

## **Preliminary Analysis of the Symbolism and the Agentivity of the dog *Qīṭmīr* during the Devotion to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus (*Aṣḥāb al-Kahf*)**

Anna Tozzi Di Marco <sup>1</sup>

### **Summary**

This article focuses on the folk religiosity concerning to the figure of the dog *Qīṭmīr* which God set at the entrance of the cave to guard the *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf*, the Companions of the Cave, during their long sleep. It emphasizes the symbolic role and the agentivity of the divine dog during the *ziyaret* at the *Eshab 1-kehf* cave near Tarsus in Turkey. This study is a first pilot exploration of the topic from an ethnographic viewpoint. Preliminary analyses of the believers' imaginary and the rituals enacted towards *Qīṭmīr* to whom direct their wishes and to heal own body.

**Keywords:** *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf, Qīṭmīr, Seven Sleepers, Tarsus Eshab 1-kehf cave, healing rituals.*

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<sup>1</sup> anna\_tozzi@hotmail.com Independent researcher (SISR member). ORCID ID 0009-0008-1411-8292

## Premise

The focus of this article is the folk religiosity concerning the “People of the cave”, that is *Ahl al-Kahf* (or *Aşhāb al-Kahf*, the Companions of the cave), related in particular to the holy<sup>1</sup> figure of the dog *Qıtmır*. To study its symbolic role through the written sources and to analyse its agentivity in the *Aşhāb al-Kahf* cave, in particular the cave located nearby Tarsus, constituted the main goal of this paper. It is part of my wider ethnographic research on Seven Sleepers of Ephesus/*Ahl al-Kahf* in the Mediterranean Christian and Islamic countries, even in the cases of interterritoriality and fluidity of both traditions. As starting point of my research I studied different kinds of sources, such as religious sources, scientific texts as well as literary heritage and iconographic works, historical books in order to contextualize the topic. I considered also the orientalist scholars’ studies. Among Islamic religious sources: the Holy Koran and the Tafsīr, the Sunna as well as the mystical literature; about Christian sources I examined pilgrims’ travelogues and Eastern hagiographical texts of the narrative. Among scientific works I looked at the Islamic zoological treatises. At the end the iconographic sources consisted of illustrated manuscripts and amulets. From the anthropological side I carried out periods of fieldwork in Northern Africa and Middle Eastern countries (as well as in the Mediterranean Christian countries concerning the Christian legend). Periods of fieldwork in Turkey started in 2016 and the research is still in progress in Tarsus and Lice caves. This ethnography of which I am undertaking a preliminary analysis, is centred above of all on native voices, their narratives and their performative actions. In particular I analysed how the believers perceive and deal with the symbolic role and the agentivity of the dog *Qıtmır* during their *ziyāra* to *Aşhāb al-Kahf* at the holy cave of Tarsus<sup>2</sup>. This last ethnographic part related to the specific topic of *Qıtmır* symbolism is not complete and it embodies only a preliminary analysis, so that it is a minority section of the whole article.

### 1. Some modern scholars’ studies on the symbolism of *Qıtmır* in the *sūrah al-Kahf*

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1 In the entire article the designation “holy” referred to *Qıtmır*, the Seven Sleepers and the cave is intended to be interpreted with anthropological connotation. In Islām the category of sacredness is plural. It has different levels of intensity and there are numerous terms such as *Şarīf*, *qiddīs*, etc. to designate it. For instance, at the highest level Allah is *al-Quddūs*, the holiest.

2 The results of the fieldworks carried out at Afşin, Tarsus and Lice caves came out in my paper presentation *The Turkish cult of Seven Sleepers/Aşhāb al-Kahf in Afşin, Tarsus and Lice* presented at the 1<sup>st</sup> International Congress of History of Religions (Türkiye Dinler Tarihi Kongresi) at Ankara University in September 2023. <https://kongre.tahr.com.tr/program>

Even if the the *sūrah al-Kahf* has been widely studied and analysed by scholars, only a few of them took in consideration the figure of the dog *Qitmīr*.

The French orientalist Louis Massignon who dedicated his life to the Companions of the cave, considered *Qitmīr* as the embodiment of the spiritual director *al-Khadir* who teaches to the Sleepers the prayer of community intercession<sup>3</sup>.

The French anthropologist Pénicaud in his book on the Breton Seven Sleepers pilgrimage reported Jean Dumont's records on their apotropaic names engraved on the cups and plates against the evil eye in Egypt<sup>4</sup>.

The academic Norman O. Brown reflected on literal and metaphorical interpretation of the Koran, that is between surface and substance, respectively the *zāhir* and the *bāṭin*, between the symbolic and hermeneutic (*Tafsīr*) interpretation of its meaning. He underlined that the *sūrah* 18 includes an esoteric wisdom<sup>5</sup>. He stated that *al-Kidr* (The Green One) is a source of mystical illumination which can be extended to *Qitmīr* as also the Italian scholar Campanini observed.

The USA scholar of Religious Studies, George Archer, highlighted the symbolic role of *Qitmīr* as a sign of Allah as well as a protective device for the faithfuls against the worship of false gods and saints. In supporting his thesis he took in consideration another element of the Islamic version, that is when Allah struck the Sleepers' ears. So that during their sleep they couldn't hear the prayers of the faithfuls<sup>6</sup>.

The Italian scholar, Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, in his analyses of the *sūrah al-Kahf* from an eschatological viewpoint, argued that the dog has the task to reinforce the Islamic faith in the absolute monotheism (*al-tawḥīd*) and in the total abandonment in Allah, the One and only God, with the final perspective of the resurrection and the eternal life<sup>7</sup>.

3 L. Massignon, REI, 1954, p. 72 in M. Pénicaud, *Le réveil des Sept Dormants*, [The awakening of the Seven Sleepers], Paris, Editions de Cerf, 2016, p. 71.

