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THE CHEW STICK OF THE PROPHET IN *SĪRA* AND *HADĪTH*¹

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A chew stick (Arabic *siwāk* or *miswāk*) is a twig, mostly of the *arāk* tree (*Salvadora persica*). The end is chewed until it is fibrous and it is moved to and fro in the mouth to clean the teeth and strengthen the gums. The twig can be green and succulent, or dried.

This article is about the chew stick as a motif,² whose development will be followed in one *sīra* text and a number of *hadīths*. I have placed the texts loosely in what I think is the chronological order, on the basis of their contents. Admittedly, the arrangement is impressionistic, but a better result may never be possible.

1. THE CHEW STICK IN THE *SĪRA* (‘BIOGRAPHY OF THE PROPHET’)

The earliest Islamic text in which the chew stick occurs is the narrative about the deathbed of the Prophet, in the *sīra* of Ibn Ishāq (d. 767):

Tl Ya‘qūb b. ‘Utba, from al-Zuhrī, from ‘Urwa: ‘Ā’isha said, The apostle came back to me from the mosque that day and lay in my bosom. A man of Abū Bakr’s family came in to me with a chew stick in his hand and the apostle looked at it in such a way that I knew he wanted it, and when I asked him if he wanted me to give it to him he said Yes; so I took it and chewed it for him to soften it and gave it to him. He rubbed his teeth with it more energetically than I had ever seen him rub before; then he laid it down. I found him heavy in my bosom and as I looked into his face, lo his eyes were fixed and he was saying: ‘No, rather *the

¹ This paper was presented at the 23th UEAI-conference in Sassari, Sept. 27th–Oct. 1st, 2006.

² See on its medical aspects: G. Bos, ‘The *Miswāk*, an Aspect of Dental Care in Islam,’ *Medical History* 37 (1993), pp. 68–79; E. Wiedemann, ‘Über Charlatane unter den arabischen Zahnärzten und über die Wertschätzung des Zahnstochers bei den muslimischen Völkern,’ in idem, *Gesammelte Schriften zur arabisch-islamischen Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (Frankfurt, 1984), ii, pp. 764–9; idem, ‘Zur Zahnheilkunde bei den muslimischen Völkern,’ *ibid.*, 811; idem, ‘Über Zahnpflege bei den muslimischen Völkern,’ *ibid.*, 874–8.

highest companions (*al-rafiq al-a'lā*) in Paradise*.' I said, 'You were given the choice and you have chosen, by Him Who sent you with the truth!' And so the apostle was taken.³

What part does the chew stick play in this story? Did the narrator want to make the Prophet purify himself or at least freshen up in view of his meeting with the high companions in paradise? That seems unlikely.

Or did the narrator intend to present the Prophet as establishing a *sunna*? At first sight, that may seem somewhat more feasible. The later a *sunna* is placed in the Prophet's life, the smaller the chance that it could be changed or abolished. Therefore we see *sunnas* established during the conquest of Mekka and the farewell pilgrimage; and why not also during the final illness and on the Prophet's deathbed? An example is the protest by the Prophet on his deathbed against *ladd*, the forced administration of a medicine through the mouth corners of a sleeping or unconscious patient. Indeed this became the precedent for a ban.⁴

But if our text had intended to establish a *sunna*, of what kind would it be? The use of the chew stick was so widespread, that Arabs hardly needed a prophetic example for it. It was a pre-Islamic habit and indeed non-Muslim pastoral peoples of Eastern Africa use such twigs for cleaning their teeth until today. If non-Arab Muslims, e.g. Persians, had other habits of dental care, they may have needed encouragement to clean their mouth the Arab way, or with a twig of that specific plant, but our text does not look like establishing any *sunna* at all. There is no obvious intention. Neither legal nor pious interest in purity are present here, and how and when to apply the *siwāk* is neither discussed nor demonstrated. Moreover, it would have been tactless to stress the importance of that little twig against the setting of the very last moments of the prophet.

³ *Das Leben Muhammeds nach Muhammed ibn Ishāq* [...], bearbeitet von 'Abd el-Malik ibn Hishām [...], ed. F. Wüstenfeld, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 1858–60; henceforth Ibn Ishāq), p. 1011. The translation is that of A. Guillaume (*The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ishāq's* [sic!] *Sirat Rasūl Allāh* [Oxford, 1955]). Asterisks mark my own modifications. Guillaume translated as follows: 'Nay, the most Exalted Companion is of paradise'. Given the capitals, he had God in view. But who would ever refer to God as a companion? It may be better to take *rafiq* as a plural, and think of the company that is meant in Qur'ān 4:69: 'the company of those whom God has favoured: the prophets, the veracious, the witnesses and the righteous people. What excellent companions (*rafiq*) they are!' Furthermore, I do not read the phrase as a nominal sentence, as Guillaume does, but as the object to a presupposed 'I have not chosen this world, but rather...'. On the choice that prophets have when they are about to die cf. Ibn Ishāq, p. 1006.

⁴ Ibn Ishāq, p. 1007, and see A.J. Wensinck et al., *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane*, 8 vols. (Leiden, 1936–88) s.v. *ladd*.

