

Stories in Motion

The Kaleidoscope as Metaphor in Comparative Studies of *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/ The Seven Sages of Rome*

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This article proposes the kaleidoscope as a hermeneutic tool for comparative research on *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome* – a frame narrative with embedded tales that circulated from the Middle Ages into the early modern period in many languages and across a vast geographical area. In recent years, scholars from a range of disciplines have increasingly shifted their attention away from reconstructing genetic relationships within the textual tradition toward the cross-cultural analysis of versions of this story matter from different linguistic and cultural spheres. This approach has the potential to offer new insights into similarities and differences between medieval societies in the East and West. However, the complex nature of the story matter and the fact that it crossed so many boundaries also poses considerable methodological challenges. The present article introduces the kaleidoscope as a dynamic metaphor to approach the multiplicity of factors involved in this kind of research. A case study of the embedded tale of the bath attendant/seneschal, examined in four early versions – Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, and Latin – serves to demonstrate the heuristic potential of this tool. After an introduction, the article discusses the material within its historical and cultural contexts, the principal features of the frame narratives; the characteristics of the embedded stories; the relationship between frame narrative and embedded tale. Throughout, the kaleidoscope metaphor serves to visualize the interaction between cultural and material contexts (the tube of the kaleidoscope), frame narrative (the mirrors), and embedded stories (coloured stones): from the interplay between these elements the moral lessons of each version emerge (refraction resulting in an intricate pattern) to the audience (person looking through the lens). Turning the kaleidoscope results in ever-changing and mesmerizing patterns for the onlookers to contemplate, each representing a different version of *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome*.

Keywords: cross-cultural comparison, *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome*, frame narrative, embedded stories, the story of the bath attendant/seneschal, methodology, hermeneutic metaphor, kaleidoscope

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Introduction

The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome is set at a royal or imperial court in a far-away country and in a remote time. It centres upon a stepmother who falsely accuses her stepson of rape and is ultimately punished for her crime. The story, structured as a frame narrative with tightly related embedded stories, is designed to instruct and entertain. Rather than offering straightforward resolutions to political, social, or ethical dilemmas, its narrative form engages storytellers and audiences on multiple levels, both internal and external, to actively participate in the process of interpretation.

Whenever the story material was translated into a new language, it was adapted to a different cultural context: the setting of the frame narrative was reshaped, different themes were foregrounded, narrative outcomes were modified, some embedded stories were added, others were omitted. Over time, this process generated a vast and highly diverse corpus of versions. On the basis of shared narrative features, these versions have traditionally been divided into a so-called »Eastern« group, conventionally gathered under the title *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher*, and a »Western« group, known as *The Seven Sages of Rome*. These two groups have for a long time primarily been studied in isolation and within their respective linguistic traditions. A more recent trend favors a comparative approach involving both the »Eastern« group and the »Western« group.¹

The fact that *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome* has a multifaceted nature and that it crossed many boundaries poses considerable methodological challenges, which it has in common with other medieval stories, such as *Kalīla wa-Dimna* and *Barlaam and Josaphat*.² These global textual traditions are notoriously difficult to grasp and have been characterized as »unruly«, »fluid«, »shifting« (e.g. Matthew Keegan)³ and as »fuzzy sets« (Karla Mallette).⁴

What hermeneutical tools are available for this kind of complex research? Literary studies have developed a range of metaphors to visualize intertextual relations between texts and their reception by audiences. These draw on images of lines, water, layers, structures, communication, and movement. Literary tradition, for example, is often conceptualized as a »chain« extending from the past to the present, while intertextuality is famously represented by Julia Kristeva as operating along horizontal and vertical »axes«.⁵ Images of flowing water inform terms such as »influence« (from the Latin *fluere*, »to flow«) and *Quellenforschung* (source research). The stratified nature of texts has been captured through the metaphor of the

1 There are various types of larger and smaller collaborations and projects, e.g. by Bettina Bildhauer (University of St. Andrews), Jutta Emig (Freie Universität Berlin), Ida Toth (University of Oxford), Emilie van Opstall (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam). The output is pluriform: a database (https://db.seven-sages-of-rome.org/Main_Page), new editions (Rita Schlusemann, *Seven Vroeden* and eadem, *Poncianus*), special issues and numerous articles (see bibliography).

2 See the *AnonymClassic* project (2018–2023) on *Kalīla wa-Dimna* by Beatrice Gruendler (Freie Universität Berlin) and *Retracing Connections on Byzantine Storyworlds in Greek, Arabic, Georgian and Old Slavonic (c. 950-c. 1100)* by Ingela Nilsson (Uppsala University).

3 Keegan, Elsewhere. See also Gruendler and Toral, *Unruly Classic*.

4 Mallette, *Seven Sages*, 18–22.

5 Kristeva, *Desire in Language*.

»palimpsest« (Gérard Genette),⁶ whereas large-scale networks of textual relations are evoked through metaphors such as »weaving« (from Latin *texere*), »mosaic«, or »polyphony« (Mikhail Bakhtin; Kristeva).⁷ The communicative dimension of literature has been theorized through concepts such as »dialogue« and »reader response« (Bakhtin; Wolfgang Iser),⁸ while Paul Zumthor's notion of *mouvance* foregrounds textual mobility and ongoing processes of adaptation.⁹ Karla Mallette adds game theory (a metaphor taken from economy) to »the toolkit of global narrative«, to move away from the traditional approach and become aware of different patterns in the history of narrative traditions: She imagines them as a »game« played by various actors (authors, translators, copyists) who strategically and unpredictably adapt their texts to their audiences (in the case of *Seven Sages of Rome*).¹⁰ She also uses »Raumschach« (three-dimensional chess) as a metaphor for the way characters, translators, copyists, printers, illustrators and scholars move within the textual tradition (in the case of *Kalila wa-Dimna*).¹¹

Within the context of the emerging theories on global story matter, I would like to propose another metaphor to analyse the intricate variety of patterns that emerges for an audience when reading or hearing the different versions of *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome*. I think that the image of the kaleidoscope might serve as a productive hermeneutic tool to capture all variables in this particularly dynamic corpus. The following case study of the embedded tale of the bath attendant/seneschal in four early versions (Greek, Hebrew, Arabic and Latin), which is present in nearly all versions of the story matter, will demonstrate its potential use to address the complexity of this kind of story matter.