4 Pénicaud, *Le réveil...*, p. 75.

5 Norman O. Brown, *The Apocalypse of Islam*, "Social text", Duke University Press, n. 8, 1983, pp. 155-171.

6 G. Archer, *The Hellhound of the Qur'an: the dog at the gate of the underworld*, "Journal of Qur'anic Studies", v. 18, n. 3, 2016.

7 P. Dall'Oglio, *Speranza nell'Islam. Interpretazione della prospettiva escatologica di Corano XVIII*, [Hope in Islam. Interpretation of the eschatological perspective of Koran 18], Marietti, 1991.

According to the scholar Massimo Campanini, although in the following verses of the sūrah 18 the dog is not anymore mentioned, in its second story it can be connected with the mysterious figure of *al-Khadir* (or *al-Kidr*) who guides Moses in his journey through the divine secrets. Indeed both are the guardians of the divine message<sup>8</sup>.

The scholar Andrés-Toledo, in his article on the dog guarding the sleeping body of Adam, asserts that “heir of this tradition [The Seven Sleepers’] is the story of the Golden-Eared dog...which is transmitted in the Zoroastrian New Persian Revāyat of Šāpur Bharuci”, written in 1569 CE. This Zoroastrian narrative merges earlier motifs from other traditions including the epic of Gilgameš who fell asleep for seven days. However, Andrés-Toledo argued Adam did not explicitly fall asleep, but he was in a lethargic state. The Golden-Eared dog is also a keeper of the path to the otherworld. It originates from Adam’s navel. Its physical description matches that one of Qitmir<sup>9</sup>.

Sarra Tlili pointed out the presence of the dog in the sūrah al-Kahf “as a reflection and recognition of this longstanding human-canine bond”. She supposes that “one of the ways in which the Qur’ān redefines the human-canine relationship is by foregrounding the spiritual affinity between dogs and human beings”. The Aṣḥāb al-Kahf piousness allows them to be chosen by the dog and to accept his offer of companionship. She emphasizes how through this part of the Seven Sleepers narrative both the Holy Koran and the Tafsīr inspire the human-canine companionship with spiritual meaning<sup>10</sup>.

## **2. The analysis of written sources**

### **2.1 Islamic scientific works**

Muslims always had an ambivalent position about dog over time, as it is considered in both negative and positive ways. Although dog commonly protects humans, unlike other domesticated animals it may also hurt them deliberately. Hence Muslims perceived it as a dangerous animal and useful at the same time<sup>11</sup>. The scientific literature of the Golden Age includes

8 M. Campanini, *La Sūrah della caverna. Meditazione filosofica sull'unicità di Dio*, [The chapter of the cave. Philosophical meditation on the oneness of God], Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1986, p. 56.

9 M. A. Andrés-Toledo, *Reshaping Religious Traditions: The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus and the Zoroastrian Golden-Eared Dog*, "Iran Namag", v. 6, n. 3-4, 2021, p. 1.

10 S. Tlili, *The canine companion of the cave: The Place of the Dog in Qur’ānic Taxonomy*, "Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies", v. 3.2, 2018, p. 56.

11 During the Ottoman time in Cairo dogs were fed, also in mosques, by the city authorities in order to keep

the zoology and a lot of treatises include dogs. The greatest scientist in this field was the Basran theologian and polymath Amr bin Bahr al-Jaḥiẓ (9<sup>th</sup> c. CE) who lived during the Abbasid caliphate in current Iraq. His work which consists of seven volumes, The book of animals (*Kitāb al-ḥayawān*) written “in service to God”<sup>12</sup> is one of the oldest and pioneering Arabic manuscript on animals. Al-Jaḥiẓ described and classified 350 species of animals, their habitat and behaviour<sup>13</sup>. Among them he argued on the nature of dog<sup>14</sup>, its characteristics, its behavior, its medical cures, its pharmacopoeia and its relationship with men. In this respect al-Jaḥiẓ indicated the things a dog can do and a man cannot as for instance a dog can, upon seeing a deer, identify the sick and the healthy ones<sup>15</sup>. He also wrote that in every Bedouin tent there was a dog in the pre-Islamic era, even later<sup>16</sup>.

Another important scholar in this field was al-Damīrī who lived in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Egypt. He wrote The Lives of the Animals (*Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān*), a zoological lexicon where animals are ranked in an alphabetic order. The Egyptian scholar used the scientific information from al-Jaḥiẓ’s book, although he eliminated anecdotes and poetry. The description of the most important animals is followed by the paragraph The interpretation of the dreams (*ta’bīr*)<sup>17</sup>. The methods he used in these interpretations were: the symbolical approach and the decoding based on the qualities of the animal. For instance about camel, he reported that dreaming one camel can be a sign of great fortune but many of them can be the omen of war and epidemics. Thus, he added also the interpretations of dog symbolism. Dreaming a dog can have a lot of meanings: slaves; impudent people; illness; lamentation; liars; guards. For instance bitten or scratched by dogs means obtaining

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streets clean of garbage. Killing a dog (or a cat) was illegal and strongly punished. Dogs had an useful military, social and economic role. At Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal courts nobles had hunting dogs as status symbol of prestige. See A. Mikhail, *The animal in Ottoman Egypt*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

12 He said that his goal is to show how wondrous divine creation is, including human innate reaction of repulsions and attraction towards animals.

13 His work is a collection of traditions about animals selected from the pre-Islamic poetry, the Koran, the Traditions, and anecdotes and Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals*.

14 In this respect he also reported the hybrid nature of a mysterious animal, that is a kind of monstrous dog like a creature living in Yemen highlands, whose the semi imaginary description seems to be based on the wild dog. M.V.M. McDonald, *Two Mysterious Animals in the "Kitāb al-Ḥayawān" of al-Jāḥiẓ: The Sim' and the 'Isbār*, "Journal of Arabic Literature", v. 22, n. 2, 1991, pp. 100-107 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4183243>).

15 F. Alajmi, *Dogs in the Ancient Arabic Stories*, Independent print, 2023, p. 13.

16 Ibid. p. 26. Two of the most famous Arab tribes were named by the word dog, they were: Kalb (dog in Arabic language) bin Wabra; Kolab bin Rabia.

