

**NAJLA KALACH**

(University of International Studies of Rome, Italy)

ORCID: 0000-0003-0807-5544 **Beyond the Folk Belief About the Madness  
and Foolishness of the Inhabitants of Homs:  
Legend or Reality?****Abstract**

The city of Homs, formerly known as Emesa, strategically located in the central region of Syria, has been long linked to a folk belief that portrays its inhabitants as mad and fool. Historical and traditional sources also link the alleged madness and foolishness of the Homsians to the day of Wednesday, the so-called “Day of the Fool” or “Homsians’ Feast”, which is considered a special day. The legend regarding the “Day of the Fool” and its celebration during Wednesdays has been passed down orally in the local culture and its origins likely trace back to ancient times when the city was still called Emesa. Therefore, this article attempts at reconstructing history and origins about this folk belief, and exploring the reasons behind the supposed madness and foolishness of the inhabitants of Homs and their connections to Wednesdays by comparing three studies published after 2000s in Arabic by Homsian intellectuals, namely Al-Aḥmad, Sam‘ān, and Kadr.

**Keywords:** Syria, Ḥomṣ, Oral Tradition, Folklore, Legend, Day of the Fool, Homsians’ Feast



## Introduction

Homs, called Emesa in ancient times, has always been one of the main cities of Syria, and is estimated to date back to the end of the third millennium BC. Located North of Damascus and South of Aleppo, this town has represented an important crossroads since the Hellenistic period and its history is deeply connected to Roman times. In fact, in 187 AD, the future Emperor Septimius Severus married Julia Domna, who was born in Emesa. She was the daughter of Julius Bassianus, the head priest of the pagan deity of Sun.<sup>1</sup>

Homs is a historic and cultural city, in fact some Homsian (or Homsī) intellectuals, poets and writers offered significant contributions to the literary arts. These include authors such as Nasīb ‘Arīḏa (1887–1946), Nudra Ḥaddād (1881–1950) and his brother ‘Abd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddād (1890–1963), who were representative members of the Pen League.<sup>2</sup>

Nowadays, despite its prosperous historical and cultural background, Homs is popular, with most people, also for two other antithetical reasons: a tragic history, and funny jokes. The former pertains to Homs being one of most affected regions since the beginning of the Syrian conflict;<sup>3</sup> the latter derives from the proverbial sense of humour and light-heartedness of its inhabitants. In fact, Homsians are known in the region for being the target of clever jokes, which typically revolve around a man from Homs, in the act of doing something perceived as foolish or naive.

As a matter of fact, Homsians are kind and warm people, to the point that their good-heartedness may be misconstrued as gullibility or slow wit, giving them their reputation of alleged foolishness, according to a folkloric belief. Furthermore, it is said that Homsians have a special celebration, referred to as “Day of the Fool” or “Homsians’ Feast”, which links the population to a notion of their alleged madness. While the jokes spread the idea that Homsians are *fool*, their association to this celebration propelled the belief that they are *mad* in folkloric legends.

This article explores what is at the core of the above-mentioned conception: is there a kernel of truth in this popular belief that depicts Homsians as fools or mad people? What is really behind the tradition of Day of the Fool, celebrated on Wednesdays? This article aims to retrace and compare the legend’s history by presenting the events in chronological order from findings from Roman Times through the works of three Homsian intellectuals namely ‘*Āḏāt wa-mu’taqadāt fī muḥāfaẓat Ḥimṣ*’ (Customs and Beliefs in Homs Governorate) by al-Aḥmad,<sup>4</sup> ‘Qīṣṣat yawm