Four Early Versions

This section describes the cultural contexts in which the four early versions of the story matter were produced, encompassing the wider socio-historical and religious conditions of its making, the manuscript witnesses through which it has been preserved, the presence or absence of paratextual matter, and the agents involved in its transmission – authors, translators, adaptors, and patrons – as well as the audiences for whom it was intended. When the places of origin of the four versions are set side by side (see below), it becomes readily apparent that the customary opposition between the »Eastern« group and the »Western« group is misleading. Although the Greek version arose in what is conventionally termed the »East«, the Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin versions all took shape in regions commonly assigned to the »West«. The persistence of an East–West dichotomy thus obscures rather than clarifies the geographical realities of transmission. Drawing upon the material evidence of the manuscripts – their dates and places of production – and, where fortune allows, upon paratextual traces such as dedicatory statements or spiritual exegesis, it is possible to sketch, if only in broad outline,

6 Genette, *Palimpsestes*.

7 Bakhtin, Holquist and Emerson, *Dialogic Imagination*; Kristeva, *Desire in Language*.

8 Bakhtin, Holquist and Emerson, *Dialogic Imagination*; Iser, *Act of Reading*.

9 Zumthor, *Intertextualité et mouvance*.

10 Mallette, *Seven Sages*, 20–21. Instead of using concepts from economy, Beecroft, *Ecology* uses ecology as a metaphor to describe the transmission of world literature.

11 Mallette, *Raumschach*.

the distinct contexts in which these four versions were fashioned, and to consider how such circumstances bear upon their interpretation. Metaphorically speaking, the Greek, Hebrew, Arabic and Latin versions of this case study each represent a different position of the tube of the kaleidoscope, which determines the position of the mirrors (frame story) and the coloured pieces (embedded stories), thereby creating a specific pattern for the viewer.

Greek

The Greek *Book of Syntipas the Philosopher* is the oldest complete version we possess of the story.¹² It contains valuable paratextual material: a dedicatory poem and a prose introduction state that it was written down by the secretary (γραμματικός) Michael Andreopoulos (11th century). He presents himself as the first Greek translator of a Syriac story with Persian origins (both now lost),¹³ and tells us that his work has been commissioned by Gabriel, governor of »the city named after honey« – probably Melitene (present-day Malatya in Eastern Anatolia). Both Michael and Gabriel were Christians. Most likely meant as didactic literature for the 11th-century Byzantine court,¹⁴ the story »especially criticizes evildoers and praises good deeds« (§1: τοὺς κακεργάτας διασύρει μάλιστα ... πράξεις ἐπαινεῖ τὰς καλῶς ἐργασμένας). Michael added the prologue of the Syriac original, which describes it as »a story full of wisdom to the benefit of its readers« (§2: διήγησις ἐμφιλόσοφος ... πρὸς τὴν τῶν ἐντυγχανόντων ὠφέλειαν).¹⁵

Michael's patron was probably Khoril of Melitene (1055-1103), a wealthy dux (amir or military commander) of Armenian descent who adhered to Byzantine orthodoxy.¹⁶ During his governance, Melitene was a large semi-independent cultural centre with a multicultural history at the border of the Byzantine empire and at the intersection of the Euphrates and the ancient Persian Royal Road. The town was mainly Syrian Orthodox, but in it lived also Melkites and Armenian Christians. In the Battle of Melitene in 1100, Khoril enlisted the help of Bohemond of Antioch (ca. 1054-1111) against the Dānismend Turks, to whom he eventually lost the town. He married off his daughter Morphia with a considerable dowry to Baldwin of Bourcq (count of Edessa, 1100-1118, and king of Jerusalem, 1118-1131).

The geographical and social hub in which Gabriel operated, the position of the town he presided over, as well as his international networks are suggestive of the potential readership

12 For the Greek, I consulted the original language. I used the edition of Jernstedt and Nikitin (1912) and the English translation (sometimes adapted) of Beneker and Gibson (2021). The paragraph numbers in the Greek quotations refer to the latter. Jernstedt and Nikitin based their edition on 6 MSS (14th-17th centuries). There are several other manuscripts with slightly different versions which hitherto have not been studied seriously. A current research project under the supervision of Ida Toth at Oxford University aims to fill this gap.

13 For the origins of the Greek version, see Redondo, Faithful Dog, Krönung, Fighting with tales 1, Toth, Fighting with tales 2, Messis and Papaioannou, Translations, 206-208, Minets, *Language of Speaking*, Shukurov, *Byzantine Ideas*, 163-164.

14 See Toth, *Motif of Wisdom*.

15 In the last paragraph of the *Book of Syntipas the Philosopher* a similar statement is repeated by the primary narrator regarding the prince's »responses to his father that are useful for life« (Michaelis Andreopuli, *Liber Syntipae*, ed. Jernstedt and Nikitin, §154/129.14ss.: ταῖς βιωφελέσι πρὸς τὸν πατέρα ἑαυτοῦ ἀποκρίσεσιν).

16 See Jeffreys et al., *Prosopography* s.v. Gabriel, <http://pbw2016.kdl.kcl.ac.uk/person/Gabriel/4001/> and Kiratz, *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary* s.v. Melitene, <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/entry/Melitene>.

of *The Book of Syntipas the Philosopher* and how it might have travelled, although we do not have any proof. It could even have been taken further towards the West by merchants or by his daughter and son-in-law. It should also be noted that there is an important time gap: while the oldest complete version dates from the 11th century, the oldest manuscript in which it has been transmitted dates from the 14th century.

Hebrew

In contrast to the Greek *Book of Syntipas the Philosopher*, the Hebrew *Mishle Sendebār* is not preceded by any dedicatory poem or prologue. Therefore, it is much more difficult to make suppositions about the cultural context in which this version of the story originated and about the purpose for which it was written down. On the basis of the content, the book is part of the so-called »Eastern« group, although the two oldest manuscripts from the Oxford Bodleian Library, used by Morris Epstein for his 1967 edition (group B), were produced in Western Europe.¹⁷ The first manuscript, MS Bodley Or. 135 (ff. 292r-300r, below: Ox. I), is a miscellaneous collection of Hebrew texts from the mid-13th century (after 1215), written in an Ashkenazi semi-cursive script and produced in North Champagne (France).¹⁸ However, the manuscript did not always circulate within Jewish communities, since at some point it was owned by John Grandison, Bishop of Exeter (1328-1369). The second manuscript, MS Bodley Heb. d.11, was compiled by the German Eleazar ben Asher ha-Levi in the mid-14th century, and contains religious, medical and astrological texts, partly from Germany (14th century) and partly from Italy (12th century) (ff. 289r-294v, below: Ox. II). It is especially known for »The Book of Memory« (*Sefer ha-Zikhronot*), a German anthology meant as a universal history of the world and the Jewish people.¹⁹ According to Epstein, both manuscripts derive from an earlier version, thought to date from around 1150.

Epstein places the Hebrew version even before the Greek version on stylistic grounds: [the Greek *Syntipas*] »seems not to be a literal translation of an earlier version. The stories are inflated, the rhetoric is flowing, and there are many embellishments. This version very likely does not represent the oldest type and may well be a development of the [*Mishle Sendebār*] cycle, tracing its way back through the Syriac to a lost Hebrew version«. He further suggests that »the simplicity and appropriateness of detail in [*Mishle Sendebār*] are hallmarks of an early stage of development«. ²⁰ However, simplicity or complexity of style are not necessarily linked to consecutive developmental stages and could very well depend on other factors, such

17 I use the edition and English translation by Morris Epstein (1967: 212-217, 11.730-70), based on two MSS (Group B, MS Bodl. Or. 135 and MS Heb. d. 11), i.e. the earliest MSS, from the 12th/13th cent. and 1325 respectively. In his notes, Epstein also refers to variants in other MSS, such as MS Vat. 100.3 from Group A. I thank Peter Broers and Pierluigi Lanfranchi for their help with the Hebrew original.

