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طِبّ *tibb* ‘Medical Science’ and رَيْبٌ *tebbā* ‘Rumor’  
——A Hidden Arabic Parallel to Syriac——

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## طِبّ ṭibb ‘Medical Science’ and رُبَّة ṭebbā ‘Rumor’

### —A Hidden Arabic Parallel to Syriac—

TAKASHINA Yoshiyuki \*

#### 0. The Topic to be Discussed

In course of the preparation of a study on the Syriac Dālat (ܐ), most typically a relative pronoun, I looked into the development of ‘how’ and ‘like (preposition)’ in the Modern Aramaic dialects, a preliminary version of which was published as Takashina (2018). In the more detailed analysis, it turned out that another form māṭō ‘how’ is employed in several dialects<sup>1)</sup> not taken up in Takashina (2018). Concerning the etymology of this interrogative, it was Nöldeke (1868: 162) who first proposed its derivation from مآ + تَب mā + ṭeb, of which the latter element is the construct state of رُبَّة ṭebbā, and based on the various evidences<sup>2)</sup>, its phonetic development is now postulated thus: \*mā ṭeb > \*māṭeb > māṭiv > māṭiw > māṭū > māṭō.

Corresponding to Arabic مَا ‘what’, Syriac مآ mā is also an interrogative ‘what’. As to the semantic development of رُبَّة ṭebbā, Nöldeke (ibid.) explained thus: ‘rumor > news > state, condition’<sup>3)</sup>, while the signification in the dictionary<sup>4)</sup> is: 1) knowledge, acquaintance; 2) report, rumor; 3) story.

Now there are two points in this brief remark. First, to confirm why the dictionary listed ‘story’ as its signification by checking the evidence in it, because the meaning sounds very adhoc. Second, to look for a similar usage in the Arabic cognate طِبّ ṭibb which usually means ‘medical treatment, medical science’ (Hans Wehr, p. 643b).

#### 1. رُبَّة ṭebbā ‘Story’

Now رُبَّة ṭebbā ‘story’ in the Syriac literature is checked. The specimen given for ‘story’

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1) Aradhin (Christian, ma:ṭu; Krotkoff, pp. 49 and 136), located relatively near Zaxo; Koy Sanjaq (Jewish, máto; Mutzafi, pp. 173 and 231b) in a distance near Arbil; Persian Azerbaijan (Jewish, máto; Garbell, pp. 80, 319a); Barwar (Christian, maṭo and dax; Khan, 2008a, pp. 431, 1331); Urmi (Jewish, mato; Khan, 2008b, pp. 191, 547); Zaxo (Jewish, māṭō; Polotsky, p. 109a). Concerning the relation of *dix* or *dax* (Takashina, 2018) and māṭō in Zaxo, see the paragraphs J2 and J3 in *Excursus J* in Takashina (forthcoming).

2) See the paragraph J3 in *Excursus J* in Takashina (forthcoming) for more details.

3) In Nöldeke’s words, ‘Gerücht, Kunde, dann Lage’.

4) Sokoloff, 2009, p. 508a.

in the dictionary edited by Sokoloff is: ܡܕܒܗ ܕܥܡ ܕܥܡ “how was its ʿtebbā<sup>5</sup>)?” (KwDW 235:2). The work is a (new) translation<sup>6)</sup> (10-11 C) of *Kalīla and Dimna* from the famous Arabic text of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (8 C). The original Arabic phrase for this Syriac is وَكَيْفَ كَانَ ذَلِكَ “how was that?” (ʿAzzām, p. 212 = Cheikho, p. 162), which is often used to prompt the storyteller to begin a new story. But it is evident that the Syriac phrase is not such a faithful translation as one would expect, but that a natural and idiomatic phrase in Syriac is employed. What follows is the result of the comparison about characteristic correspondences.

- 1) For the first case (KwDW 7:22 = ʿAzzām, p. 84), the Syriac text is much the same as above<sup>7)</sup>: ܡܕܒܗ ܕܥܡ ܕܥܡ “and how was its ʿtebbā?”
- 2) For the second (30:1 = p. 94): ܡܕܒܗ ܕܥܡ ܕܥܡ “how was its story?”
- 3) After this, ܡܕܒܗ ܕܥܡ ܕܥܡ “how was its ʿtebbā?” is used (40:5 = p. 99; 43:38 = p. 102; 223:10 = p. 204; 227:20 = p. 206, etc.).
- 4) Another case to be noticed: ܡܕܒܗ ܕܥܡ ܕܥܡ “what was its ʿtebbā?” for the Arabic phrase كَيْفَ كَانَ مَثَلُهُمْ “how was their example?” (50:4 = p. 105).

Seeing that ܡܕܒܗ parallels ذَلِكَ ‘that’ for the most part, except 1) and 2), it will be safe to say that the Syriac ܡܕܒܗ was not employed in so explicit a sense as ‘story’. Rather the context requires a relatively broad and vague nuance. Hence comes a new interpretation for the phrase ܡܕܒܗ ʿtebbā ‘state of things’: ܡܕܒܗ ܕܥܡ ܕܥܡ “how was its state of things?”