<sup>1</sup> Ross Burns, *Monuments of Syria. An Historical Guide*, Bridgend 1994, pp. 128–129; Elisséeff, Nikita, ‘Hims’, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, CD-ROM Edition v.1.1., Brill, Leiden 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Allen, *La letteratura araba*, (trans.) Bruna Soravia, Bologna 2006, p. 151.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Syrian Cities Damage Atlas’ by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, Viewed 1 October 2021, <[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reach\\_thematic\\_assessment\\_syrian\\_cities\\_damage\\_atlas\\_march\\_2019\\_reduced\\_file\\_size\\_1.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reach_thematic_assessment_syrian_cities_damage_atlas_march_2019_reduced_file_size_1.pdf)>.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Awād Ḥālid al-Aḥmad, *Āḏāt wa-mu’taqadāt fī muḥāfaẓat Ḥimṣ*, Dimaşq 2011.

al-arbi'ā' fi Ḥims' (Wednesday's story in Homs) by Sam'ān,<sup>5</sup> and *Ġudūr an-nukta al-ḥimṣiyya. Ḥarb al-īdiyūlūgyā al-fukāhiyya wa-lītūrġiyā al-maġānīn al-mundaṭira* (The Homsian Joke's Roots. War of the Humorous Ideology and the Extinct Mad People Liturgy) by Kadr.<sup>6</sup> As expected, there are period gaps in the studies, as the time span observed is considerable. In the following sections, the reasons behind the supposed madness or foolishness of Homsians and their association to Wednesday Feasts will be presented.

### **The Alleged Madness and Foolishness of Homs' Inhabitants, what is Behind it?**

The writings of geographers and travellers are a valuable resource for the study of Arab-Islamic heritage, since they provide evidence about specific civilisations, pinning them at a specific time and place in history, by describing the territory, the population, and local habits.

As mentioned in the introduction, Homs has a very ancient history and occupies a strategic position<sup>7</sup> in Syria, which allowed it to be very frequented and well-described in the past by important geographers and travellers, of many different nationalities and religions, who gifted us with fascinating evidence regarding the cultural, historical, and geographical image of Homs.

For example, the historian and geographer Al-Mas'ūdī (10<sup>th</sup> century) in his historical compendium *Murūġ ad-dahab wa-ma'ādin al-ġawhar* (Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems),<sup>8</sup> reports a description of the land of Homs which according to him "it improves the body, purifies the colour, dulls understanding, eliminates jealousy, dries up impression, boosts the mind and is as clear as pure water."<sup>9</sup> Arab geographer and cartographer Ibn Ḥawqal (10<sup>th</sup> century) in his work *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ* (Picture of the Earth) affirms about Homs that "its fresh air and soil were the finest

<sup>5</sup> Architect Nihād Sam'ān is a Homsian intellectual and historian who is very well-known locally, thanks to his active contributions to the local history, culture, and literature. Due to the ongoing conflict in Syria the process of finding sources faced significant limitations and the effort to locate literary publications by this author proved challenging (some materials might be available for consultation, but at this time access was denied). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, publication by Sam'ān on online local journals was used, that is the article 'Qiṣṣat yawm al-arbi'ā' fi Ḥims', published online in *Madā* 5 (2018), Viewed 1 September 2020, <<http://sy-mada.com>>. In this electronic version, pages are not numbered.

<sup>6</sup> Ġurġ Kadr, *Ġudūr an-nukta al-ḥimṣiyya. Ḥarb al-īdiyūlūgyā al-fukāhiyya wa-lītūrġiyā al-maġānīn al-mundaṭira*, Dimašq 2019. In 2009, Syrian journalist and writer Ġurġ Kadr published a previous version of this book, titled *Adab an-nukta. Baḥṭ fi ġudūr an-nukta al-ḥimṣiyya*.

<sup>7</sup> The city of Homs is situated in the valley of the Orontes River, on a high hill approximately 500 meters above sea level, and is a fertile agricultural region, especially in the Western area. Thanks to its geographical location, the weather is pleasant, and the air is fresh and breezy. In fact, many geographers, and travellers of the past described Homs through their references to its waters, land, and quality of air.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Mas'ūdī, in: Kadr, *Ġudūr an-nukta al-ḥimṣiyya*, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> All the translations from Arabic to English are by the author of this article, except where indicated.