The deathbed story as a whole may have the underlying intention to enhance the status of Abū Bakr's family. According to one well-known *sīra* narrative, Abū Bakr himself had put up a poor show during the Prophet's final illness, since at the crucial moment he was having some quality time with his wife in al-Sunḥ, at the outskirts of Medina.⁵ In the *sīra*, it is always important which companions are present or absent during important events, and what part they play.⁶

In the deathbed narrative, the prophet's intimacy with ʿĀ'isha may be emphasised to compensate for Abū Bakr's absence. The prophet did not only die on her lap after she had nursed him; she also pre-chewed the chew stick for him. ʿĀ'isha was his favourite wife, but she was also the daughter of Abū Bakr. The person who carried the chew stick was a relative of hers. He serves to underline once more the presence of Abū Bakr's family in the Prophet's final hour. The message seems to be that even though Abū Bakr was absent, his relatives were there.

Yet the main *raison d'être* of the chew stick motif in Ibn Ishāq's *sīra* seems to be of a purely narrative nature. It is a universal topos in deathbed stories to recall what the deceased did just before he died, so as to emphasise the liveliness he had shortly before. We may recount such stories ourselves, after a relative died. The deceased was still so much alive: he or she asked about the garden, or showed an interest in today's newspaper, and as a contrast, one hour later that lively person was dead. In the case of Muḥammad, the sign of liveliness was that he was still interested in dental hygiene, as on a normal day.

2. FROM *SĪRA* TO *HADĪTH*

The above *sīra* narrative was saved into some *ḥadīth* collections. That was not a great step, for Ibn Ishāq's story has a chain of transmitters and therefore was already a *ḥadīth*. But it did mean an upgrade. *Qisṣa*

⁵ Ibn Ishāq, p. 1010.

⁶ In a widespread story about the *hijra*, e.g. (Ibn Ishāq, pp. 323, 327–9; al-Ṭabarī, [*Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l mulūk* =] *Annales*, ed. M.J. de Goeje et al., 15 vols. (Leiden, 1879–1901), i, pp. 1237–40), Abū Bakr is the travelling companion of the Prophet, a motif suggested by Qur'ān 9:40. No less than three of his children are emphatically present and undertake creditable tasks in connection with the *hijra*, whereas ʿAlī stays behind and plays a subordinate part. This version contrasts with a story in which Abū Bakr is nearly absent, or present in a bothersome way, whereas ʿAlī carries off the palm (R.G. Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, 1. *The Heidelberg Papyrus PSR Heid Arab 23* [Wiesbaden, 1972], pp. 140–42).

and *sīra* represent early types of Muslim scholarship, which in the Islam of the *‘ulamā’* have a lower status than *ḥadīth*.

Ḥadīth scholars of course were above all interested in transferring legal materials from the *sīra* to *ḥadīth*, but took over narratives as well, when they contained an ethical lesson or a behavioural example, or were simply dear to them. Among these was also the deathbed story.

In the standard *ḥadīth* collections,⁷ the deathbed story is found in various versions. I quote only the relevant parts.

T2 is virtually identical with T1; it has the same chronological framework and the same *isnād*. (AbH vi, 274)

T3 ‘Ā’isha said, When the Prophet died, he was leaning his back against me. Then ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr entered with a chew stick in his hand. The Prophet called for it (*da‘ā bi*). I took it, prepared it and handed it over to him, and he began to rub his teeth with it. Then his hand became heavy, and he became heavy on me, while he said, ‘Oh God, the highest companions,’ twice. Then he passed away. ‘Ā’isha said, The Prophet passed away on my lap. (AbH vi, 200/25698)

‘Ā’isha’s relative is called by name here: it is her brother. The Prophet is a bit livelier, for it is he who takes the initiative and calls for (*da‘ā bi*) the stick. But his collapse is more dramatic as well; he dies during the very use of it. The main intention of this version seems to be the telling of an endearing story with some drama; secondly, there is a definite emphasis on the family of Abū Bakr.

T4 ‘Ā’isha: The Prophet died in my house, on my day, and in my lap. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr entered with a succulent chew stick in his hand. The Prophet looked at it, and I thought he might want it. So I took it and chewed it, shook it out and chewed it for him, prepared it and handed it over to him. He rubbed his teeth with it better than I had ever seen him rub before; then he held it up to me, but it fell out of his hand. I began to pray to God for him with the prayer that Gabriel used to say (*da‘ā li bi*), for so he prayed when he was ill, but he did not do so during this illness. He raised his eyes to heaven and said, ‘The highest companions, the highest companions,’ and passed away. Praise be to God, who mixed my saliva with his in the last of his days in this world! (AbH vi, 48/24271)

⁷ The nine works which are dealt with in Wensinck, *Concordance*, i.e. the *Ṣaḥīḥs* by al-Bukhārī and Muslim and the *Sunan* works, which together are known as ‘the six books’, plus three more, among which Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s *Musnad*. I quote these works according to the system and the abbreviations in A.J. Wensinck, *A Handbook of Early Muhammadan Tradition* (Leiden, 1927), p. xvii. In some cases, I added *ḥadīth* numbers from modern editions.

In T4, the stick is called ‘succulent’: a slight contamination from a legal *ḥadīth*, on which see T10 below. The story is somewhat dramatised. The word *da‘ā* was given an extra preposition and generated a new motif: that of the prayer. ‘Ā’isha’s prayer is not enough to prevent the Prophet’s decease; Gabriel’s not praying for him this time may serve to explain that the Prophet had to die at all, which certain believers found difficult to accept.⁸ ‘Ā’isha’s preparation of the chew stick is expanded upon. The mixing of her saliva with his emphasises her intimacy with the Prophet, as does the first sentence as well.