The Christian monk who translated the Arabic masterpiece into Syriac could breathe two literary atmospheres by then (10-11 C), though such a late work cannot claim to be an authentic Syriac literary output. However, his collocation can suggest us a subtle nuance of ܡܕܒܗ ʿtebbā in his days, nonetheless.

## 2. Arabic طِبُّ ʿṭibb ‘State of Things or Usual Way’

This semantic development in Syriac suggested to me checking if Arabic had something common with this Aramaic ʿtebbā. But the Arabic word that appears to be cognate in the phonetic form, i.e. طِبُّ ʿṭibb, has a quite different signification ‘medical science or treatment’. Nevertheless, it reminded me of another cognate in Arabic employed in a famous Muʿallaqa by ʿAntara bn Šaddād. Namely, طِبُّ ʿṭibb ‘skillful in’.

إِنْ تُعْذِرِي دُونِي الْقِنَاعَ فَإِنِّي طِبُّ بِأَخْذِ الْفَارِسِ الْمُسْتَلِمِ (line 35 of, Lyall, p. 98)

“Even if you (f., sg.) should lower your veil before me, I am skilled to seize the well-armoured knight (cf. Arberry, p. 181)”

5) The spelling ܡܕܒܗ in ܡܕܒܗ is a favorite variant spelling for ܡܕܒܗ in the very late period of Syriac.

6) The older translation of ‘Kalīlag and Damnaḡ’ is quite another work, which was translated directly from Pahlavi like the Arabic work by Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ. Since sentences are quite different from the new translation, we cannot call it into our present discussion.

7) The difference lies only in the choice of an adverb variant. Hence it is virtually the same as 3) below.

It was not long before I learned that طِبّ had a similar usage in the earlier period of Arabic history, since lexicons list for طِبّ: ‘state, condition, case; custom, habit, wont’ and ‘inclination: natural disposition or condition’<sup>8)</sup>. It will be logical to group these all thus: ‘state of things, natural disposition, usual way’. To be sure, the word has various usages that developed into the current ‘medical science’, but at the same time, it is certain that this alone is out of place among all the other significations of طِبّ.

As is often the case, Arab dictionaries copy the same examples. Only two examples are found and they are quoted here from Lane’s lexicon.

- a) مَا ذَاكَ بِطِبِّي “that is not my usual way” (p. 1820c)<sup>9)</sup>
- b) وَمَا إِنِّ طِبُّنَا جُبُنَّ \* مَنَايَا وَدَوْلَةُ آخِرِينَا “and our usual wont is not cowardice<sup>10)</sup>; but our destinies and the good fortune of others [caused our being defeated]” (p. 107c; part of a poem).

Due to the very rare usage, it was by no means an easy task to locate, in literary works, other passages which employ this word in the similar sense, but fortunately I can add two more from Kitāb al-ʿAġānī ‘The Book of Songs’ by ʿAbū al-Faraġ al-ʿIṣḥāq (died 967). Both are from poems.

- c) وَمَا بُغِضُوهُمْ طِبِّي “and being hated by them is not my usual state of things<sup>11)</sup>”
- d) وَمَا طِبُّهُ فِي طُرُقِهِ أَنْ يُشَجَّعَا “and his usual way is not getting encouraged in his roads<sup>12)</sup>”

Seeing that the latter verse is ascribed to Taʿabbata Šarran (a pre-Islamic poet), it is very probable that the usage goes back to 6 C. Then it was the days when Aramaic or Syriac ṭebbā ‘state, condition’ (see the first section) was still alive in everyday life in the sense ‘state of things’. Also, طَبُّ ب ‘skillful in’<sup>13)</sup> may well be explained as coming from ‘as usual as if in one’s natural disposition’.

### 3. Still in need of Enough Examples

While ‘story’ for رُمُور should be replaced with ‘state of things’, ‘state of things, natural disposition, usual way’ for طِبّ needs further research. It is only natural that the first thing for ‘medical treatment’ in Pre-Islamic days was observing ‘the state of things’ or ‘custom, habit, wont’ of the person in trouble. Nonetheless, the data in this brief study alone cannot support a common etymology of Aramaic ṭebbā and Arabic ṭibb. It is very likely to be so. Thinking of the very peculiar semantic range of ‘the state of things’ as compared with other usages of طِبّ, it is even probable that this usage might have derived from Syriac or some other Aramaic colloquial during the Pre-Islamic times

8) The first part from Lane, p. 1820c; the latter from Steingass, p. 624b.

9) Lane’s translation: “that is not my custom, habit, or wont” (p. 1820c). I am most grateful to Prof. Abd el-Rahman el-Sharqawi (Cairo University) for helping me to identify or locate these original sources.

10) Lane’s translation: “and our habit is not cowardice” (p. 107c).

11) Bulaq, 6/149, l. 29; Cairo, 7/102; Beirut, 7/74.

12) Bulaq, 18/217, l. 7; Cairo, 21/146; Beirut, 21/98.

13) This sense is usually explained from ‘knowing, possessing knowledge’ (Lane, p. 1820b).

when many Arab Christians existed. In the meantime, it will be better to collect more attestations of طَبَّ ‘state of things, usual way’.

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