among the Islam countries.”<sup>10</sup> Al-Idrīsī (12<sup>th</sup> century), in his famous work, *Nuzhat al-muštāq fi ihtirāq al-āfāq* (The Book of Pleasant Journeys into Faraway Lands) wrote that “its city is a beautiful town on the level from the ground and full of people. (...) And its air is the fairest air in the cities of the Levant.”<sup>11</sup> Ibn Baṭṭūta also (14<sup>th</sup> century) in his *Rihla* (The Travels) provided a delightful image of the city describing it as “a beautiful city where its surroundings are impressive, its trees are full of leaves, its rivers are flowing, its markets have wide roads, and its beautiful mosque stands out and is centered with a water pond.”<sup>12</sup>

It should be considered that the descriptions provided by geographers, cosmographers, travellers might have been susceptible to variations, based on when the person arrived at their destination. Moreover, it should be noted that it is not possible to account for any biased or prejudiced views the authors might hold in their descriptions, therefore such reportages should not be assumed to coincide strictly with the reality of that time. However, there appears to be consensus that during the times between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries Homs was a flourishing town, a fertile land rich in water thanks to the river, that benefitted from fresh, healthy air, due to its geographical position. But what about its inhabitants? In the following lines that is, what is behind the alleged madness and foolishness of the inhabitants of Homs and its connections to Wednesdays will be discussed.

It is essential to retrieve past evidence, if we want to explore the popular belief that – generally-speaking – Homsians are mad or gullible, as they appear to be the center of many Syrian jokes. Perhaps what is called “foolishness” or “gullibility” nowadays is what used to be considered as “madness” in past times. Over the centuries, historical sources and events connected to the popular belief likely concurred to the creation of legends and tales about the alleged madness and foolishness of Homs’ inhabitants. The studies consulted for the purpose of this article shed some light about some of the possible explanations on the topic.

One of the versions regarding the alleged madness or stupidity in Homs is presented by both Samʿān and Kadr. This story dates back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when Homs was still Emesa, and under the Byzantine domination. The anecdote centers on Saint Symeon (or Simeon), known at the time as the Holy Fool.

The Saint’s story is mainly detailed in biographies by Evagrius and Leontios, who inform us that Symeon was born at the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD in Edessa (presently, Turkey) and raised in a wealthy family. At the age of 20, after a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he became a monk, along with his friend John. For a period of about 30 years, they lived in a desert location near the Dead Sea to pursue asceticism, until Symeon decided to rejoin society (about 550 AD) and moved to Emesa. There, he began the challenging pursuit of “Foolishness for Christ”, as a way to preserve the

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Ḥawqal, in: Kadr, *Ġudūr an-nukta al-ḥimšiyya*, p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Idrīsī, in: Kadr, *Ġudūr an-nukta al-ḥimšiyya*, p. 57; Muḥammad ʿĪd al-Manšūr, *Ḥimš fi-ʿuyūn ar-rahḥāla*, Dimašq 2015, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn Baṭṭūta, in: Kadr, *Ġudūr an-nukta al-ḥimšiyya*, p. 57; Al-Manšūr, *Ḥimš fi-ʿuyūn ar-rahḥāla*, pp. 17–19.

fruits of his spiritual labour matured during the years in isolation. In Emesa, Symeon passed himself off as a simpleton, behaving strangely, pretending to be confused and acting as a fool, in order to reach a complete detachment from mundane life; he was, therefore, regarded as a madman by the community. As stated by Krueger, at that time “Madness, furthermore, was commonly regarded as a form of demoniac possession, and Symeon himself-pretends to be possessed by demons as part of his folly,”<sup>13</sup> so his quest to be a “fool”, in the spiritual sense of the word, may have been what granted him a reputation of being “mad”, instead.

According to the sources,<sup>14</sup> Symeon used to spend his time in unceasing prayer and strict fasting, and he performed miracles in Emesa. Nobody knew that his act was all a pretense, except for the deacon of the Church of Homs, and it was only after his death that the secret life of Symeon came to light. Subsequently, his strict form of ascetism reached across Europe and Russia; then Islam came, and Sufism later spread, thus the city of Homs was theatre to the rise of asceticism of Christian origins and, later, Islamic. That is how Homs came to acquire a special stature in this field. Moreover, Sam‘ān<sup>15</sup> affirmed that he did not find any other reference about the madness or foolishness of Homsians prior to Symeon’s story.