17 J. de Somogyi, *Ad-Damirī's Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān: An Arabic Zoological Lexicon*, "Osiris", v. 9, 1950, pp. 33-43.

what the dreamer endeavours to get. Moreover: chasing dogs means glory and elevation; a dog tearing one's clothes means slander by a fool; to dream a puppy means beloved child; shepherd's dog: profit from a king. Chasing with dogs represents desires fulfilled. Watch dog: chastity of wife. Al-Damīrī cited also *Qiṭmīr*. To dream the Seven Sleepers' dog represents the danger of imprisonment, escape or concealment, that is the remaining in a hiding place<sup>18</sup>.

Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā)'s Iraqi disciple, Marzubān (10<sup>th</sup> c. CE), in his treatise dedicated entirely to dogs, The superiority of the dogs over many of those who wear clothes, depicts it as a creature characterized by in-betweenness, that is between the human and animal realms. It is on the boundary between wilderness and domesticity. The writer also exalted its virtues in comparing to the negative aspects of some human beings, as for instance dog loyalty against human infidelity, or its courage against men cowardice. Also in the field of geography we have some texts concerning the term *kalb* (dog) such as Yaqout al-Hamwī 's The Dictionary of Countries (*Mogem al-Boldan*). In his book he mentioned some sites named after dog, such as Al-kalb a place between Qoms and Al-Rai in present Iran and the mountain Al-kalb one-day far from Yamama' in current Saudi Arabia<sup>19</sup>.

## **2.2. Islamic folk literature**

There are many proverbs regarding dog in the Islamic literature. Some of them are: "Dog owners do not stay alone", "Dogs cannot be forced to work", "Active dog is better than a lazy lion", "Easier than barking at clouds"<sup>20</sup>. In the collection of folkstories One thousand and One nights (Alf layla wa layla) the dog is portrayed in contrast with the aridity of human soul. The tale of Sidi Nouman starts with the Abbasid Caliph, Hārūn al-Rashīd (766-809 CE) who asked the name to a young man who had ill-treated his horse. He was Sidi Nouman. Then the caliph said him: "I have never seen any horse broken in such a barbarous manner as by you yesterday. Every one who looked on was indignant, and blamed you loudly". So that Sidi Nouman prostrated himself before the throne of the Caliph and encouraged by the Caliph's kindness he began his tale. Amina, his wife, had a strange behaviour at dinner every evening, hence he started to follow her one night. Each night she went to the cemetery to meet a

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18 J. de Somogyi, *The Interpretation of Dreams in Ad-Damīrī's Ḥayāt Al-Ḥayawān*, "The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland", n. 1, 1940, p. 11. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25221590>).

19 Alajmi, *Dogs...*, p. 39.

20 Ibidem, p. 43.

female ghoul “one of those demons which... springing out upon unwary travellers whose flesh they eat... if no live being goes their way, they then feed upon the dead bodies”. During the next day Sidi Nouman talked to her about what he witnessed at the graveyard. So Amina who was a magician, after putting her hand in a vessel of water and murmured some words, sprinkled it on his face. As consequence he was transformed in a dog by her spell. After beating up him/it she chased it away in the street. The fiction continues with his tale on how he/it saw the human world through animal eyes. At the end his encounter with another magician, a young lady who gave him a bottle of water in order to dash it on Amina’s face. So that his wife was transformed in a horse the caliph saw him beating<sup>21</sup>. These are only some examples which demonstrate the positive perception regarding dog in the Islamic culture. The Arabic heritage about dogs as protagonists of the tales which are collected by Faisal Alajmi, is wider and it deserves a more specific research.

### **2.3. Pre-Islamic era: Mediterranean ancient civilizations and Christian sources**

If we go back to the pre-Islamic times in the Mediterranean region it is useful to stress the role of mythical dogs in ancient civilizations. This animal had a liminal status between earth and underworld, the human and the monstrous, human and supernatural sphere, the civilised world and the uncivilised one. Above of all it had chthonic aspects. For instance in the Egyptian civilization the jackal god Anubi was the guardian of the soul after death who presided to the rite of mummification. It is represented in the same position of the Sleepers’ dog, *Qitmīr* as some scholars such as George Archer, Gobillot and others underscored<sup>22</sup>. Likewise in the later Greek-Roman world the canine psychopomp, the multi headed monster Cerberus, was the guardian of Hades (the underworld). It was the intermediary between life and death or guide to the afterlife. In the Greek-Roman city of Ephesus pilgrims visited the temple of the goddess Artemis, who was always accompanied by a greyhound dog. However no dog of the mythology of the classical world was endowed with the ability to speak.

If we consider the Jewish and Christian sources, in the Old and New Testaments there are many references to dog either to affirm virtues or to condemn vices. Nevertheless it is mostly considered an impure animal, a

21 <https://sacred-texts.com/neu/lang1k1/tale31.htm> (consulted 22/11/2023)

22 Archer, *The Hellhound...*



terrifying beast, and in allegorical sense symbol of enemies of the Hebrews and of the Church<sup>23</sup>.

On the contrary if we look at the apocriphal literature, the *Acts of Peter*, dating to the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE (probably in Asia Minor) we have a talking dog with divine powers. The text describes the rivalry between the apostle Peter and Simon Magus which occurred in Rome. The dog plays a prominent role in this conflict. In this apocriphal account it is told Peter unchained a watch dog at the entrance of the house where Simon Magus was hosted. Thereupon the dog started to talk to him: "What do you wish for me to do, servant of the ineffable living God?". Peter asked to the talking dog to act as the apostle's helpmate and envoy to the sorcerer Simon Magus. After its mission the dog fell at Peter's feet and died. The role of this supernatural dog intended to effect the redemption of Simon Magus' disciples who were fascinated by his magic and false teachings. Moreover in his work *Cronographia*, John Malale, reporting Peter's anecdote, highlighted the intervention of the talking dog in helping him in order to assert the superiority of the faith in God. The metaphorical representation of Peter as shepherd and the dog as sheep dog could have influenced the Eastern versions of the Seven Sleepers myth and lately the Islamic tale<sup>24</sup>. Also in some Fathers of the Church such as St Augustine and Ambrose (bishop of Milan), dog represents a good metaphorical example<sup>25</sup>.