T5 ‘Ā’isha said, The Prophet passed away in my house, on my day, and in my lap. One of us [women] used to pronounce incantations over him with a prayer (*tu‘awwidhuhu bi-du‘ā*) when he was ill. So I was about to do that, but then he raised his head to heaven and said, ‘Among the highest companions, among the highest companions.’ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr passed by with a succulent piece of palm branch in his hand. The Prophet looked at it and I thought he might want it. So I took it and chewed the end of it, shook it out and handed it over to him. He rubbed his teeth with it better than I had ever seen him rub before. Then he wanted to give it to me, but his hand fell (or: it fell out of his hand). God mixed my saliva with his on the last of his days in this world and the first in the later world. (Bu 64, 83w)

T5 is an offspring of T4. The prayer has become an incantation here and the arrangement is slightly different. ‘Ā’isha’s initiatives are even more numerous than in T4. Al-Bukhārī included this text in a chapter on ‘The illness and death of the Prophet’ and seems to have seen no legal or behavioural tenor in it.

T6 ‘Ā’isha said, The Prophet died in my house when it was my turn, and in my lap. God mixed my saliva with his. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr entered with a chew stick. The Prophet was too weak to use it, so I took it, chewed it and rubbed his teeth with it.⁹

T6 is very short and not at all keen on story-telling. The Prophet is very weak and ‘Ā’isha does virtually everything, but that is not what matters here. The motif has been processed for the *sharī‘a*. The Muslim practice, also in our days, of helping children and old and sick people with the *siwāk* in this way has its explicit precedent here.

⁸ Notably ‘Umar; Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, p. 1012.

⁹ Bu 57, 4b, in the chapter: ‘About the houses of the wives of the Prophet’.

T7 ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr entered with a *siwāk*, rubbing his teeth with it. The Prophet looked at him and I said, ‘Give me that *siwāk*, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān!’ So he gave it to me and I gnawed and chewed it and I gave it to the Prophet, and he rubbed his teeth with it, leaning against my bosom. (Bu 11, 9)

The last Tradition also modifies a part of the original story for a legal purpose. The broader context has been left out. This time ‘Abd al-Raḥmān has the *siwāk* not in his hand, but in his mouth, and ‘Ā’isha took it into her mouth after that. A *sīra* fragment was adapted to fit a legal question: is it permitted to use someone else’s chew stick? At least this is what al-Bukhārī found important, for he presented this *ḥadīth* under the chapter heading, ‘Using someone else’s *siwāk*’. T4 and T5 already spoke of ‘mixing the saliva’, but had no legal focus yet.

The notion that the Prophet’s *siwāk* was prepared for him also found its way into another Tradition, which has no connection with the deathbed scene:

T8 When the Prophet wanted to use the *siwāk*, he gave it to me, so that I could wash it; then I used it myself first, then I washed it and handed it to him. (AD 1, 28)

The matter of sharing or passing on a *siwāk* had already been dealt with in an older legal Tradition:

T9 The Prophet once used a *siwāk*, while two men were with him. Then he was inspired (*ūhiya ilayhi*) to pass it on to the elder of them, and so he did.¹⁰

3. A LEGAL DISCUSSION: THE USE OF THE CHEW STICK WHILE FASTING

Two relatively early *ḥadīth* collections contain a number of *ḥadīths* and reports that bear witness to an early legal discussion about the chew stick: the *Muṣannaḥ* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq ibn Hammām al-Ṣan‘ānī (126–211/724–827) and that of Ibn Abī Shayba (159–235/775–849). These texts are unaware of the small detail from the deathbed scene. They simply take the *siwāk* for granted and concentrate on the question, whether and how it should be applied during the fast.

¹⁰ AR x, 19603, cf. Mu 42, 19; Mu 53, 70 ‘...in a dream’; AD 1, 27/50 (mentions it as a specialty of the Medinese).

One may assume that the early Muslims used the chew stick naively, also during Ramaḍān. Then some legal scholars developed scruples, in practice or only in theory: is the use of the *siwāk* a breaking of the fast or not?

I have not found texts that forbid the use of the chew stick in Ramaḍān in general terms, but a number of Traditions focus on the saliva that is produced in the mouth. Does swallowing that saliva amount to ‘drinking’, which is forbidden during the fast? One can imagine three types of qualms. Chewing the *siwāk* stimulates the production of saliva; a succulent twig may bring its own humidity into the mouth; and when the twig is soaked in water there is even more external liquid. Reasons enough for the pious to invoke the sayings and examples of previous authorities, who insisted on a dry *siwāk*, i. e. a withered twig that was not soaked in water to soften it.

T10 Al-Ḥakam¹¹ considered a succulent *siwāk* for a fasting person reprehensible.

T11 Ziyād ibn Ḥudayr al-Asadī said, ‘I never saw a man who was more assiduous with the *siwāk* than ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb while he was fasting, but it was a withered piece of wood,’ i.e. dry. (AR iv, 7485)

T12 Abū Hurayra said, ‘I made my mouth bleed twice today with a *siwāk* while I was fasting.’¹²

Others thought of the few nutrients present in the twig:

T13 Qatāda [b. Di‘āma; 66–117/680–735; *EI*²] considered it reprehensible for a fasting person to use a succulent [piece of] palm branch as a *siwāk*, because it counts as eating food (*ṭa‘m*). (AR iv, 7494)

T14 ‘Amr ibn Shuraḥbīl [Abū Maysara] said, Do not use a succulent *siwāk* while you are fasting, for something of its food may enter your throat.’ (AR iv, 7493)

T15 Al-Ḍaḥḥāk [b. Muzāḥim; gest. c. 106/724; TT iv, 453/784] considered it reprehensible. He said, It is sweet and bitter.¹³

¹¹ Al-Ḥakam b. ‘Abdallāh, Successor, TT ii, 428/748, IAS xxx, 37/5, and ‘Amr b. Shuraḥbīl Abū Maysara, d. c. 66/685; TT viii, 47/78; IAS xxx, 37/6.