The image of Saint Symeon and his “fool” behaviour undoubtedly left an indelible mark in the history of Emesa; in fact, it probably influenced what was reported by geographers and travellers regarding the madness of Homs’ inhabitants even centuries later since his prominent role in Homs passed down through time, however the authenticity of some peculiarities of the character mentioned in the studies might raise doubts.

In order to investigate how the concepts of “foolishness” and “madness” of the past have survived up to present days, the extracts from the works of geographers, travellers, and scholars will be once more considered, but this time in reference to the inhabitants of Homs.

Al-Muqaddasī (10<sup>th</sup> century) in his book *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī-ma‘rifat al-aqālīm* (The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions) affirmed that:

حمص ليس في الشام أكبر منها (...) وفيه أقاويل لا تصح، والبلد شديد الاختلال متداع إلى الخراب، والقوم حمقى.<sup>16</sup>

Homs is the biggest in the Levant (...) There are stories that are not true, as the country is very imbalanced and is falling into ruin, and population is fool.

<sup>13</sup> Derek Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius’s Life and the Late Antique City*, Berkeley 1996, p. 106.

<sup>14</sup> Kadr, *Ġudūr an-nukta al-ḥimṣīyya*, pp. 102–104; Sam‘ān, ‘Qīṣṣat yawm al-arbi‘ā’ fī Ḥimṣ’; Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius’s Life and the Late Antique City*, pp. 90–125.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Muqaddasī, in: Al-Aḥmad, *‘Ādāt wa-mu‘taqadāt fī muḥāfaẓat Ḥimṣ*, p. 78; Kadr, *Ġudūr an-nukta al-ḥimṣīyya*, pp. 54–55; Sam‘ān, ‘Qīṣṣat yawm al-arbi‘ā’ fī Ḥimṣ’.

In his vast geographical encyclopaedia *Mu'ğam al-buldān* (Dictionary of Countries) the geographer Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (13<sup>th</sup> century) offers an unflattering representation of Homs and its inhabitants since he states that the air and land are putrid at the point that this characteristic can affect the mind of those who visit the city.<sup>17</sup> He wrote:

ومن عجيب ما تأملته من أمر حمص فساد هوائها وتربتها اللذين يفسدان العقل حتى يضرب بحماقتهم المثل.<sup>18</sup>

What most struck me about Homs was the putrid air and land, which spoiled the mind until one is hit by their madness.

The Arab geographer Ad-Dimašqī (14<sup>th</sup> century) wrote about Homs in his cosmographic work *Nuḥbat ad-dahr fī 'ağā'ib al-barr wa al-baḥr* (The Best of the Times of the Wonders of the Land and Sea):

أهل حمص يوصف عامتهم بقلة العقل ويُحكى عنهم حكايات شبيهة بالخرافات.<sup>19</sup>

The general people of Homs are described as narrow-minded and stories similar to legends are told about them.

As Al-Aḥmad states in his study,<sup>20</sup> it is worth mentioning what the scholar Aḥmad Waṣfī Zakariyyā (1889–1964) affirmed, many centuries later, about the foolishness or madness in Homs, in his work dated 1934 *Ġawla aṭariyya ba'd al-bilād aš-šāmiyya* (An Historical Tour in Some Countries of the Levant), where he blamed the geographers and historians for stigmatising the Homsians and he affirmed:

إن أهل حمص كما أعرفهم لا يختلفون في الفطنة والنباهة عن بقية الشاميين، وحمص كانت وما برحت تنجب من الشعراء والفضلاء عدداً غير يسير.<sup>21</sup>

As I know, people from Homs are not different from other Syrians in their ability and intelligence, in fact, Homs is still producing large number of poets and scholars.