18 The catalogue of the Bodleian Library says North Campagne instead of North Champagne, but this must be a mistake (see <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/search/?q=mishle+sendebar>, accessed on 7 June 2025). During the 11th century, the region of Champagne (especially Troyes) had been noted for the presence of its Jewish community, in which especially the scholar Rashid had played an important role.

19 See Dunphy, *Encyclopedia*, lemma »Eleazar ben ha-Asher«, Yassif, *Book of Memory* and Boyarin, They shall serve.

20 *Tales of Sendebār*, ed. Epstein, 19 and 21.

as the social position of the person who translated, adapted and wrote down the text,²¹ as well as the different uses and audiences of a particular version. The bimodal nature of the story, i.e. its transmission in oral and written form, should not be neglected either where brevity is concerned. As Omar El Akkad explains in his introduction to the annotated *Arabian Nights*: »Every story is simply bone. The marrow, the life-full thing, is the telling«. ²² A written text can represent different stages, from a blueprint for oral retelling to a full-blown literary text with citations of classical literature.²³

Arabic

The Arabic version of the *Seven Viziers* that this paper discusses is part of the *101 Nights*, the lesser-known cognate of *1001 Nights*, that circulated in Western Europe through Muslim Spain and the western regions of North Africa. The manuscript was a spectacular discovery by Claudia Ott, who noticed it in a showcase during the Berlin exhibition »Treasures of the Agha Khan Museum: Masterpieces of Islamic Art« in Berlin (2010) and realized it could be of interest. It turned out to be the oldest known representative of the story, written in Granada by a Maghrebi hand. The manuscript does not contain any embellishments, except for certain elements in red ink. Its language is literary, but easy to understand, suspenseful and pleasurable. It contains some traces of orality.²⁴ Unfortunately, the last part of the story (from night 85 to the end) and the colophon are missing. Ott dates the copy to 1234, based on the date accompanying the geographical treatise bound in the same volume. Ulrich Marzolph and Aoubakr Chraïbi²⁵ are more cautious as to the dating, but they also assume an early date of production. Prior to Ott's discovery, the oldest known manuscript of *101 Nights* dated to 1776.

As we will see below (section *The Double Embedding of the Seven Viziers*), the narrative situation of the story of the bath attendant is complicated by the fact that it is embedded in the frame narrative of the *Seven Viziers*, which in its turn is embedded in the frame narrative of *101 Nights*, in which Shahrazad tells stories to an Indian king.

Latin

The Latin version, the *Historia Septem Sapientum*, is part of the so-called »Western« group. It can be linked to an earlier French prose text from Alsace dating to the 13th century, which circulated in Northeastern France (Alsace-Lorraine), South Germany and Austria, often together with the *Gesta Romanorum*, a popular collection of anecdotes and tales. The oldest transmitted Latin version of the *Historia Septem Sapientum* can be found in the Innsbruck Codex 310, dating from the year 1342. Detlef Roth divided the manuscripts into four groups,

21 In some cases, the paratextual material contains information about the author/translator/adaptor, for example the grammarian Michael Andreopoulos in the Greek *Syntipas* (see above) and the monk John of Alta Silva (i.e. the monastery of Haute Seille in France) in the Latin *Dolopathos*.

22 El Akkad, in *Arabian Nights*, ed. Lemos Horta and trans. Seale, xiv.

23 I do agree with Epstein that *Mishle Sendebār* is clearly adapted to a Jewish audience. In spite of the exotic setting of the frame story in India, it abounds in biblical language and references and includes two unique embedded stories on Absalom. Its style is distinctively humorous, as it uses biblical texts in an ironical way, as we will see below.

24 See *101 Nacht*, trans. Ott.

25 Marzolph and Chraïbi, *Hundred and One Nights*.

three of which contain allegorical exegeses (Groups I, II and III).²⁶ The addition of spiritual exegeses throughout the Latin text gives us important insight into the various uses of the Latin version of the story.²⁷

For the purpose of my comparison, I use his edition of the two earliest groups of manuscripts, Groups I and II, since the manuscripts from these groups contain the most elaborated exegeses.²⁸ As paratexts these are of special interest for us here: they reveal how the external translator/adaptor wanted his contemporary audience to interpret the frame story and the embedded stories (called *narraciones* by the narrator and *exempla* by the characters) by offering spiritual allegories of persons, objects and actions. The exegeses interrupt the frame narrative, with »etc.« (*et cetera*), a title (*Reductio*) and a direct address to the external audience (»*Karissimi!*«, »Dearest people!«), followed by a Christian interpretation. They are presented as entities separate from the frame story and are written as – sometimes quite far-fetched – explanations for a contemporary Christian audience of all sorts (religious and worldly). In certain cases, the commentator even adapted the content of the *Historia Septem Sapientum* to create a conceptual unity directed at the downfall and redemption of the soul. In contrast to biblical texts, contemporary fiction lacked spiritual authority and could be freely adapted. Since some manuscripts note that the author of the spiritual commentaries is a Franciscan monk,²⁹ Detlef Roth theorizes that they could have been written for preachers to be used as independent *exempla* of edifying literature in their sermons, addressing virtue and sin for the moral education and salvation of their audience.³⁰ In fact, it was common practice for Friars Minor to include various popular stories as *exempla* in their sermons to connect better with their congregation.³¹

26 For this section, see Roth, *Historia*, vol. I, especially 7-14, 177-180, 192-199, Steinmetz, *Exempel und Auslegung*, 48-56 and Gábor, *Seven Sages*.

27 Csilla Gábor, *Seven Sages*, 25, argues that the exegeses in Groups I and II, with their somewhat detached and simple tone, are suitable for sermons, whilst those in Group III are more personal and spiritual and seem to convey a message that lends itself to devotion and meditation.

28 Groups I and II (14th cent.) belong to the H tradition (which is inspired by the French A tradition from the 13th cent.). For the Latin text of *Senescalcus*, see Roth, *Historia*, 365-366, no. 10.17-19; 368-371, no. 11.1-10; 373-374, follow-up no. 11.17; 377, exegesis). The translations from Latin into English are mine.

29 *Historia*, ed. Roth, 198.

30 *Historia*, ed. Roth, 178-179; 198 n.73 and also 27, 29, 41, 66 for the author of the commentaries (a monk of an order of the Friars Minor) and their use for sermons (to teach moral lessons) in the case of both the *Gesta Romanorum* and the *Historia septem sapientum* (often transmitted together). See, for example, the remarks in MS F Fiecht, Library of the Abbey St. Georgenberg-Fiecht, MS 15 (olim Cod. 129) f. 100v: *expliciunt Gesta imperatorum moralizata a quodam frate de ordine minorum*, and MS W1 Würzburg, Franciscan Abbey MS 115, f. 166r: *Incipit Moralitas Cuiuslibet hystorie in Speciali et sunt Omnes predicabiles et propriissime ad mores hominum trahende*.