On the opposite side of benevolent dog, in some patristic books such as Justin Martyr's *Apologies*, Simon Magus was represented as rapacious wolf<sup>26</sup> likewise the emperor Decius' image as voracious beast.

During early Eastern Christianity Jacob of Sarugh's homely on the Seven Sleepers is the Syriac text (6<sup>th</sup> c. CE) from which the Arab Christian and Islamic renditions descend. In this account there is a watcher whom God sets over the Sleepers but it is not specified if it is doglike. In this Syriac text most of the specific elements of the Koranic story are present: the guardian, the number 8 of the Sleepers, the duration of 309 years of their

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23 For a deeper understanding of the issue, see G. J. Botterweck, H. J. Fabry, H. Ringgren (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Volume VII, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974.

24 I. Thurn (ed.), *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia*, De Gruyter, 200; E. Jeffreys, M. Jeffreys, R. Scott (tr.), *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, in E. Jeffreys, B. Croke. R. Scott (eds) *Studies in John Malalas*, Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, Byzantina Australiensia, Sidney, 1990.

25 A. Ferreiro (ed.), *The Devil, Heresy & Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, Leiden, Brill, 1998, pp. 53-56.

26 A. Ferreiro, *Simon Magus in Patristic, Medieval and Early Modern Traditions*, Brill, 2005.



sleep<sup>27</sup>. Later according to the Muslim traditionists Ta'labi and Damīrī the Arab historian Ibn Ishāq adapted this narrative to the Arab world.

There is only a Christian chronicle wherein the dog of the Seven Sleepers is clearly mentioned: the pilgrim Theodosius' guide to the Holy Land written in the year 530 CE. In his travelogue he wrote he stopped in Ephesus coming back from Holy Land. He visited the Seven Sleepers cave and inside he saw a puppy dog (*catulus* in Latin language) named *Viricanus*. However, *Viricanus* refers to a dogman. The dog headed men were considered barbarian foreigners par excellence, living on the edge of the world and civilization<sup>28</sup>. Some scholars such as Bellamy think that the detail on *Viricanus* is a post Koranic interpolation even if archaeologists have underlined it is not rare to find in the ancient tombs of children also the skeleton of a dog<sup>29</sup>. It is also functional to remember that when the French orientalist Louis Massignon visited the Ephesian cave, his Turkish guide was frightened to enter because of *Qıtmır*. The Italian iranianist scholar Gianroberto Scarcia's study traces a connection between *Viricanus* and the giant saint Christopher (Christ carrier) who originally had the aspect of *cynocephalus* (dog headed man)<sup>30</sup>. Reprobis renamed Christopher after his baptism, was a Roman soldier martyred during Decius's kingdom in the same period of the Seven Sleepers' martyrdom and in the close region of Lycia. According to the scholar the word *Viricanus* seems to echo a word in Middle-Persian language, *barracanus* (in Latin). The *barrakan* was a royal rotated garment which was adorned with coins. At the same time Scarcia argues that the Turkish word *raqım* is referred to a colorful fabric with spots like *Qıtmır*'s coat and it also corresponds to Christopher's cloth. Further, he highlights that *Qıtmır* is also a multiple of the coin called *dhiram*, as well as the coin with the function of offering for the dead in order to lead his soul to the afterlife. Thus, Scarcia supposes a relationship on the symbolic level between *Viricanus* and Christopher through some adjuvants (helpers to the cause), that is the royal rotated garment/spotted

27 A. Tozzi Di Marco, *Agiografia e culto dei Sette Dormienti. Storicità e processi di mitologizzazione della agiostoria nel Mediterraneo*, [Hagiography and cult of the Seven Sleepers. Historicity and processes of mythologization of the hagiostory in the Mediterranean], Edizioni del Gruppo di ricerca arabo-cristiana, 2023.

28 D. G. White, *Myths of the Dog-man*, University of Chicago press, 1991.

29 L. Migliorati et al, *Sepolti nel teatro: il valore dei cani in sepolture comuni infantili*, [Buried in the theatre: the significance of the dogs in common childish graves], comunicazione presentata in occasione del Seminario di Storia e Archeologia Greca, Sapienza Università di Roma, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, 27-29 maggio 2015.

30 During the ancient times it was believed that the homeland of the cynocephalus giants was Lybia or Armenia. In the Coptic museum in Cairo there is an icon which portrayed two Coptic cynocephalic saints, named Ahrakas and Oghan.

coat and the coins regarding the Arab term<sup>31</sup>. The commemoration of the cynocephalic saint who is the patron saint of boatmen and pilgrims, occurs on July 25<sup>th</sup> while the Seven Sleepers' day is July 27<sup>th</sup>.

In the Christian iconography the cynocephalic saints are not limited only to the icon of saint Christopher. They are also depicted in the Pentecostal icons and miniatures, mostly in Armenian manuscripts<sup>32</sup>. Indeed since the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE a specific characteristic of the Armenian iconography of Pentecost is the portrayal of the cynocephalic figures among the populations of the world. The oldest one is in the Armenian Gospel of Mamistra (in Cilicia as Tarsus), dated to the year 1223 CE, wherein a demoniac cynocephalic figure is struck by the Pentecostal revelation likewise Saul of Tarsus (St Paul)<sup>33</sup>.

Another Christian source also certifies the presence of the dog in the cave. It is an Ethiopic manuscript of which I don't have further information<sup>34</sup>.

