

Brazil: 1001 Nights Gets First Translation from Arabic to Portuguese

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"O my sister, relate to us a story to beguile the waking hour of our night." This is the cue - in the theatre jargon - from Dinazad so that the sweet and intelligent Sahrazad may begin to tell her marvellous stories to King Schahriar and, thus, escapes death for one thousand and one nights.

The stories of Sahrazad are in the book "The Thousand and One Nights," which reached the western world 300 years ago and now, for the first time, have been translated directly from the Arabic originals into Portuguese by Arabic language and literature professor Mamed Mustafa Jarouche, of the University of São Paulo (USP).

Up to now, the many copies that arrived in Brazil had been translated mainly from French.

The book, published by Globo publishing house, arrived at bookstores this Saturday, May 7. The Arabic storyline, which has been winning western readers since the 18th century, tells the story of a powerful Sassanian king called Schahriar, who discovers his wife is cheating on him and travels the world after spiritual enlightenment.

After a period of travels, he has a revelation: "Nobody can control women," as he is told by a young adulterous woman. The king therefore returns to his kingdom and decides to get married to a different woman each night and have her killed the next morning.

After the death of many women, comes Sahrazad, the daughter of the vizier of the kingdom. Brave, educated and intelligent, she adopts an infallible strategy to remain alive and stop the new deaths: she starts inventing stories to tell to the king, and she does that for one thousand and one nights.

She started narrating the tales at bedtime, and went on telling the story throughout the night and, when day was breaking, she stopped, normally at the climax of the story. Schahriar was curious to know the end of the story, and kept her alive for one more day.

"Sahrazad is a unique case of a female character who acts with her intellect to convince the king to abandon his awful and crazy strategy," stated Jarouche.

Another interesting posture, according to the professor, is that she uses pure narration to make the king change his mind, different from Arab wise-men who, in the stories of the time, always used maxims and treaties to convince the powerful.

Sahrazad's intelligence may also be identified in her narrative style. "She uses great suspense, which excites the kind and stretches the story," explained Jarouche.

Versions

There are many versions of the "Thousand and One Nights" in Brazil. In 1882, Carlos Jansen translated the German text "Tales of the Thousand and One Nights."

Since then, there have been various editions of the book. That is not to mention the number of children's books and cartoons.

But the book had never been translated directly from Arabic, most texts are based on the French edition by Antoine Galland, who lived between 1646 and 1715, and incorporated into the book famous tales like those of Simbad and

Aladdin, but that are not part of the original book.

Apart from that, Galland adapted the stories to the western customs of the time, adding the habit of drinking coffee.

So as to work on the translation to Portuguese, Jarouche studied manuscripts in Europe and the Middle East for five years. He studied three volumes of the Arabic text at the National Library of Paris.

"As the reading was very difficult due to dialects that no longer exist, mistakes in copying, smudges and deterioration, I studied another four of the main Arabic editions of the book," he explained.

The edition in Breslau, Germany (1825-43), which was the first complete publication, was one of them.

Another edition used in the study was the one in Bulaq - a neighborhood in Cairo -, which was the first based on just one Egyptian manuscript.

Jarouche also studied the second edition in Calcutta (1839-42) - which has nothing to do with the first edition, dated back to 1814-18, apart from the city where it was printed -, the Leiden, Netherlands, edition (1984) and recent manuscripts from Beirut, Lebanon (from 1991 and 1999). He also used books by scholars and various dictionaries.

The volume that arrived at bookstores on Saturday, in Brazil, is the first of five volumes, and it brings the first 170 nights. It will also be released in Portugal, and for this purpose will be adapted to the Portuguese spoken there. The second book has already been translated, but still has no definite date for publication.

Apart from the faithfulness to the story, Jarouche's translation includes notes with regard to linguistic aspects and to comparisons between various manuscripts and Arabic editions. It is believed that the story of Sahrazad arose in Iraq, in the ninth century, and from there was taken to Syria and later to Egypt.

The volume is also filled with valuable annexes such as translations of passages of the book that have more than one version and that are interesting to readers who would like to learn about the story of the creation of the text.

Another differential of the book is the Arabic names. In the volume, they are written as they should be read.

Sahrazad, for example, is spelt following international conventions: Šahrazad. The objective, according to the publishing house, was to respect readers avoiding "precarious solutions".

Descriptions of the symbols appear in the first pages of the book. The volume will be sold for approximately US\$ 22.

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