31 See Delcorno, *Exemplum*. I thank Eleonora Lombardo for this reference. In contrast to the Friars Minor, the learned Dominican clergy tended to emphasize teaching and defending doctrine. They seem to have preferred the use of more overtly Christian stories for their sermons, such as *Barlaam and Josaphat*. See Smirnova, *De l'histoire à la rhétorique*.

Frame Narrative

This section offers a brief outline of the frame narrative as it can be found in most versions. Its principal features will be presented and some general characteristics of the four versions will be discussed. Metaphorically seen, the frame narrative represents the mirrors within the tube of the kaleidoscope. When one turns the tube, for example, when one passes from Greek to Hebrew, the angle of the mirrors changes too, i.e. the frame story is adapted.

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there was a ruler who had only one son. He sent him away to be educated, but when he returned, he no longer spoke. The ruler was very upset, because he did not know that the stars had warned his son to remain silent for seven days, otherwise he would die. Then the prince's stepmother offered to take him to her room and make him talk. She made all sorts of proposals, ranging from making love to overthrowing the king and marrying her. But the boy resisted and, worse still, threatened to expose her.

The stepmother tried to save herself by tearing her clothes and scratching her face open, accusing the prince of attempted rape. The king, furious, immediately ordered his son's execution. For seven days, seven wise men of the court told him stories, urging him to discover the truth and not to trust any woman, whilst the stepmother, with a strong appeal to her husband's emotions, told him stories to convince him not to trust the wise men.³² These are stories populated with people of all social classes, animals, or fairytale beings. The king immediately changes his judgement after each speaker: now absolving his son, then condemning him again. On the eighth day, the prince finally speaks and the final verdict is delivered. In some versions the stepmother is acquitted, but in most versions, she is condemned.³³ Justice is restored and the prince's succession secured. Sometimes this is followed by the conversion of the prince and chapters on wisdom.

The frame story is always set in a (pseudo-)historical time and a remote place, creating a certain exotic distance between the protagonists and the medieval audience. The Greek *Book of Syntipas the Philosopher* is set at the Persian court of King Cyrus. The stepmother is one of Cyrus's seven concubines. In the Hebrew *Mishle Sendebār*, we find ourselves in India. The ruler is King Bibar, husband of eighty wives. The stepmother is Bibar's favourite wife. The frame story of the *Seven Viziers* is set at the oriental court of sheikh Sayf al-Alam, the stepmother being one of his wives. The Latin *Historia Septem Sapientum* is set in Rome during the reign of the (fictitious) emperor Pontianus, whose son is called Diocletian. The stepmother is his second wife, the empress.

There are, however, some major differences. Although in all versions the stepmother is presented as wicked by the external narrator, in the »Western« group, she is depicted as much more depraved and punished much more severely: from the outset, she desires the downfall of the prince and when she is found out (now with additional proof of adultery), she is killed

32 Generally speaking, the wise men tell two stories per day in the »Eastern« group and one story per day in the »Western« group.

33 Although the female protagonist of the frame story has a negative role, not all female characters in the frame story and the embedded stories are depicted as monolithically depraved. On this topic, see, for example; Eming, Flynn, and Murath, *Female Voices*; Foehr-Janssens, *Misogyny*; Lundt, *Weiser und Weib*; van Opstall, *Wicked Stepmother*; and Critten, *Hating women*.

instantly. Furthermore, in the »Eastern« group, the prince is educated by one philosopher (Greek: Syntipas, Hebrew: Sendebār, Arabic: Sindbad) who does not belong to the group of seven philosophers telling their stories at the court. In the »Western« group, the boy is both educated and defended by the Seven Sages.

The frame narratives discussed in this article are the product of four different communities with strong patriarchal structures. The shape of the frame narrative (the mirrors of the kaleidoscope) – its setting, characters, and plot, as well as the gender stereotypes built into it – has a direct effect upon the interpretation of the embedded stories (the coloured pieces of the kaleidoscope) by the internal and the external audiences. This will be demonstrated in the next section with the story of the bath attendant/seneschal. This embedded story is about a corpulent ruler (prince/king), who asks his servant (the bath attendant/seneschal) to arrange a woman in exchange for money. The greedy servant wants to keep the money for himself and secretly brings his own wife. When it turns out that the prince/king very much enjoys having sex with the servant's wife, the latter deeply regrets his deed. This is one of the few embedded stories present in nearly all the versions of *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome*.³⁴

The story is either set in a bathhouse, with a bath attendant and a prince (Greek, Hebrew, Arabic), or in a bedroom, with a seneschal and a king (Latin). The change of setting from bathhouse to bedroom (which can already be found in the French example on which the Latin version is based) can perhaps be explained by the degree of popularity of bathhouses in certain cultural contexts. Public bath houses and private baths were widespread phenomena in the Byzantine Empire, in medieval Jewish communities in the East and West (public baths, ritual mikveh), and throughout the Islamic world (hammams, ritual ghusl), from the Middle East to Al-Andalus. They were not only places for physical and spiritual cleansing, but also for socialization.³⁵ Although bath houses were not an unknown phenomenon in Christian communities in Western Europe, they were a less prominent feature of daily life.³⁶

34 In many publications, these stories carry the Latin titles (introduced by Karl Goedeke in the 19th century) *balneator* and *senescalcus* respectively; other stories shared by versions throughout both the »Eastern« group and the »Western« group are dog (*canis*), boar (*aper*), and bird (*avis*). There is no clear connection to oral folk tales for this particular tale, so it is impossible to search its wider international tradition as a tale type by linking the story to ATU numbers.

35 In *Das Bad*, 114–115, Albrecht Berger describes what bathing was like for a Byzantine audience: the members of the Byzantine elite were usually accompanied by an entourage. People bathed naked or clad in a loincloth. After bathing, one could eat, drink and take a nap on a couch. Prices were low and the bath attendants did not earn much. Compared to the large-scale Roman *thermae*, Byzantine baths were smaller but still numerous, see Marano, *Baths and Bathing*. For bathing in Byzantine literature, see Agapitos, *Grauen und Wonne and Erotic Bath*. For Jewish baths and mikveh in the Middle Ages, see Abrahams, *Jewish Life*, 89 and Bodner, *Jewish Ritual Baths*. For a 10th–11th century-witness of hammams in Bagdad, see Hilal al-Sabi' (who calculates 60,000 public baths) in Fairchild Ruggles, *Islamic Art*, 91–92.