## **2.4. Islamic religious sources**

At the level of Islamic sacred scriptures (Koran and Sunna) and in folk religiosity dog plays a symbolic and liminal role. It is regarded as one of the signs of Allah. In the Holy Koran it is mentioned in some sūrah (K. 7:176; 5:4; 18:18) which show how it was not considered an impure animal, except in the chapter (sūrah) 7 according to some commentators such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. In the chapter 7 verse 176 it is written: "If it had been our will, we could have used these signs to raise him high, but instead he clung to the earth and followed his own desires - he was like a dog tongue whether you drive it away or leave it alone. Such is the image of those who reject Our signs". However, as the scholar Sara Tlili argued

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31 G. Scarcia, *Reveries canicolari intorno a Cristoforo e ai Sette Dormienti* [Canicular Reveries on Christopher and Seven Sleepers], in D. Bredi, L. Capezzone, W. Dahmash, L. Rostagno (eds.), *Scritti in onore di Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti*, vol. 3, Roma, Edizioni Q, 2008, pp. 1109-1129; G. Scarcia, *Una grotta Circium versus da terra d'Islam a terra cristiana* [A cave towards Circium from Islamic world to the Christian world], "Quaderni di Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni", Supplemento al n. 82 (1/2016), Brescia, Morcelliana, 2017.

32 In some manuscripts such as the 15<sup>th</sup> c. Kievian Psalter they are portrayed as the Barbarian warriors who are Christ's enemies and in another manuscript, which tells St. Mercurius' story (Abu Sayfain), still alive and documented in Ethiopia. <https://orthodoxartsjournal.org/the-icon-of-st-christopher/> (consulted 05/01/2024)

33 Today the Gospel is in the Armenian church of Balat/Galata in Istanbul. Rudy Favaro, "Iconografie in itinere", in P.G. Borbone, A. Mengozzi, M. Tosco (eds), *Linguistic and Oriental studies in honor of Fabrizio A. Pennacchietti*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006, p. 253.

34 Cfr. A. Brita, *Performing (with) Multiple-Text Manuscripts in the Making of the Ethiopian Sainthood: Matter and Devotion in Ethiopia between the Fourteenth Century and the Present Time*, in A. Brita, J. Karolewski, M. Husson, L. Miolo and H. Wimmer (eds), *Manuscripts and Performances in Religions, Arts, and Sciences, Studies in Manuscript Cultures*, 36, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter, 2024, pp. 371-424.

in opposition to Archer's view<sup>35</sup>, the analogy in question deals merely with the behaviour of the dog when it is attacked, it pants without any ethical dimension; "but if one does not molest him he also pants, rather, it is part of its intrinsic nature. In the same way, the behavior of the morally misguided person is not influenced by what one tells him; rather, it is determined by his own character"<sup>36</sup>.

Considering the Sunna the position of the dog is ambivalent. Al-Buhāri reported that at the Prophet's time dogs entered and left the place of prayer without the believers being concerned. However, Moḥammad stated that when a dog drinks from a container the owner has to wash it seven times. Moreover, although he ordered to kill all the dogs in Medina except those concerning the sphere of domestic utility and work as the sheepdogs and hunting dogs, Maymounah, one of his last wives, had a white dog named Mismar. Wherever she went Mismar accompanied her, thus nobody could steal her baggage. When her dog died she was very sad and cried a lot. However the transmitter of the ḥadīth Abu Dāwud reported that he ordered to kill only the black dogs with a white spot in their eyes because they were considered devils. Another ḥadīth reported that both pilgrim and prostitute could redeem their sins by giving water to a thirsty dog.

In the mystical milieu the first story of the *sūrah al-Kahf* indicates symbolically the *sūfi*'s personal spiritual journey towards Allah<sup>37</sup>. In his mystical manual, *Risālah fi 'l-Taṣawwuf* (1045 CE) the theologian and *sūfi* al-Qushayrī (11<sup>th</sup> c. CE), discusses *sūfi* theory and praxis. The mystical path consists in the advancement towards the detachment and isolation from the world necessary to approach God through a number of spiritual stations (*maqāmāt*) and spiritual states (*aḥwāl*). They are compared to the Ahl al-Kahf condition when God deafened their ears (K. 18:11). During the same period in another treatise on sufism such as al-Hujwīrī's *Kash al-Mahjūb* (Unveiling of the Hidden) the Companions of the cave were represented as *awliyā* (s. *walī*, the sacred person), who perform miracles (*karāmat*). According to al-Hujwīrī the stray dog represents the metaphor of the *sūfi*'s marginality of living. However, in the mystical literature the figure of the dog appears in all its ambivalence. On the one hand it is exalted for its quality of rectitude as term of comparison and measure of the

35 Archer, *The hellhound...*, p. 2.

36 Tlili, *The canine companion...*

37 Sufism (*al-taṣawwuf*), the Islamic mysticism, is the esoteric dimension of Islam.

*sūfī*'s itinerary, and on the other as symbol of human egoism. In particular, Farid al-dīn 'Attar lauded the obedience of the lowly guard dog who stays up all the night as opposite of a prideful human being. Mevlana Jalāl-al-Dīn Rūmī, the renowned *Sūfī shaikh* and poet, had a reverence for *Qıtmır* and he equated it to the mystic in own inner love of God. When a group of students asked to him about the color of the dog of Seven Sleepers, he answered "yellow/sallow; a lover is always yellow/sallow as I am; and that dog was a lover"<sup>38</sup>. The reciprocal closer relationship between the dog and the mystic brings them until their identification. Therefore it was not rare to encounter a *sūfī* accompanied by his dog who lived in the streets and cemeteries, eating in the garbage dumps in a radical poverty: for instance the well-known Persian Mansūr al-Ḥallāj with his two black dogs<sup>39</sup>. Also the mystic Nasih al-Dīn had a pet dog he named *Qıtmır*, attributing to it spiritual virtues. His hagiography reported someone asked to the *Sūfī* why he was so attached to his dog. He answered because of its friendship to God, because it can distinguish a lover from a repudiator of God<sup>40</sup>. The researcher Alexander Papas who examined the *Sūfī* literature regarding the involvement between the dog and the dervishes, gave extensive accounts of this bond. Among the examples, the existence of a shrine of a mystic surnamed Abu al-Kalb in Edirnekapi cemetery in Istanbul. He had five stray dogs and he used to roam in the streets with them<sup>41</sup>. In some of these cases the dog was perceived as a saint with own disciples as their sanctuaries reveal in Central Asia. Papas argued that this phenomenon expressed the introduction of the marginal and antinomian practices within the *Sūfī* orders<sup>42</sup>.

