

2.2.1.3 The Sumaniyya

There is no reason why we should devote much time to the "Sumanite" mentioned in our anecdote. His person and his doctrine remain unclear. A later transmitter, the historian Yaḥyā b. 'Alī al-Munajjim (241/855–300/913),¹ tried to identify the anonymous Azdite with Jarīr b. Ḥāzīm, who would become quite a respected traditionist and historian and wrote a book on the Azraqites, among other things.² He was indeed acquainted with Ṣālīḥ b. 'Abd al-Quddūs; in a poem the latter criticised him, saying that he was never sure of Jarīr's friendship.³ But in the early 120s he would still have been rather young; he died only in 170/786, although he was allegedly born in 85/704. Ibn al-Munajjim's speculation was probably really only a shot in the dark.⁴

It would, on the other hand, be important what in fact a Basran narrator thought a Sumanite was. He was probably simply evoking a stereotype. The Sumanites were regarded as sensualists who did not believe in any spiritual reality; this is how they were said to have confronted Jahm b. Ṣafwān.⁵ This was exactly what was expected of a *zindīq* as well; we have seen it in the case of Bashshār b. Burd,⁶ and there are more examples.⁷ The Indian physician with whom Ja'far al-Ṣādiq converses in the "Book of the Myrobalan"⁸ is presented in the same way. And there were indeed Indian physicians in Basra. Hārūn al-Rashīd would later invite them to his court; some translated Sanskrit texts on behalf of the Barmakids.⁹ It seems that their command of Arabic was quite good, and even if that had been a problem, clearly an interested Muslim intellectual could always find a decent translator in Basra. This was how texts on rhetoric were made accessible;¹⁰ the Indians were regarded as especially exemplary.¹¹ Jāḥiẓ was able to form an opinion on Indian literature in general: Indian books, he found, did not have one specific author but were transmitted over

1 *Agh.* III 146, 14, where he appears as *Abū Aḥmad*; for more information see GAS 1/375f.

2 Regarding him see GAS 1/310f.

3 Tawḥīdī, *Baṣā'ir* II 811, 3ff./IX 188 no. 628; also Buḥturī, *Ḥamāsa* 92, 7ff.

4 Cf. also Fück, *Arab. Kultur* 259, n. 3.

5 See p. 566 below; cf. also Gimaret in: JA 1969, p. 299ff.

6 See p. 15f. above.

7 Cf. e.g. Kulīnī, *Kāfī* I 78, –7; further material see vol. I 530, n. 13 above.

8 See p. 550f. below.

9 Ullmann, *Medizin* 105 f. It was on behalf of the Barmakid Yaḥyā b. Khālid that the oldest (?) account of the Indian religion was written, which would be used by later authors time and time again (Minorsky, *Sharaf az-Zamān on China* 125ff.).

10 Jāḥiẓ, *Bayān* I 92, 4ff.; Ma'mar Abū l-Ash'ath, who converses with an Indian physician here, came from Basra (see p. 42 below).

11 Ibid. III 14, 6ff.