36 Speer, *Sodomite King*, 196 explains the change of setting in the earliest French verse adaptation K (after which the Latin version is ultimately modeled, see above) by the fact that the public bathhouse, the casual nudity in an all-male setting, and obesity were not suitable for Northern European courtly audiences. I would like to nuance this explanation. As far as I can conclude from secondary literature, bathing seems to have not been uncommon in medieval Europe until the 16th century; see, for example, Smith, *Clean*. Regardless of the degree popularity of public baths in medieval Europe, the setting of the bathhouses would have aligned

The Embedded Story of the Bath Attendant/Seneschal

Metaphorically seen, the embedded stories represent the disc with coloured pieces of the kaleidoscope. In the following, the specific characteristics of the embedded story of the bath attendant/seneschal will be analysed, such as its characters, themes and narrative style. It seems that in the process of transmission and adaptation to a new audience, some stock elements were more malleable than others to create a coherent story and align it with the frame narrative. I will examine in more detail how each of the four versions maintains some elements while adapting others. In the Greek, Hebrew and Arabic versions, both the error of judgement on the prince's »manliness« as well as greed for money lead to the downfall of the bath attendant. In the Latin version, greed alone leads to the seneschal's exile. As we will see, the identity and gender of the narrator are of importance for the interpretation of the story. The link between the embedded story and the frame narrative will be discussed in the section *The Link between Frame Narrative and Embedded Tale*.

Corpulency and Sex Trafficking

In the Greek version, the fourth philosopher arrives on the fourth day, advising King Cyrus to carefully examine the case and find out the truth before passing judgement, lest he ends up »like a certain bath attendant«. While telling his story (§§47-48), he elaborates most vividly upon emotions, tying in with the emotional reaction he expects from the king (both are, or risk to be, »struck by regret« (§48: πικρᾷ τῇ μεταμελείᾳ πληγείς and §49: πικρότατα μεταμεληθείς). He tells King Cyrus that a prince went to a bath house to wash and anoint himself. His genitals (§47 τὰ τοῦ νέου αἰδοῖα, cf. below τὰ ἀνδρῶν) were invisible because the prince's body was »quite big and very fleshy« (§47: εὐμεγέθης καὶ πολύσαρκος). As soon as the bath attendant saw him, he was »deeply upset« (§47: περιπαθῶς ἀπωδύρετο), since he assumed that without male genitals the prince could not have sex with a woman and therefore could not have children, voicing his concern about the succession. The young prince gladly accepted the bath attendant's empathic bitter tears, telling him he himself was also at a complete loss about how to have sex with a woman »the way men do« (§47: κατὰ τοὺς ἄνδρας). So, he offered the bath attendant a gold piece for finding him a woman to test his abilities. Could the prince only have pretended not to know whether he was capable of having sex? In the Arabic version, he genuinely despairs, while the Hebrew version suggests that he knew all along (see below).

Many embedded stories in the Hebrew version are relatively succinct, but not this one. On the fifth day, the fifth counsellor tells his story, warning King Bibar not to kill his son, since he will »rue it« (p. 208: ויתנחם), as did the bath attendant. The counsellor elaborates on the fact that the prince was »exceptionally fat« (p. 208: ביותר שמן), adding that »his stomach lapped over his knees and covered his genitals« (p. 208: ריב ארכבותיו וכסה את ערוותו). The bath attendant concludes that the prince was unable to »climb on top of a woman as is the custom«

with the (pseudo-)historical setting of the Roman empire frame story. Moreover, there are only two males involved in the story of the bath attendant, i.e. the bath attendant and the prince. Maybe the change of setting is prompted chiefly by the change in the plot to suit the needs of the empress in the frame story or by the Christian use of the embedded story as shown in the exegesis (see below).

(p. 210: לבא על האשה כדרך כל הארץ, cf. also p. 214).³⁷ He weeps, expressing his worries that his just and beloved king and his offspring were at risk. But the prince himself does not seem particularly worried. He simply offers one hundred gold pieces to find him a woman, a much larger sum than the gold coin in the Greek version, in order to test himself. »Do yourself a good turn« (p. 212: עשה טובה), the prince adds in manuscript Ox. I, apparently allowing the bath attendant to keep some of the money for himself for his role as matchmaker.

The Arabic version is close to the Greek version, but much shorter. The story of the bath attendant is told to sheikh Sayf al-Alam by his fourth vizier, who warns him against taking a rash decision. Otherwise, he will regret his actions, just as the owner of the hammam did.³⁸ He points out that the prince was so big that his penis was »barely visible«³⁹ and that the bath attendant could not »tell if he was a man«.⁴⁰ At this point, the Arabic text does not quote the prince's words, but expresses his inner thoughts, including his worries that his father wanted him to marry and his doubts about his capability to get a wife. If in the Greek and Hebrew versions the direct speech offers room to doubt the prince's sincerity, the inner thoughts of the Arabic version convince the audience that his proposal is genuine. Again, the prince offered a high price, a dinar, although the text does not say if it was made of silver or gold.

In the Latin version of the embedded story of the seneschal, the setting shifts from bath-house to bedroom. Corpulency and sex trafficking remain central to the plot, but the gender of the narrators is inversed. The story is no longer told by one of the sages, but by the empress. Instead of serving as an example in the argumentation of one of the sages, it is adapted to the argumentation of the empress. The consequences of this gender inversion will be elaborated upon below.⁴¹ In the Latin frame story, the empress reproaches her husband for not believing her: otherwise, the same thing will happen to him that happened to a certain king and his seneschal. And she tells him about a king who was »strangely bloated« (11.1: *miro modo inflatus*), to such an extent that women shrank from approaching him (11.1: *mulieres eum appropinquare abhorrebant*). While on his way to Rome to steal the bodies of Saint Peter and Saint Paul,⁴² he fancied a woman for the night. But his trusted seneschal told him no woman

37 »Climb on top of a woman« is a literal translation, where Epstein translates »have union with a woman«. The prince is too corpulent to take the missionary position, which was the preferred position of rabbis, see Bickart, Overturning the »Table«. Other positions are not taken into consideration, unless the expression means in a general sense »to have sexual intercourse with a woman«.

38 For this article, I used the German translation of the Aga Kahn manuscript 00513 (1234/5?) by Claudia Ott (101 Nacht, 161-162). Since I did not have access to a digitized version of the Aga Kahn manuscript, I added Arabic quotations in the notes from the edition of *Mi'at laylah*, ed. Šuraybit, 286-287, based on a more recent manuscript (dated 1257 AH / 1841 CE). I thank Rima Redwan for transcribing and translating them for me.

39 See n. 31, compare *Mi'at laylah*, ed. Šuraybit: *وكان سمينا لا يكاد يظهر ذكره* »He was so fat that his penis could hardly be seen due to obesity«.

40 101 Nacht, trans. Ott, 161.

41 The French model of the Latin version already attributes the story of the *balneator/seneschalcus* to the empress. See the insightful article by Speer, Sodomite King, on the transgendering operation in the earliest French verse adaptation K (see also n. 37). For a detailed comparative analysis of the story of the *seneschalcus/Roma* in the French A prose version, the Latin H version and the *Scala Celi*, see Steinmetz, *Exempel und Auslegung*, 107-112.