## **2.5. The *sūrah al-Kahf* - the cave - (K. 18: 9-26) and its *Tafsīr***

In the *sūrah al-Kahf*, in particular in its first story concerning the Companions of the cave, (*Yedi uyuyanlar* in Turkish language for the Seven Sleepers) the dog has a divine role. It represents the pivotal innovation compared to the Christian tradition of the Seven Sleepers anecdote. It appears four times in this chapter. This dog whose name is not mentioned, is only referred briefly and it does not contribute to the core plot of the account even if it is among the main characters. In the Koranic worldview

38 Shams al-Dīn Ahmad-e Aflākī, (tr. John O' Kane), *The Feats of the Knowers of God*, Brill, 2001

39 F. Zanella (a cura di), *Il cane di Maometto*, [The dog of Mohammad], Stampa alternativa, 2005, p. 178.

40 A. Papas, *Dog of God: animality and wildness among dervishes*, in S. Raei (ed.), *Islamic alternatives. Non-mainstream religion in Persianate societies*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017, p. 125

41 Papas, *Dog of God...*, p. 126

42 Papas, *Dog of God...*, p. 127

this dog is equated to the Companions of the cave. Without any note or explanation, we read that the dog is lying with its paws stretched out on the threshold of the cave, placed by Allah to guard the *Ahl al-Kahf*. It seems that the Koran expects this familiarity by its primary audience. The Koran takes for granted that its earliest listeners were already aware of this tale, mostly belonged to Jewish and Christian lore, to whom it makes reference. In this case the Koran offers elaboration, a rereading of pre-Islamic material. This process of adaptation and transformation of the Christian Seven Sleepers parable to the Muslims' mindset is evident in the different accounts given by the commentators of the *sūrah*<sup>43</sup>. Moreover, the absence of the dog before the sleep and after the Sleepers' miracle of resurrection suggests that it is relevant to the story only during their sleep. The second reference of the dog in the chapter is: "if you looked at the Sleepers, you surely would have turned from them fleeing. And you surely would have been horrorstruck by them" (K. 18:18). Thus, in the Islamic rendition the cave is not walled<sup>44</sup> like in the Christian legend but it is marked by a liminal being, which inspires terror to whom approaches them. On Sarra Tlili's opinion the positive presentation of the dog in the sura 18 is the attempt to give it a respectable place in Koranic taxonomy of the Creation and to counter the biases on canines. Therefore it seems the Holy Koran approves the proximity between humans and dogs, hence the close human-canine relationships<sup>45</sup>. Although in the Koran there are not other references about the dog which acts as God's mouthpiece, on the contrary it is extensively mentioned in the writings of the exegetes (*Tafsīr*). The dog of the *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* is a talking animal, named for some commentators of the Koran *Raqīm* interpreting the verse 9 (K. 18:9) and for others *Qīṭmīr*. According to the Persian al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1036) *Raqīm* was referred to the inscription with the names of the Companions of the cave, while for others it was their hometown<sup>46</sup>. Al-Tha'labī offered also other variants of its name, such as *Rayyān* and *Hamrā*. He and ibn Kathīr recorded someone who said this dog was a royal hunting dog from the court of the Sleepers' evil king. According to another commentator, Muqatil b. Sulayman, the dog was the Sleeper Maximian's pet (*Makslimīnā*). *Qīṭmīr*'s agency is

43 N. N. Roberts, *A parable of blessing: the significance and message of the Qur'anic account of 'The Companions of the cave'*, "Muslim world", vol. 83, n. 3-4, 1993, pp. 295-317.

44 The cave is not walled to allow the solar light to enter in the cave in order to awake the sleepers.

45 Tlili, *The canine companion*...

46 The scholar James A. Bellamy asserted that al-Raqīm is a corrupted word instead of al-ruqud, which means sleepers, thus he thought it was a copist's error. J. A. Bellamy, *Al-Raqīm or Al-Ruqud? Note on Sura 18:9*, "Journal of the American Oriental Society", 1991, v. 111, n.1, pp. 115-117.

evident in the Koranic exegesis, since it is the one who approaches the youths and insists on accompanying them. Indeed al-Tha'labi gives us two narratives of this encounter. In both versions while the Sleepers were going up to the cave they encountered a sheepdog. They threw stones at it to chase it away, thinking its barking would have revealed their location. At this point the dog stood up on its hind legs like a person and started to speak. In the first version of the story, attributed to 'Ali (d. 40/661), the dog said: "Do not drive me away, for I bear witness that there is no other god but God alone. Let me protect you from your enemy." In the second version, attributed to Ibn Abbās (d. 68/687), the dog said: "Do not be afraid of my presence for I love those beloved of God. So sleep, and I shall guard you". So that, the dog is considered either fearful (perceived by the Sleepers as a threat) or protective as a guardian (its offer to protect them). It is on the threshold in-between this world and the netherworld, the living and the dead asleep like a barrier at the entrance of the cave.

