a "cultural hero" as depicted in cultural anthropology: a mythological personality who is treated as a giver and teacher of culture, situated between God's and men's world, between *sacrum* and *profanum*. His acts function as patterns accepted by this culture. The typical cultural hero is a man with extra-natural features, acting in mythological times and teaching people important skills, giving them customs and laws³⁹.

The *awa'il* phenomenon can be interpreted according to Mircea Eliade's methodology of the sacred time. In the context of *sacrum* acts, gestures and sayings, authored by ancestors more or less distant in time, become acts and gestures of archetypal character, placing man in the sacred time. At the same moment, this

³⁶ Cf. AL-QALQASHANDI, *Subh al-Asha fi Sina'at al-Insha* [The Dawn of the Blind. On the Writing], *op. cit.*, VI, p. 344 and *passim*.

³⁷ ABU BAKR AL-BAQILLANI, *Ijaz al-Quran*, ed. S.A. SAQR, Al-Qahira 1963, p. 134.

³⁸ Cf. AL-BAYHAQI, *op. cit.*, p. 397; M.M. DZIEKAN, *Searching...*, p. 24–25.

³⁹ D. PENKALA-GAWĘCKA, *Bohater kulturowy*, [in:] *Słownik etnologiczny. Terminy ogólne*, ed. Z. STASZCZAK, Warszawa–Poznań 1987, p. 53; cf. also: M. ZOWCZAK, *Bohater wsi – mit i stereotypy*, Wrocław 1991, *passim*.

time is the time of creation in the sense of the *in illo tempore*, when the world and the whole universe were set in order⁴⁰.

The concept of *awa'il* would thus constitute the realization of non-periodical repeating and the Muslim thought's inclination to ward the full hierophanization of time. This way the sacred time is not only a period of cyclically and regularly repeated religious rites, but also of non-cyclic activities of [seemingly] secular character. As M. Eliade puts it, one can always go fishing, hunting, etc., and imitate a mythical hero, personify him, reproduce mythical time, go out of the secular persistence, and repeat a mythical story. Every time can become a sacred time, of any moment the duration can be transformed into infinity⁴¹. Thus the pagan time of *Jahiliyya* becomes a time of culture heroes, a time of demiurges who shaped the way that was to be taken by the later Arabic culture, already marked with a stamp of its religion – Islam. So *Jahiliyya* could not be a time without religion, which, after all, does not necessarily imply a belief in God, gods or ghosts, but relates to the experience of *sacrum* and thus is connected with ideas of the existence, the meaning and the truth⁴². All this confirms Eliade's opinion that no religion is completely new, no religious message ruins the past completely; it is rather about reshaping, renewal, revalorization, integration of elements – these most important ones! – of the eternal religious tradition⁴³.

Hamilton A.R. Gibb noticed here a clear tendency:

the history of the Islamic Community is essentially the contribution of individual men and women to the building up and transmission of its specific culture; that is these persons (rather than the political governors) who represent or reflect the active forces in Muslim society in their respective spheres; and their individual contributions are worthy of being recorded for future generations.⁴⁴

Gibb's commentary relates to the biographical literature, but I think that it also fits perfectly the "pioneer" literature.

On the other hand, the will to justify certain Muslim rites with their historicity is connected, in my opinion, with the rule presented by Edward Shils, who says that these are particular ties with those, who preserved given traditions in the past⁴⁵ constituting a condition necessary for adopting and accepting

⁴⁰ M. ELIADE, *Traktat o historii religii* (Polish translation of *Traité d'histoire des religions*), Łódź 1993, p. 378–381; cf. also IDEM, *Mit wiecznego powrotu* (Polish translation of *Le mythe de l'éternel retour. Archétypes et répétition*) [in:] *Sacrum, mit, historia*, Warszawa 1998, p. 11sq.

⁴¹ M. ELIADE, *Traktat...*, p. 382.

⁴² IDEM, *Wstęp*, [in:] *Szamanizm i archaiczne techniki ekstazy* [Polish translation of *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*], Warszawa 1994, p. XIII.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

⁴⁴ H.A.R. GIBB, *Islamic Biographical Literature*, [in:] *Historians of the Middle East*, ed. B. LEWIS, P.M. HOLT, London 1962, p. 54.