42 In the *Historia Septem Sapientum*, the story of the bath attendant (*seneschal*) is conflated with the story of the king going to Rome to steal the bodies Saint Peter and Saint Paul (*Roma*).

wanted to get close to him without a reward. Because of his obesity the king needed to buy himself a wife. So the king offered no less than 1,000 florins to the woman who agreed to sleep with him.⁴³

Error of Judgement and the Vice of Greed

In the Greek, Hebrew and Arabic versions, the bath attendant concludes that the prince did not have male genitals and that it was safe to bring him his own wife. Therefore, he keeps the money and takes her to the bathhouse. In the Latin version, where the king's obesity plays a different role, the seneschal does not make a wrong judgement about the king's sexual capacities and his capability to produce an heir. However, like the bath attendant, the seneschal is overcome by greed (11.3: *ductus cupiditate*). He tries to convince his own wife to have intercourse with the king. Since the empress is the narrator of this embedded story, it does not come as a surprise that the wife's role in the narrative is more elaborated. She is not only described as beautiful but also as chaste, and – in contrast to the other versions – she has some agency when asked to sleep with the king. Her words are reported in direct speech: she was not interested in the king's physical condition, but refused to commit »such a sin against God for some temporary goods« (11.5: *propter bona aliqua temporalia tale peccatum contra Deum*). This motivation could be an addition by the Christian commentator to enhance the link with their allegorical interpretation (see below). However, after being threatened by her husband, she gives in. The seneschal delivers her to the king during the night on the condition that she would not be seen by anyone. Although he pretends that it was *she* who did not want to be seen by the outside world, it is in fact *he* who needs to hide the identity of his own wife from the king.

An Unexpected Outcome

In the Greek version, the prince takes the woman to a place in the bathhouse where a bed is made. They stay there all night and he has sex with her »as men usually do« (p. 37/§48: ὡς ἀνδράσι εἶθισται) until the bath attendant peeks in and sees with his own eyes that the prince is able to have sex »the way men do« (p. 37/§48 κατὰ τοὺς ἀνδρας πράττοντα). »Struck by bitter regret« and »wounded by despair« (p. 37/§48: πικρᾷ τῇ μεταμελείᾳ πληγείς ... τοῦ ἀνδρὸς τῇ ἀθυμίᾳ τιτρωσκομένου), he sends his wife home. But she refuses to obey her husband and tells him that he should be ashamed of himself for handing her over to the prince to be violated all night long. Consumed with grief, he takes his own life.

In the Hebrew version, the tone of the story is humorous. When the bath attendant looks through the window and sees the prince making love to his wife no less than four times (a specification added in Ox. I), he rudely summons her to leave: »Haven't you had enough, whore? Cease your fornication« (p. 214 n. 3: צאי מתזנותיך זונה, לא די לך עדין, thus Ox. I, whereas

43 Speer, *Sodomite King*, describes how the French K version reworked the theme of obesity and sexuality from the »oriental tradition« (using Hebrew and Spanish for comparison). In the French K version, the (Egyptian) king is extensively described as homosexual and suffering from an illness, which the seneschal tries to cure. As we have seen, these elements are absent in the Latin version, where the king's obesity is reduced to a matter of unattractiveness. It is difficult to say whether the depiction of obesity in this story reflects ideas of contemporary audiences or is a matter of adapting the story to the plot (see n. 36).

Ox. II has: »It's time to come out, my mate!« (p. 214: צאי כבר זוגתי). However, she refuses to obey. The fifth counsellor reports her words in direct speech: »What are you complaining about? Did you not hire me out to the prince and take a hundred gold pieces for it? He won't release me until nightfall« (p. 216: והוא לא יניחני עד הערב). Instead of being indignant, she apparently enjoys being with the prince as much as he enjoys being with her. As Epstein⁴⁴ notices, this is one of the many instances in *Mishle Sendebār* of biblical language employed to a very worldly situation, the wife using God's words to Moses from Exodus, 14:15 to address her husband: »and the Lord said unto Moses: »Wherefore criest thou unto me?« For those familiar with the Hebrew Bible, the contrast between the language and the content is quite provocative. The story ends with the death of the bath attendant: he hangs himself out of regret.⁴⁵ So in this version, the wife is no longer a pawn in the game of the bath attendant as in the Greek *Syntipas*. The humorous touch is even more visible in a later Latin adaptation of *Mishle Sendebār* from Northern Italy in the 14th century (edited by Hilka in 1912), where lively dialogues emphasize the pleasure of the prince and the wife even more.⁴⁶

The Arabic version does not give any details about the wife, she has no visible agency through speech, thoughts, actions or emotions. The fourth vizier reports that the bath attendant looked through the peep hole and saw how the prince »laid her on her back and slept with her«.⁴⁷ Upon discovering the truth, he ran home and hung himself. There is no interaction between him and his wife.

In the Latin version, the bath attendant comes to the king's bedroom at the first cockcrow to fetch his wife. But the king, pleased with the arrangement, keeps her with him. The seneschal returns a second and a third time, but each time is turned away by the king. Finally, he reveals his secret in order to get her back. The shutters are opened and daylight streams in through the window, confirming the bath attendant's words. The king flies into a rage, exiles the seneschal and keeps his wife to live with her »in honour and joy« (*in honore et gaudio*). He then continues his journey to Rome – where he will be defeated.

The (mis)interpretation of visual evidence (seeing no genitals, watching the privacy of the bathhouse through the peephole) is absent in this version. Instead, the opposition between darkness and light is emphasized (the night in the bedroom behind closed doors, the daylight streaming through the window, uncovering the truth).

44 *Tales of Sendebār*, ed. Epstein, 217, n. 2.

45 I translate ויתנחם with »to regret«, not »to be consoled« (*Tales of Sendebār*, ed. Epstein, 217), cf. Num 23:19, where God is said not to have regrets like human beings do. Epstein adds some interesting variants from manuscript Vat. 100.3, e.g. mentioning that the prince's obesity is caused by overeating.

46 *Historia Septem Sapientum I and II*, ed. Hilka.

47 See note 31. Compare *Mi'at laylah*, ed. Šuraybit, وأبصر ما صنع الملك بأمراته وواقعها, «—And the owner of the bath came and looked through a small window, and he saw what the king did with his wife and that he slept with her three times.»

The Link between Frame Narrative and Embedded Tale

This section explores the relationship between embedded tale and its frame narrative in the case study of the bath attendant/seneschal. Using the metaphor of the kaleidoscope, the mirrors and the coloured pieces together form intricate patterns for the onlookers, which change every time the position of the tube is turned.

Generally speaking, in *The Book of Sindbad the philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome*, the interpretation of the moral of the embedded stories depends on how it is linked to the frame narrative: who is the narrator, who is supposed to identify with whom, and how do the themes addressed in the embedded story resonate with the frame story? The link between the frame narrative and the embedded stories is always tight, but seldom straightforward.⁴⁸ Although they share characters (ruler, wife, prince, servant) and themes (rash decisions, concern for succession, sexual intercourse without consent), they do not always have a one-to-one relationship. However, every time a character has finished their story, the king immediately changes his opinion regarding his verdict, either condemning his son to death or acquitting him. There is no mention of his inner thoughts and reasonings. As a result, the external audience is invited to actively think about the moral behind each story.