### **3. The anthropological fieldwork**

#### **3.1 Islamic iconography**

During my periods of fieldwork I often noticed in the houses and shops of Islamic countries of Middle East and North Africa the iconography related to the Seven Sleepers and *Qıtmır*. Since the tale of the Companions of the cave has been always in the hearth of Muslims, Islamic iconography developed this topic on many different kinds of materials such as manuscripts, drawings, amulets, veneration artifacts. In order to find and to study this material I visited also the museums of Islamic Arts. Specifically Muslim artists were inspired by the pericope of the long miraculous sleep in the cave with the watch dog at the entrance since the 13<sup>th</sup> century and markedly after the 14<sup>th</sup> century. During this time in particular, Turkish-Persian art developed the sleeping youths' portrait in a circular frame. Muslim miniaturists always depicted them in number of seven despite the traditionally eight and the ambivalence of the Koran in this respect. Thus, the academic of Islamic art Ibrahim Ellassal emphasizes the Western influence on these Muslim representations. In his view the painters, although of different schools of art like Persian, Turkish and Indian schools, were influenced by the Western iconography of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, because they were always represented in number of seven and as young people<sup>47</sup>. Furthermore, according to the anthropologist Thierry Zarcone

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47 Ibrahim Ellassal is an Egyptian historian of Islamic art. I. Ellassal, *Stories of Sūrah Al -Kahf in Islamic*



*Qitmīr* plays a key position in these drawings<sup>48</sup>. Although the color of its coat was debated among the exegetes of the Holy Koran, it is above of all portrayed as white and curled up, sleeping right alongside his apparent masters like in the Persian manuscript *Qisas al-Anbiyā* (Stories of the Prophets) written by Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Manṣūr Nīsābūrī. However, the most common variant says it was a sheepdog. Concerning the general theme of dogs some illustrated manuscripts such as *Tarjuma-i Thawāqib-i manāqib* (A Translation of Stars of the Legend) written by Shams Al-dīn Ahmad Aflākī, (probably in Bagdad 1590 CE), represent them as part of the social life of the community: in the streets and bazaars close to its owner or during the hunting trips. Despite this during the first time of Islām herds of stray dogs roamed the city streets, they were hungry and aggressive and they posed serious health problems due to rabies and other diseases. Thus, these social and health problems caused the general prejudice of the impurity of the dog. On the contrary, the name of *Qitmīr* together with the names of the *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* has a prophylactic function and they were and are engraved on the talismanic pendants in various shapes and on drawings in form of a ship (in Turkish *Eshāb ül-Kahf gemisi*) to hang on the wall of the house<sup>49</sup>. The position of *Qitmīr* in the paintings or engravings is central to mark its high sacred status and the significance of its mission. We can find also their names carved on the stern of Turkish Ottoman ships to ensure a safe journey, because of the wavy movement of the Sleepers (K. 18:17), as well as on the Ottoman swords to protect their owners. Some times they are inscribed also in a tree of life shape. In one Ottoman glass painting (19<sup>th</sup> century) *Qitmīr* name shapes two leaves at the bottom of the tree, in order to mark its prominence to protect the access to the tree, likewise at the entrance of the cave<sup>50</sup>. In Maghreb they were written on pebbles in order to ward off the wild dogs<sup>51</sup>. The thaumaturgical power of their names derives from a *ḥadīth* reported by the transmitters of Tradition (*al-ḥadīth*) such as Muslim, Abu Dāwud, and al-Tirmidhī, which refer to the recitation of the *sūrah al-Kahf*. Its recitation preserves from the Dajjal, the equivalent of Antichrist, therefore from any evil.

The theoretical framework described so far nourishes the Muslims'

*Miniatures*, "International Journal of Heritage, Tourism and Hospitality", 12(1), 2018, pp. 1-21.

48 T. Zarcone, *The Seven Sleepers between Christianity and Islam: from portraits to talismans*, "Religiographies", n. 1, Fondazione Cini, Venezia, 2022.

49 Zarcone, *The Seven Sleepers...*

50 Zarcone, *The Seven Sleepers...*

51 Papas, *Dog of God...*



collective social imaginary for centuries and it is revealed to be embedded into the believer's religious actions. According to the anthropologist Talal Asad, "Islam is not a social structure or a complex of beliefs, artifacts, customs and morals. It is a tradition, a discursive tradition. It should be considered a discursive practice (rather than a normative one), which is connected to the social action and to the bodily discipline"<sup>52</sup>. Indeed the lived Islam by the Muslim Turks at the *Aşhāb al-Kahf* caves is engaged onto this framework. In this regard the traditional knowledge of the symbolic role of *Qıtmır* as divine messenger (friend of God) is transferred and incorporated in the physicality of the holy place. The dog acts as baraka carrier, which is transferred to the cave and experienced through the body rituals. During my periods of fieldwork in Turkey, according to the visitors' religious practice, only two of the four existent caves - Tarsus and Lice caves – (the other two are: Selçuk, Afşin caves) denote the metaphorical presence of *Qıtmır*. Here the relationship with the faithfuls is remarkable. The methodology of my fieldwork consists of the participant observation and semistructured interviews. Even if the ethnographic research is not yet complete (in Lice I just started last year) we can assume some preliminary results regarding Tarsus cave.

### 3.2 Tarsus cave<sup>53</sup>

Tarsus cave is generally considered the authentic cave of the *Aşhāb al-Kahf*, even if Jordanian Muslims claim their cave near Amman<sup>54</sup>. The grotto is situated close to Dedeler village, about 15 km far to the north of Tarsus. During past times it was attended also by the Orthodox Christians, mostly Greek residents before the exchange of the population in 1923. The French archaeologist and orientalist Victor Langlois who explored Cilicia in 1852-53, said that after Jerusalem and Mecca it was one of most important pilgrimage among Muslims. He recorded a tradition which told of seven young people who tasked with carrying a message to the king of Tarsus, left the Armenian castle of Lempron (in Turkish Namrun Kalesi) fell asleep miraculously in the cave and awakened two hundred years later<sup>55</sup>. Up to the hill of the Taurus mountains, called Encülüs Mountain (or locally

<sup>52</sup> T. Asad, *The idea of an anthropology of Islam*, Washington D.C., Georgetown University, 1986.

<sup>53</sup> A. Tozzi Di Marco, *The Seven Sleepers Tradition (Ashab-ı Kehf) in Afşin, Tarsus and Lice: Comparative Analysis of Intangible Heritage*, "Edeb Erkan", n. 5 (forthcoming).