⁴⁵ E. SHILS, *Tradycja* [Polish translation of *Tradition*, CSSH 13.2, 1971], [in:] *Tradycja i nowoczesność*, Warszawa 1984, p. 44; also cf. A.Я. ГУРЕВИЧ, *Эдда u каза*, Москва 1979, p. 98.

a tradition as one's own norm. This is not, however, the only explanation of this striking phenomenon. It may be that it is a Muslim version of a phenomenon noticed by Peter Gray in relation to the historiography of the European middle ages, directed at the central myth: the Incarnation of Christ⁴⁶. In the case of the cultural circle with which we are dealing here, the rise of Islam itself and descent of the *Quran* – the holy Word of God – may be considered to be the central myth, or as Clifford Geertz states, the central epiphany of Islam, comparable with Christ in the Christianity⁴⁷.

Referring to definite persons, authors, or the first executors of some certain acts, may still have another explanation in the Arabic culture. The transfer of information happened in this culture almost exclusively through personal contacts, as proved by the chains of authorities (*isnad*) that precede records on historical, religious and literary events, typical of the *sunna* (the Prophet's Tradition) and the Arab-Islamic historiography. This kind of transmission is characteristic for the "oral" cultures – and the Arabic culture preserved the signs of its oral character well into the later Middle Ages, if not until our days⁴⁸.

The position of Quss, a Christian, in the history of the Arab-Muslim culture is thus further confirmed by conferring upon him the priority in shaping the legal principle binding in the *sharia*. Quss is also said to have foretold the coming of 12 Imams (this story can be found particularly in Shi'ite sources), he was also an interpreter of dreams.

Further on, some of his characteristics became proverbial, for example: *ab-lagh min Quss* – 'more eloquent than Quss', or *adha min Quss* – 'more intelligent than Quss'. We also find such statements in many classical Arabic poetic and prose works⁴⁹. Additionally, the adjective *Qussi* was used in the sense 'great' in the title of the work of a historian Imad ad-Din al-Isfahani (d. 1200) *Al-Fath al-Qussi fi al-Fath al-Qudsi* ['Quss' great conquest, it is the conquest of Jerusalem', or, as H. Masse suggests, 'Qussian eloquence on the conquest of Jerusalem']⁵⁰ depicting the victory of Saladin over the Crusaders.

Georges Khoury seems to be right then, when he calls for the reevaluation of our knowledge concerning the pre-Islamic period in the history of the Arabs and for looking at it from another perspective, using the latest accomplishments of the humanities treated as a whole. This will surely lead to a wider understanding of certain phenomena, seemingly purely Islamic, which however, are naturally marked with the pagan *sacrum* of the *Jahiliyya*. The first time he wrote these words

⁴⁶ P. GRAY, *Historia historii*, „Dialogue USA” 1, 1973, p. 54.

⁴⁷ C. GEERTZ, *Wiedza lokalna* [Polish translation of *Local Knowledge*], Kraków 2005, p. 115–116.

⁴⁸ Cf. M.M. DZIEKAN, *Dzieje kultury arabskiej*, Warszawa 2008, p. 150–153.

⁴⁹ M.M. DZIEKAN, *Quss...*, pp. 40–48.

⁵⁰ H. MASSE, 'Imād al-Dīn Muhammad B. Muhammad al-Isfahānī, [in:] EI; I.D. AL-ISFAHANI, *Al-Fath al-Qussi fi al-Fath al-Qudsi*, s.l. 2004.

was about 20 years ago, and they are still up to date. Unfortunately, the current events in the Middle East prevail over the brilliant history and tradition of Arabic Culture.

Abstract. The article deals with the half-legendary Quss Ibn Sa'ida from an ancient North Arab tribe Iyad, who is believed to have been a bishop of the Yemeni city of Najran and a monk (anachorete). The sources from the Quranic and medieval Arab (Muslim) tradition are gathered and analysed to underline the vivid place that Quss had in later historiography and theological works, and his unique position, a Christian, in the history of the Arab-Muslim culture. The case of Quss is not without value as far as the problem of common historical memory is concerned.

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