¹² AR iv, 7486. This implies a dry *siwāk*, for a succulent, pre-chewed or well-soaked *siwāk* would not have caused bleeding. ‘Twice’ no doubt refers to the beginning and the end of the day; see below, T39.

¹³ IAS xxx, 37, 4. ‘Sweet and bitter’ sounds like a circumscription of *ṭa‘m* in the sense of ‘taste, flavour’; cf. Lane, *Lexicon* p. 1854a.

So at least two legal scholars, living around 700, and perhaps some Successors and Companions were against succulent *siwāks* during the fast. Others reacted by explicitly permitting or even recommending it:

T16–T19 Ibrāhīm [al-Nakha‘ī] said, There is no harm in the [use of the] *siwāk* for a fasting person.¹⁴

T20 Ziyād ibn Jarīr said, I never saw a man who was more assiduous with the *siwāk* than ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb while he was fasting. (IAS xxx, 35/3, 4)

T21 Khabīsha said, I came to ‘Ā’isha and asked her about the [use of the] *siwāk* for a fasting person. She said, This is my chew stick; I have it [always] at hand while I am fasting. (IAS xxx, 35/5)

T22 [‘Abdallāh] ibn ‘Abbās [3BH–68/619–687; *ET*²] was asked after about the *siwāk* for a fasting person. He said, Purity is good, use the *siwāk* in any case. (IAS xxx, 35/6)

In these texts, the nature or the *siwāk* is not specified (dry or wet). But saying, ‘there is no harm in...’ as well as the ostentatious behaviour ascribed to Companions of the Prophet imply an opposition against the older opinion that there *is* harm.

A text that tries to play down the problem of nutrients in the chew stick:

T23 A man came to [Muḥammad] b. Sīrīn [TT ix, 214/336; 33–110/653–728] and asked, What about the *siwāk* for a fasting person? He answered, There is no harm in it. Then [that man] said: [But] it is a palm branch that contains food (*ṭa‘m*)! [Ibn Sīrīn] said, The water [in your mouth] has a taste (*ṭa‘m*) while you rinse.¹⁵

3.1. *Dry or wet chew sticks during the fast*

Other texts explicitly approve of a *succulent* chew stick during the fast.

T24–T32 ‘Aṭā’ [b. abī Rabāh; d. 114/732; *ET*²] said, There is no harm in using a succulent (or: green) *siwāk* for a fasting person.¹⁶

¹⁴ IAS xxx, 36/1. Sa‘īd ibn al-Musayyab (IAS xxx, 36/8) and Sālim [b. ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Umar] (IAS xxx, 36/2) and ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Umar (IAS xxx, 35/2) similarly.

¹⁵ IAS xxx, 37/1. If I understand the text properly, there is a play on the two meanings of *ṭa‘m*, cf. note 13.

¹⁶ Mujāhid, ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Abbās, al-Ḥasan [al-Baṣrī], Ibrāhīm [b. Yazīd al-Nakha‘ī], ‘Urwa [ibn al-Zubayr] and [Sufyān] al-Thawrī similarly (AR iv, pp. 7491, 7492, 7497; IAS xxx, 36/9–13; 37/2).

One might not go so far as moistening one's chew stick with water from outside:

T33 Al-Sha'bī[¹⁷, 'Āmir b. Sharāhīl, c. 40–105/660–725; *EF*²] used the *siwāk* without moistening it. (IAS xxx, 37/8)

But 'Aṭā' did moisten it:

T34 'Aṭā' moistened it when it was dry. (IAS xxx, 37/7)

'Aṭā' did not only approve of a succulent or wet *siwāk* during the fast, he even forbade dry ones:

T35 Ibn Jurayj [80–150/699–767; *EF Suppl.*] asked 'Aṭā', What sort of *siwāk* is forbidden?

- 'When the *siwāk* is dry and no water comes from it.'
- 'What is the so-called water of the chew stick [*mā' al-siwāk*]?'
- 'The saliva that comes onto it from the head and the mouth.'
- 'So when the *siwāk* is dry and has no juice (*uṣāra*) [it is forbidden]?'
- 'Yes.'¹⁷

But why would 'Aṭā' forbid dry *siwāks*? Possibly since they make the gums bleed, as in T12, and/or because he was against bigotry and zealotry. But maybe 'Aṭā' was not quite so relaxed about this subject matter after all, as a somewhat peculiar text shows:

T36 Ibn Jurayj asked 'Aṭā', May a person who is fasting use a *siwāk*?

- 'Yes.'
 - 'And may he swallow his saliva? And when he does so, does he break his fast then?'
 - 'No, but it is forbidden to do so.'
 - 'And when he swallows it after he was informed that it is forbidden?'
 - 'Then he has broken his fast.'
- 'Aṭā' said this more than once. (AR iv, p. 7487)

The consequence of 'Aṭā's' opinions would be that one may use a succulent or even wet *siwāk* during the fast, but has to spit out the saliva caused by it.