<sup>54</sup> A. Tozzi Di Marco, *The Seven Sleepers/Ashāb al-Kahf tale and cult: two case studies in Turkey (Ephesus and Jordan (Al-Rajib))*, "Euras Journal of Social Sciences", 2023, v. 3, issue 1.

<sup>55</sup> V. Langlois, *Voyage dans la Cilicie et dans les Montagnes du Taurus: exécuté pendant les années 1851-1853*, Paris, 1861, pp. 336-338.

Ziyarettepe, that is Ziyaret Mountain), it is accessible through a long stair. Nowadays Tarsus *Eshab ı-kehf* is mostly attended during the Islamic feasts such as Kurban or Ramazan but also during Hıdırellez<sup>56</sup> (between May 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>). Recently the Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs) put a sign inside the cave which lists the correct rules of the *ziyāra*. The Diyanet aims to direct the devotees in a correct manner (*edep*) according to the orthodox practice. The main end is to prevent the heterodox folk rituals. Despite these indications the pilgrims still enact local beliefs and narratives. Let's examine the Islamic discursive tradition of the Turkish Muslims during their *ziyāra* at this holy cave, following Asad's analysis.

Devotional practices such as stopping in front of the holy funerary recint to recite the *al-Fatiha* (the Opening sura) and reciting the sura al-Kahf are part of the orthopraxi. They are intermingled with traditional folk rituals performed in the cave in order to invoke God's grace, the *baraka*<sup>57</sup>. This complex of rituals represents the lived Islam, enacted by the locals, that is their perceptions of the sacred. After reciting the *al-Fatiha* believers give candies to the *Eshab ı-kehf* in the funerary enclosure. This custom to give them some food is a ritual also witnessed among Indian Muslims. In particular, according to the scholar Sharif Ja'far, before beginning a travel or in order to get rid of own troubles "they take out seven plates of food, recite the Fatiha over them, eat some and distribute the remainder. A special plate is reserved for the dog, wich is not placed with the rest, but given to a dog to eat"<sup>58</sup>.

Inside the Tarsus grotto in a small cavity the pilgrims identify a rock as the head of *Qıtmır* due to its shape. Since this mythical canine embodies God's will, it manifests its agentivity through the protective power. Pilgrims use to kiss and to touch *Qıtmır* rock in order to invoke it in their lives. These apotropaic actions which prevent the evil, include also the ritual of putting small stones as symbols of a vow in some holes of the wall. Furthermore the litholatric tradition at the *Eshab ı-kehf* consists of rubbing the rock with the sick part of the body. This practice is enacted to receive the *Qıtmır*

56 It is a celebration of the day of the first encounter on earth between the Prophets Hızır (Al-Khidr) and Ilyas (Elijah). Cfr. M. Boivin, M. Penicaud (eds), *Inter-religious Practices and Saint Veneration in the Muslim world. Khidr/Khizr from the Middle East to South Asia*, London, Taylor&Francis, 2023.

57 According to the new Encyclopaedia of Islam the *baraka* is a beneficent force of divine origin which causes superabundance in the physical sphere and prosperity and happiness in the psychic order.

58 Sharif Ja'far (tr. G. A. Herklots), *Islam in India: or the Qānūn-i-Islām The Customs of the Musalmāns of India*, Taylor&Francis, 2017, p. 137.

*baraka*, hence to cure own illness. The faithfuls think *Qıtmır* can help them because of his *wilāya* (sainthood) that is the metaphysical proximity to or intimacy with God. They don't venerate the divine dog since it is not allowed in Islam but they believe in the miraculous power of its *baraka*. Therefore in this context *Qıtmır* expresses his agentivity through his symbolic capital as intercessor to God likewise the pious Seven Sleepers on the basis of Koran and Sunna.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Comparing to the copious studies on the *sūrah al-Kahf* there are not many scholars who dealt deeply with the role of *Qıtmır*. During my periods of fieldwork in Tarsus and Lice caves I experienced the importance that believers give to *Qıtmır*, that is to its power of intercession. Very few anthropological studies have analysed its pivotal role in the Seven Sleepers/ *Eshab ı-kehf* devotion. The present study is the first pilot exploration from an ethnographic viewpoint.

In the past times anthropologists of Muslim societies such as Clifford Geertz and Ernest Gellner used the dichotomy between orthodox and unorthodox Islam or between the categories of Great and Little Traditions to explain the distinction between the scripturalist authoritative religion and the ritualistic folk faith. On the contrary, Talal Asad's conceptual framework of Islamic discursive tradition assumes that

tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions). An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present... An anthropology of Islam will therefore seek to understand the historical conditions that enable the production and maintenance of specific discursive traditions, or their transformation and the efforts of practitioners to achieve coherence<sup>59</sup>.

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59 Asad, *The idea of...*

Therefore if we consider this conceptual frame, the healing rituals which involve the divine dog, performed at the Tarsus cave, represent a discursive tradition. This discursive praxis entails a fluid interaction between the scripturalist tradition of the first part of the *sūrah Al-kahf* (which forwarns the Truth of the Resurrection, hence of the eternal life on condition of total abandon to God) related to *Qıtmır* (among the five animals accepted in Paradise) and the localized narratives and beliefs. Believers consider *Qıtmır* an intermediary between humans and God on the threshold between the world of the living and the divine. They think of it as *baraka* giver and asking for its intercession to heal own sick body or to help in solving own sufferings they perform some lithotherapeutic rituals. It is evident that the symbolic efficacy<sup>60</sup> embedded in these healing practices plays a crucial role which is based on the local religious, social and cultural context. The materialized encounter with *Qıtmır* at Tarsus cave leads the devotee to a ritual transformation of self through bodily healing.

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<sup>60</sup> The notion of the symbolic efficacy has been analysed by many anthropologists over times: Levy-Strauss (1949), Geertz (1966), Turner (1967), Csordas (1983), Langdon (2007), etc.