Find Out the Truth!

In the Greek, Hebrew and Arabic frame narratives, the advisors warn Cyrus, Bibar and Sayf al-Ālām respectively not to kill their son too hastily, but to investigate whether the stepmother/concubine tells the truth, before it is too late and they regret their decision. After all, the life of an only son and heir is at stake. They couch their warning in the form of an example and explicitly ask the ruler to identify with the bath attendant. The use of a parable allows the storytellers not only to activate their audience's participation, but also to take some liberties of speech. In the Greek version, for example, the fourth philosopher describes the bath attendant as »foolish« (§48: μάταιος, ματαιόφρων) – an expression he could never have used in a direct warning to King Cyrus (»You are a fool if ...«).⁴⁹

The fact that the bath attendant is worried about the prince's succession (albeit very briefly) encourages the ruler (whose emotions and decisions change rapidly throughout the frame narrative) to reflect upon his own legacy: if he kills his only son, he puts his succession at risk. Simultaneously, the question of succession might also remind the external audience of the stepmother/concubine, who, at the beginning of the story tries to make the prince speak in

48 On the difference between loose and tight relationships between frame and embedded stories, see Irwin, Frame. Marzolph, Phenomenology, discusses the nature and potentials of Middle Eastern frame tales, arguing that more attention is needed to the relationship between embedded tales and frame tales in a comprehensive comparative perspective.

49 Interestingly, in many versions (such as the Greek, Hebrew and Arabic versions discussed in this article), the king actually does not pay heed to the philosopher's advice: evidence plays no role in the outcome of the trial of the frame narrative, while the prince's word and the queen's confession do. However, in other versions (like the Latin version discussed in this article), proof of the empress's wickedness is added by the public exposure of a disguised man among her female entourage, with whom she had committed adultery over a long time.

the intimacy of her own quarters. After some sweet talk she proposes that the prince kill his father and marry her in order to become king himself.⁵⁰

However, the fact that the bath attendant uses his own wife for sex traffic does not exactly mirror the situation in the frame story. In the frame narrative, the concubine falsely accuses the prince of rape before the king and is negatively portrayed as a liar and bad woman,⁵¹ but the wife of the bath attendant in the embedded version is portrayed quite differently. In the Greek version, she is characterized as a beautiful, blameless victim with a strong sense of honour; in the Arabic version she remains a flat character without direct speech. In the Hebrew version, the most risqué of the three versions discussed in this article, she is her husband's antagonist and seems to turn her distressful situation to her advantage, getting even with her husband (and one would say rightly so). So, her portrayal is either in line with patriarchal expectations of a good wife or makes fun of these expectations.

The Double Embedding of the Seven Viziers

The way the Arabic version is embedded into a double frame story with multiple layers of narrators, both male and female, merits some attention here. Metaphorically speaking, we are dealing with a kaleidoscope within a kaleidoscope. The story on the bath attendant by the fourth vizier is embedded in the frame narrative of the *Seven Viziers*. In its turn, the *Seven Viziers* is embedded in the larger frame narrative of *101 Nights*, as one of the stories Shahrazad tells an Indian king. Night after night, sitting in her sealed room and spurred on by her sister Danishad, Shahrazad tries to save her own life by telling tales, often interrupting them half-way. As long as the king wants to listen to her, she is safe.

One would expect that this narrative situation might have resulted in a gendered perspective on the tale of the bath attendant, told on one level by the fourth vizier and on another level by Shahrazad. To mitigate the king's rage for being betrayed by his wife, she could have cast the female characters in a more favourable light. However, in the story of the bath attendant, the character of the wife remains sketchy.⁵² This could be explained by the fact that there is yet another narrative level, since the totality of *101 Nights* is told by an external primary narrator. This narrator transmits the story in written form and is responsible for the frame story as a whole, including all the embedded stories. During the first nights, he or she is anonymous, but from the second to the fourteenth night he is presented as Sheikh Faharayis («Sword of the Noblemen»), the philosopher who tells the story of *101 Nights* to a king. His presence is also visible in the text, since he articulates the overall structure with

50 In the Greek version (§9) it is not clear whether this was a provocation to make him speak or a proposal to take seriously (see van Opstall, *Wicked Stepmother*). The Hebrew (*Tales of Sendebār*, ed. Epstein, 82-85) and Arabic (Ott, *101 Nacht*, 146) versions are less ambiguous on this point.

51 In the Greek version, the wife's words »after being violated« (ὕβριςθεῖσα in §48) reminds the reader of the concubine's words »tried to violate me« ὕβριν περιᾶσθαι ἐπενεγκεῖν (in §45 and elsewhere in the frame narrative).

52 The positive ending of the frame story of the *Seven Viziers*, where the concubine is absolved by the king, is not a consequence of the female perspective, since other versions, such as the Hebrew version, end likewise. In the Greek version, the stepmother is condemned to a shame parade through town with a shaven head on a donkey, while in the Latin version she (and her female attendants) are condemned to death.

the so-called »night formula's« (»The first night. It is told ...«). To this external narrator, one could of course add the final narrative level of the storytellers of flesh and blood who actually told *101 Nights* during oral performances.

Ulrich Marzolph argues that in *1001 Nights* Shahrazad uses the mirroring of the frame story and embedded stories as a tactic to heal the king, but that this therapeutic effect is absent in *101 Nights*: »Shahrazad simply tells attractive and instructive stories in order to entertain the king and arouse his curiosity so that she may live on to the following night« (Marzolph and Chraïbi, *Hundred and One Nights*, 302). I think that the mirroring mechanism between frame narrative and embedded stories of the *Seven Viziers* is the same as in the Greek, Hebrew and Latin versions, but that the multilayered structure of *101 Nights* (a kaleidoscope within a kaleidoscope) causes the audience to lose sight of the lessons the stories contain.

Beware of Your Son! / Don't Be Greedy!

What is the link between the embedded story and the frame story in the Latin version? Let me first turn to the frame story and then to the spiritual exegesis attached to it. Told by the empress, the story serves another purpose, namely to convince Emperor Pontian to kill his son. The emperor is no longer supposed to identify with the seneschal who should have investigated the case and who hangs himself out of regret. Instead, the empress suggests a correspondence between the emperor and the king and the prince and the seneschal. Moreover, the focus shifts from the importance of truth-finding to the vice of greed (11.3: *cupiditas*).