¹⁷ AR iv, p. 7490. Fasting is not mentioned in this text, but it is in the chapter heading and the surrounding Traditions. Moreover, the text makes sense only in a context of fasting.

The following text sounds a bit tired of the whole issue:

T37 Al-Shaʿbī said, There is no harm in the use of a succulent or a dry *siwāk* for a fasting person. (IAS xxx, 37/3)

3.2. *The chew stick allowed once or twice a day during the fast*

People who wanted to make the prohibition less severe or—depending on the starting point—wanted to limit the general permission, discussed the possibility of using it at least twice a day during the fast:

T38 ʿUrwa [b. al-Zubayr, 23–93/643–712; *EI*²] used the *siwāk* twice a day: in the early morning and in the late afternoon. (IAS xxx, 35/7)

T39 Abū Hurayra was asked about the *siwāk* for a fasting person. He said, I threw it into my mouth twice today. (IAS xxx, 36/6)

Some said, Not at the end of the day:

T40–T42 Mujāhid [b. Jabr al-Makkī, c. 21–102/642–720; *EI*²]...¹⁸ considered the use of the *siwāk* at the end of the day reprehensible for a fasting person.

This is probably because using a *siwāk* shortly before the evening indicates a lack of stamina. But other reasons came up as well:

T43 ʿAṭāʾ... answered, To God, the breath of a fasting person is more fragrant than musk. (IAS xxx, 35/8)

T44 Al-Hakam [b. ʿAbdallāh]... considered it reprehensible at the end of [the day], because he considered it desirable that the smell of his breath returned into his stomach. (IAS xxx, 36/7)

Others had definitely nothing against it:

T45 Sālim [b. ʿAbdallāh b. ʿUmar (?)] saw no harm in a *siwāk* for a fasting person when the sun faded. (IAS xxx, 36/3; cf. 36/2)

T46 Ḥasan [al-Baṣrī, 21–110/642–728; *EI*²] said, ‘There is no harm in it at the end of the day; it is a thing that cleans, so let one use it at the beginning and the end of the day.’ (AR iv, 7489)

T47 Ibrāhīm [b. Yazīd al-Nakhaʿī, 50–96/670–715; TT i, 177/325] found no harm for a fasting person in using the *siwāk* at the beginning of the day and at the end of it. (AR iv, 7496)

¹⁸ Maymūn ibn Mihrān (d. c. 735) and Muḥammad [b. Sīrīn] similarly (AR iv, 7495; IAS xxx, 35/9, 36/4).

And others wanted to widen the permission, or were just tired of the fuss about this mini-problem:

T48 [‘Abdallāh] b. ‘Umar used the *siwāk* while fasting when he went to the midday *ṣalāt*. (AR iv, 7488; IAS xxx, 35/10)

T49 ‘Āmir [b. Sharāḥīl al-Sha‘bī] said, A fasting person may use the *siwāk* at any time of the day he wants. (IAS xxx, 36/5)

Finally the Prophet is invoked for a laid-back attitude:

T50 ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Amir ibn Rab‘īa from his father, I saw the Prophet using a *siwāk* while he was fasting (var.: innumerable times). (AR iv, 7484; IAS xxx, 35/1)

This is the only prophetic Tradition on the chew stick during the fast in the *Muṣannafs* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq and Ibn Abī Shayba. It is also the only one that survived in the standard collections.¹⁹ The discussion with all its ramifications apparently had come to an early end, and only a broad prophetic *sunna* remained.

In what follows, I arrange the other Traditions and reports about the chew stick by subject matter, without any claim to completeness.²⁰ Some motifs already occurred in the earlier collections.

4. PRAISE OF THE CHEW STICK

T51 ‘Ubayd ibn ‘Umayr said, The *siwāk* gives the mouth a sweet smell and satisfies the Lord. (AR x, 19603)

T52 ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib said, Your mouths are roads for the Qurā’n, so make them smell good with the chew stick. (IM 1, 7/291)

T53 The Prophet said, Apply the *siwāk*, for it gives the mouth a sweet smell and satisfies the Lord. (AbH ii, 108)

T54 The Prophet said, The *siwāk* cleans the mouth and satisfies the Lord.²¹

¹⁹ Bu 30, 27; AD 14, 26. I start from the assumption that prophetic Traditions tend to be younger than such as go back to a Companion or a legal scholar of the 8th century (cf. J. Schacht, *Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* [Oxford, 1950], e.g. p. 5; G.H.A. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition. Studies in Chronology, Provenance and Authorship of Early Hadīth* [Cambridge, 1983], *Index s.v. isnād*).

²⁰ I left out, for instance, all *hadīths* that have multiple topics.

²¹ IAS i, 169/10; Bu 30, 27; Nas 1, 5; Dā 1, 19; AbH i, 3, 10; vi, 47, 62, 124, 146, 238.

T55 Al-Shaʿbī said, The *siwāk* cleans the mouth and clears the eyes. (IAS i, 169/15, 171/27)

4.1. *The sunnas of the prophets, the fiṭra*

T56 The Prophet said, Four things belong to the *sunnas* of the prophets: perfuming oneself, marrying, the use of the chew stick and henna.²²

T57 The Prophet found Jibrīl slow, but [the latter] said, How can [a revelation] come to you [plur.], while you do not cut your nails, do not clean your knuckles and do not apply the chew stick?²³

T58 Ten things belong to the *fiṭra*: ... the chew stick ...²⁴

5. STRICT OR MODERATE RULES?

As we saw in the texts about the fast, some Muslims used the chew stick with a vengeance. This also becomes manifest where the fast context is lacking. A Successor, a Companion and the Prophet himself serve as examples for such behaviour.

T59 Al-Ḥakam [b. ʿAbdallāh] said, I stayed with Mujāhid and he used the *siwāk* assiduously. (IAS i, 170/19)

T60 Jābir ibn ʿAbdallāh [d. 78/697; *EP* Suppl.] used the *siwāk* when he went to bed, when he got up during the night and when he went to the morning prayer. I said to him, You bother yourself a lot with that *siwāk*. He answered, Usāma reported to me that the Prophet used to do it like this. (IAS i, 169/6)

T61 The chew stick had abraded the gums of the Prophet. (Ibn Saʿd i, 169)

Of course the zealots knew that there was neither a qurʾānic verse nor an explicit prophetic command about the chew stick. The best they could do was to suggest that there had *nearly* been a revelation about it.

T62 [ʿAbdallāh] b. ʿAbbās said, [The prophet] ordered us so continuously to use the chewing stick that we were afraid a revelation would be sent down on him about it. (IAS i, 169/11, 171/28; Ṭay 2739)

²² IAS i, 170/21, AbH v, 421 *bis*; Tir 9, 1.

²³ I.e., practise the *ādāb* given with the *fiṭra*. IAS, 171/24.

²⁴ AD I, 29 *bis*; Nas 48, 1 *ter*; AbH iv, 264; vi, 137, and many other such enumerations, which I left out of my corpus.

T63 From [ʿAbdallāh] b. ʿAbbās, The Prophet said, I was ordered [so often] to use the chewing stick that I thought a *qurʿān* or a revelation would be sent down on me. (AbH i, 337)

The second best was a near-command from the part of the Prophet:

T64 The prophet said, Were it not that I might overburden my community, I would order use of the chew stick.²⁵

T65 The prophet said, Were it not that I might overburden my community, I would order use of the chew stick at every *ṣalāt* (or: *wuḍūʿ*).²⁶

T65 may well have been at the centre of the zealots' attempts to enforce the *siwāk*; cf. the connection with *ṣalāt* below (T79).

The anti-zealot faction could use a description of the behaviour of the Prophet's wife Maymūna to explicitly unlink the *siwāk* from prayer and to promote a laid-back attitude in general,

T66 The *siwāk* of Maymūna bint al-Ḥārith, the wife of the Prophet, was left to soak in water. When work or prayer distracted her [she forgot about it]; otherwise she took it and used it. (IAS i, 170/20)

They more successfully mobilised a prophetic dictum—if I understand it correctly—to play down the importance of the whole subject:

T67 The prophet said, I bothered you (*akthartu ʿalaykum*) a lot about the *siwāk*.²⁷

6. USING THE CHEW STICK AT CERTAIN MOMENTS

The Companions of the Prophet walked around with a chew stick behind their ears, 'where a secretary has his pen' (T68).²⁸ This implies that it was always ready for use. ʿAbdallāh ibn ʿUmar is said to have used one at every meal (T69).²⁹ The Prophet was said to have ordered the use of the *siwāk* on Friday, among other measures of purity and

²⁵ IAS i, 169/13; AbH i, 80 *bis*; ii, 287 *bis*, 530–1; Bu 94, 9 *bis*; Mu 2, 42; Tir, 18 *bis*; Nas 1, 7.

²⁶ AR x, 19605; IAS i, 168/5, 170/16; Bu 2, 8a; 30, 27; Mu 2, 42; Nas 1, 7/287; Dā 1, 18c/686; Mā 2 115; AbH i, 214; ii, 399, 429, 460, 517; iii, 442; iv, 225; v, 410; vi, 80, 429.

²⁷ IAS i, 170/30; Bu 11, 8b; Nas 1, 6; Dā 1, 18a,b/684, 685; AbH iii, 143, 249.

²⁸ IAS i, 168/12, 171/29; AD 1, 25/48.

²⁹ IAS i, 170/23.

hygiene (T70).³⁰ He had one with him while traveling, among other items of toiletry (T71).³¹ A number of Traditions report the use the *siwāk* by the Prophet at various moments in the house of ‘Ā’isha. One may, but need not, think of the deathbed story (T1) here, for ‘Ā’isha is often the authority for intimate details in the Prophet’s life.

T72 ‘Ā’isha said, When the Prophet entered his house, the first thing he did was using the chew stick.³²

T73 When the Prophet woke up with his wife he called a slave girl named Barīra³³ to bring him a *siwāk*.

T74 ‘Ā’isha said, After every sleep, at night or during the day, the Prophet used the *siwāk* when he woke up. (AbH vi, 121)

T75 ‘Ā’isha said, After every sleep, at night or during the day, the Prophet used the *siwāk* when he woke up, before he performed the ablution. (IAS i, 169/9; AD 1, 30/57; AbH vi, 160)

6.1. Chew stick and prayer

The ablution mentioned in T75 links the *siwāk* with the *ṣalāt*, as some separate Traditions do as well. It may be applied before or afterwards.

T76 The Prophet said, A *ṣalāt* with *siwāk* is seventy times more excellent than one without. (AbH vi, 272)

T77 The Prophet used to perform two *rak‘as* and then use the *siwāk*. (IAS, 169/7)

T78 When the Prophet woke up after sleep at night or during the day he used (or: cleaned his mouth with) the *siwāk* before he performed the ablution.³⁴

The following Tradition presents the *siwāk* as an obligation at every *ṣalāt*, but one that is less burdensome than the ablution:

T79 [...] The Prophet had been ordered to perform the ablution at every *ṣalāt*, pure or not. When that was too burdensome for him, he was ordered to use the *siwāk* for every *ṣalāt* [...]. (AD 1, 25/48; Dā 1, 3b)

³⁰ AR iii, 5301, 5318; Mu 7, 7; Mā 2, 113.