After finishing her story, the empress emphatically asks her husband if he understood the message (11.17: »*Domine, intellexisti quod dixi?*«, »Master, did you understand what I have said?«), explaining that the trusted seneschal in her story, who betrays and confounds his own wife out of greed and is exiled from the kingdom, stands for his son, Prince Diocletian. Since his son intends to confound and destroy his father out of greed for power, she asks her husband to act like the king in the story and exile his son. The parallel offered by the empress is problematic: besides the fact that the king is corpulent, pagan, and lustful, he does not have anything to fear from the seneschal's actions. However, the empress manages again to convince her husband to condemn his son. As Ralph-Henning Steinmetz argues, in the Latin version, the elaborate interpretations with unexpected correspondences suggested by the empress are part of an overall educational strategy for the external audience: »the sevenfold juxtaposition of correct and incorrect interpretative methods [by the sages and the empress respectively] constitutes a critique, presented through narrative means, of the way in which illustrative narratives are handled in argumentation.«⁵³

In the meantime, the external audience is well aware that in the frame story the empress has falsely accused Prince Diocletian out of greed for power. In the Latin versions, she first plotted to kill her stepson for power (0.22) and then tried to seduce him (0.35-42). Even if there is no direct link between the wife of the seneschal in the embedded story and the empress in the frame story, it should be noted that the effect of the positive characterization of the bath attendant's wife is different for the internal audience and the external audience:

53 See Steinmetz, *Exempel und Auslegung*, 274 (English translation mine). See also *Exempel und Auslegung*, 127-152 and Gábor, *Seven Sages*, 28-30.

it invites the internal audience (the emperor) to think positively about women in general, including the empress (seeing them as victims of male greed), whereas for the external audience it emphasizes the contrast between the chaste wife and the lying empress.

The spiritual exegesis (*reductio*) that follows the story in certain manuscripts (see above) gives us a unique insight into an interpretation by and for a contemporary audience. The commentator transposes the story into a Christian parable by drawing different and more extensive parallels than the ones offered by the empress in the frame story. He also includes the positive figure of the bath attendant's wife in his exegesis, who now is said to represent the human soul. The commentator begins with a direct address to his external audience: »Dearest people!« (»*Karissimi!*«). The king, who is on his way to steal the bodies of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, is assigned the role of the devil: »That king is the devil, who is bloated (*inflatus*) to such an extent that he does not want to humiliate himself before God, and in a surprising way craves for women, meaning souls who are cleansed by God through baptism.«⁵⁴ The women (souls) hate the king (devil), who, with his army of pride, greed and extravagance (*superbia*, *avarice*, *luxuria*), tries to steal the bodies of Saint Peter and Saint Paul (the hearts of the chosen ones cleansed by baptism and penance). The greedy seneschal is the devil's servant, who symbolizes »every greedy man in this world« (*avarus quilibet huius mundi*), who is overcome by greed (*per avariciam ductus*) and delivers his own wife (soul) to the king (devil). He enters the royal bedroom (his conscience, *consciencia*), which is occupied by the king (devil). Although he repents and asks her back three times with words, but not with deeds, he loses the chance of salvation.⁵⁵

While the key word in the tale of the empresses is *cupiditas* (greed in a general sense), the commentator uses *avaricia* (avarice, with regard to material gain). By using *avaritia*, one of the commonly known seven deadly sins (in Latin: *gula*, *luxuria*, *avaritia*, *tristitia*, *ira*, *acedia*, *vanagloria*, *superbia*), he makes the story suitable and recognizable for a Christian audience.⁵⁶ Read as an allegory of the downfall of »any greedy man«, the story of the seneschal could have been used in church to instruct a Christian audience on the consequences of committing one of the seven deadly sins. However, the link to the frame story is lost, and the embedded story now functions as an autonomous parable.

54 *Rex iste dyabolus, qui est inflatus superbia in tantum, quod deo non vult se humiliare, et miro modo appetit mulieres, id est animas deo per baptismum lotas.*

55 Specific numbers appear not only here, but also elsewhere in the Latin embedded stories. They could have been added by the translator/adaptor to enhance the link between the story elements and his allegorical exegesis. In the story *Canis* (2.1-20), for example, there are three nurses, three jumps in the air by the dog, and four feet of the cradle. The spiritual exegesis that follows after *Canis* explains that the three nurses stand for contrition, confession and penitence; the three jumps for praying, fasting, and charity; the four legs of the cradle for the four cardinal virtues.

56 While *avaritia* is the common term for greed in Christian ethics, *cupiditas* is not unknown. It figures in 1 Timothy 6:10 *radix enim omnium malorum est cupiditas quam quidam appetentes erraverunt a fide et inseruerunt se doloribus multis* (»For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs«, transl. NIV). The same reference to the New Testament is present in the Pardoner's Tale of the *Canterbury Tales* (around 1400), concluding with *radix malorum est cupiditas*. Augustine opposes *cupiditas* (earthly greed or desire) to *caritas* (divine love) (*De doctrina christiana* 3.10.16).

To conclude, none of the four versions discussed in this paper is characterized by a one-to-one relation between embedded story and frame story. The position of the mirrors (frame story) within the tube determines the way the coloured pieces (embedded story elements) are refracted into complex patterns that mesmerize the onlooker: in the story of the bath attendant/seneschal as well as in the frame story, there are a king, a prince, an advisor, and a wife; there is sexual intercourse without mutual consent, there is an error of judgement, greed, regret, (self-)punishment. While the moral of the embedded story depends on its position in the frame story, the echoes between the characters and the themes are seldom straightforward but always contain surprises. The power of the embedded tales lies precisely in their open relation with the frame tale, encouraging the internal and external audiences to find out their meaning. Rather than reducing political, social or ethical dilemmas to simple solutions, the narrative structure invites us to actively reflect upon moral behaviour and the versatility of the story matter offers an open instead of a closed message.

Conclusion

The cross-cultural study of a story matter that travelled across so many boundaries has the potential to offer new insights into similarities and differences between medieval societies in the East and West. However, because of its circulation across a wide geographical area and large temporal span in both oral and written form, and because of the interplay between its frame narrative and tightly related embedded stories, the corpus is highly challenging. In this article I have demonstrated how the metaphor of the kaleidoscope might serve as a hermeneutic tool to visualize how different aspects of *The Book of Sindbad the Philosopher/The Seven Sages of Rome* are intertwined. The case of the story of the bath keeper/seneschal shows that each version's moral lessons emerge from the continually shifting interaction between the specific cultural context in which it circulated (the position of the tube), the frame story (the angle of the mirrors) and the embedded story (the disc of coloured pieces). Concerning, for example, the change from »error of judgement« and »greed« in the Greek, Hebrew and Arabic versions of the embedded story to the emphasis on »greed« alone in its Latin version: this adaptation can be explained by the switch of narrator from sage to empress (on the level of the frame story), but might also have been influenced by the use of the story as a free-standing example of *avaritia* in Franciscan preaching (on the level of the cultural context). These kinds of adaptations, such as the role of gender, the setting in space, or the (money) transactions, merit to be studied within a larger corpus. The dynamic character of the metaphor of the kaleidoscope, which with every turn shows a new pattern to the onlooker, might help to discover and interpret what is lost and gained in transmission, translation and adaptation, thus facilitating cross-cultural comparison and suggesting new directions for further research.

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