³¹ Ibn Sa’d, [*K. al-Ṭabaqāt al kabīr*] *Biographien Muhammads, seiner Gefährten* [...], ed. E. Sachau, 9 vols. (Leiden, 1904–40), i, 170.

³² IAS i, 168/3; Mu 2:43, 44; AD 1, 27/51; Nas 1/8; IM 1, 7/290; AbH vi, 182, 188, 192.

³³ She was ‘Ā’isha’s slave girl. IAS i, 171/26.

³⁴ Ibn Sa’d i, 169; AD i, 30/57; AbH vi, 160.

6.2. *The chew stick at night*

Using the *siwāk* when getting up at night became one of the most discussed topics:

T80 [Abū Wā'il] Shaqīq said, We were ordered to clean our mouth when we rose at night. (Nas 20, 11b)

T81 When the Prophet rose at night he cleaned his mouth with the *siwāk*.³⁵

T82 The Prophet used the *siwāk* several times at night. (IAS i, 170/17)

But why would one get up at night if not to pray?

T83 'Alī said, When one of you rises at night, he should use the *siwāk*. For when a man rises at night, uses the *siwāk* and then performs the ablution and the *ṣalāt*, an angel comes and stands behind him, listening to the Qurā'n, and he comes closer and closer until his mouth is on that man's mouth, and he does not recite a verse that does not enter his belly. (IAS i, 170/18)

T84 'Ā'isha said, The *siwāk* and the water for the ablution were prepared for the Prophet; when he got up at night he went to the privy and then used the *siwāk*. (AD Ṭahāra 30/56)

T85 The Prophet used to perform at night twice two *rak'as*; then he went away and applied the *siwāk*. (IM 1, 7/288; AbH i, 218)

The nightly prayer may be specified as the *tahajjud*, a *ṣalāt* with an even number of *rak'as*,

T86 When the Prophet rose for the *tahajjud*, he cleaned his mouth with the *siwāk*.³⁶

Alternatively, it may be the *witr*, a *ṣalāt* with an odd number of *rak'as* (T87–T89),³⁷ or as a combination of *tahajjud* and *witr* (T90),³⁸ each with varying numbers of *rak'as*.

³⁵ IAS i, 169/8; Bu 4, 73b; Bu 11, 8; Bu 19, 9b; Mu 2:46b, 47; AD 1, 30/55; Nas 1, 2; Nas 20, 10; IM 1, 7; AbH v, 382, 397, 402, 407. AbH v, 402 adds as a variant: *li'l-tahajjud*, cf. T86.

³⁶ IAS i, 167/1, 168/2; Ṭay 409; Bu 19, 9b; Mu 2:9, 46a; IM 1, 7/286; Dā 1, 20; AbH v, 390. On this type of *ṣalāt*, see A.J. Wensinck, 'Tahadjjud,' in *EP*.

³⁷ Mu 6, 139; AD 1, 30/58; Nas 20, 43. On this type of *ṣalāt*, see A.J. Wensinck, 'Witr,' in *EP*.

³⁸ Mu 6:182, 183, 191; AbH vi, 123; cf. Mu 2, 48.

I refrain from presenting the Traditions that deal with the number of *rak'as* in the various *ṣalāts*, or how often the *siwāk* is used in between, or whether the *siwāk* should be used before or after going to the privy, etcetera. For the moment it may suffice to observe that the *siwāk* became linked to the nightly prayer and developed intricate sub-topics there.

7. HANDLING THE *SIWĀK*

As we have seen, a chew stick can be succulent or dried. It can be pre-chewed, moistened with water, prepared for someone else and shared with someone else. A number of texts give yet other details about handling the *siwāk*. When a man did not actually use the *siwāk*, he wore it behind his ears, as we saw in T68. When the Prophet used the *siwāk*, he placed the end of it on his tongue (T91)³⁹ and produced the sound *a' a'* (or *ih ih*), as if he were vomiting (T92).⁴⁰ Or he put it under his upper lip, when he interrupted his chewing on account of astonishment or anger (T93).⁴¹

8. FINAL REMARKS

Some readers may think, in the wording of T67, that they were 'bothered a lot about the chew stick'. Why look into such tedious texts about a tiny subject?

Both Muslims and non-Muslims always claim that *ḥadīth* is an extremely important genre, second only after the Qur'ān as a source of Islamic Law. Yet it is never studied systematically and in its entirety,⁴² and even decent editions are lacking. If *ḥadīth* is really so important, one should study it, and it is better to start with a small subject. The chew stick requires a monograph rather than an article; more sizeable topics would require volumes.

Apart from the difficulty of handling masses of texts in innumerable variants, every *ḥadīth* raises the following questions: What is it about?

³⁹ Mu 2, 45; AbH iv, 417.

⁴⁰ Bu 4, 73a; AD 1, 26 (*ih ih*); Nas 1, 3; Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, i, p. 170.

⁴¹ Mu 33, 15; Nas 1, 4.

⁴² This will change with the publication of G.H.A. Juynboll, *Encyclopedia of Canonical Ḥadīth* (Leiden, forthcoming).

where and in what time did it originate and who may held responsible for bringing it into circulation?⁴³

- What is a Tradition about? What does it want to convey? What part does it play in which discussion? Often enough it is not about what it seems to be about. It may contain a reaction to a contrary point of view, it may be an argument in a dispute, it may represent a phase in the growth of an opinion. Therefore it should not be isolated and then summarised under a simple heading, as Wensinck had done in his *Handbook* of 1927. It must be read within the context of *all* related Traditions. Hence a text corpus like that above is necessary.
- How can a Tradition be dated? One dating method is the Common Link Method. Invented by Schacht, developed by Juynboll, disputed but then taken over by several other scholars, this method now seems to be accepted among non-Muslim scholars.⁴⁴ It focuses on the youngest person in a series of transmitters that all *isnāds* of a given Tradition have in common. He is the common link, who is supposed to have proliferated the Tradition. The biographical lexicons will tell us *where* he did so, who he was and where his authorities came from.

However, this method can be applied only in selected cases. Three conditions must be fulfilled: the text must go back to the Prophet; it has to be transmitted with a number of *isnāds*; and these have to partially resemble each other. Only then a common link may become manifest. Of all the texts in our corpus, only four fulfil these criteria. This is not the place to draw *isnād*-trees; whoever may want to do so, may find the *isnāds* via the footnotes to the texts. Here I simply give my results.

- Out of the seven *isnāds* of T67 ('I bothered you a lot...'), six have the following part in common: 'Abd al-Wārith—Shu'ayb ibn Ḥabḥāb—Anas ibn Malik—Prophet. In this Baṣran *isnād*, 'Abd al-Wārith ibn Sa'īd (TT vi, 441/923; lived c. 102–180/720–796) is the common link.

⁴³ Most of these questions were formulated by Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Schacht, *Origins*, pp. 163–75; Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, pp. 206–17. The most encompassing description of the method will no doubt be found in Juynboll, *Encyclopedia*. The easiest introduction hitherto may be Juynboll, 'Ḥadīth and the Qur'ān,' in *EQ* ii, pp. 378–81. See also H. Motzki, 'Dating Muslim Traditions. A Survey,' *Arabica* 52 (2005), pp. 204–53.

- In five out of six *isnāds* of the Basran Tradition T91–T92 (about the Prophet wearing the *siwāk* on his tongue), Ḥammād ibn Zayd (TT iii, 9/14; 98–179/717–795) is the common link.
- T72⁴⁵ (‘When the Prophet entered his, or: ‘Ā’isha’s, house...’), has in all variants of its Kufan *isnād* the following transmitters in common: al-Miqdām—Shurayḥ—‘Ā’isha—Prophet. Al-Miqdām ibn Shurayḥ ibn Hānī’ al-Ḥārithī (TT x, 287/504, died *c.* 100/720) is the common link.
- Of T81 and T86 (about the *siwāk* while rising at night), the transmission is quite complicated. But all *isnāds* have in common: Abū Wā’il—Ḥudhayfa ibn al-Yamān—Prophet. The Kufan Successor Abū Wā’il Shaqīq ibn Salama (TT iv, 361/609; 1–82/622–701) seems to be the common link, then, and an unusually early one too.

It is good to have a few Traditions dated. Yet it is obvious that the Common Link Method is not of great help for understanding the rise and decline of our topic as a whole.

Just going through the texts with some common sense will at least provide an outline. The deathbed story in Ibn Ishāq’s *sīra* text (T1) is older than 150/767. Independent of that, the texts about the *siwāk* during the fast (T10–T50) came into being between the dates of the authorities quoted in them and the appearance of the *Muṣannafs* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq and Ibn Abī Shayba; say between 100–205/720–820. The ‘Strict or moderate rules’-discussion (T59–T67) was already there in those early days; it must have started as a branch of the ‘*siwāk*-and-fast’-topic. Witness the number of quotations in the standard collections, it gained momentum some decades later, and correspondingly the Prophet himself is the authority in the often quoted T64–65 and T67. One may date them roughly between 185–265/800 and 875. *Within* this group I would not yet venture any chronological arrangement.

Maybe the *siwāk* during the nocturnal *ṣalāt* is old, given that there is an early common link. But the intricate ramifications of this topic (T86–T90 and more!) seem to be very late. Of course studying the topic ‘Rising at night (for prayer)’ as a whole would help increase knowledge about the use of the *siwāk* before, during and after the night *ṣalāts*, to get a clearer picture of Abū Wā’il as a common link, and to understand

⁴⁵ In this case we can even link textual variants with transmitters in younger parts of the *isnāds* (‘partial common links’).

the Traditionist mind better. The question ‘strict or moderate?’ can no doubt be studied in connection with innumerable other subjects. And this goes for most topics: the associated fields have to be studied as well. Many such text corpora, then, will have to be gleaned together and impressionistic reading will remain indispensable for both understanding and dating *ḥadīth*.

Abbreviations (apart from those for the standard *ḥadīth* collections, on which see note 7):

AR = ‘Abd al-Razzāq ibn Hammām al-Ṣan‘ānī, *al-Muṣannaf*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A‘zamī, 11 vols. (Beirut, 1970–72).

IAS = ‘Abdallāh ibn Muḥammad ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Kitāb al-muṣannaf fī ‘l-aḥādīth wa‘l-āthār*, 15 vols. (Bombay, 1966–83).

TT = Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, 12 vols. (Hyderabad, 1325–27).