Unfortunately, there is no way to ensure that the sources provided are reliable or authentic, as influences by previous writings cannot be ruled out. Furthermore, the

<sup>17</sup> Al-Aḥmad, *Ādāt wa-mu'taqadāt fī muḥāfaẓat Ḥimṣ*, p. 79.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Ḥamawī, in: Al-Aḥmad, *Ādāt wa-mu'taqadāt fī muḥāfaẓat Ḥimṣ*, p. 79; Kadr, *Ġudūr an-nukta al-ḥimṣiyya*, p. 57; Sam'ān, 'Qisṣat yawm al-arbi'ā fī Ḥimṣ'; Al-Manṣūr, *Ḥimṣ fī- 'uyūn ar-rahḥāla*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>19</sup> Ad-Dimašqī, in: Al-Aḥmad, *Ādāt wa-mu'taqadāt fī muḥāfaẓat Ḥimṣ*, p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Aḥmad, *Ādāt wa-mu'taqadāt fī muḥāfaẓat Ḥimṣ*, p. 80.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 80.

argument about foolishness and madness is very complex, since there is a tendency in human beings to consider some people or situations as “mad” or “crazy”, often based on dubious subjective criteria or lack of truthfulness. Perhaps some descriptions have a basis of truth, as might be the case with the stories about the Feasts of Homs, which will be presented in the following sections.

### Wednesdays and the Feasts of Homs: The Origins of a Legend

Nowadays, in Homsian folklore, in addition to jokes, Homs is immediately associated to the so-called in the local dialect, *'īd al-maḡanīn* (Day of the Fool), *'īd al-ḥamāšna* (Homsians' Feast) or *'īd al-ḡadba al-ḥumšiyi* (the Feast of Homsian Foolishness). This section is devoted to investigating what is behind the fame of Wednesdays and the Homsians' Feast and whether this is more about reality or legend. In Al-Aḥmad's study it is stated that “according to oral folklore, Wednesday is considered an extraordinary or special day, however, no celebrations or rituals seem to be performed, specifically on this day.”<sup>22</sup>

According to the sources consulted for this section, it is possible to highlight three main connections related Wednesdays, namely: the celebration of the Sun god in Emesa, Wednesday's prayer during Mu'āwiya's ruling, and the legend of Tamerlane.

The most ancient story dates back to Roman times, when Homs was Emesa. Al-Aḥmad then wrote<sup>23</sup> that the origin of the Homsians' Feast was a festivity celebrated on Wednesdays, dedicated to a Roman deity, and supposedly honored in the Eastern region of Homs. In fact, as confirmed by Seyrig:

Among the great devotions of Roman Syria, that is to say among those that have achieved more than local fame – Hierapolis, Doliché, Emesa, Palmyra, Heliopolis – only one, that of Emesa, has an indisputably solar character.<sup>24</sup>

The celebration mentioned by Al-Aḥmad<sup>25</sup> was dedicated to the local deity, whose worship reached its peak in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD under Varius Avitus Bassianus and who, at the age of fourteen, became Emperor of Rome (218–222) under the name of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus. He belonged to the Severian dynasty, as he was the grandson of Julia Maesa, Julia Domna's sister, both daughters of the high priest of the

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, pp. 77–78.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 81.

<sup>24</sup> Seyrig Henri, 'Antiquités Syriennes: 95. Le Culte Du Soleil En Syrie a L'époque Romaine', *Syria* 48, 3–4 (1971), p. 340. Quotation translated from French.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Aḥmad, *'Ādāt wa-mu'taqadāt fī muḥāfaẓat Ḥimṣ*, p. 81.

Sun god at Emesa; thus he served as head priest of the Sun god Elagabalus, which is why he was himself also called Elagabalus.<sup>26</sup>

Elagabalus was notable for his eccentric and depraved behaviour, as he took many lovers of both sexes, and the words of Mader offer a brief insight into his character:

Consistent emphasis on the bizarre and the extravagant marks him as a clear political type, a larger-than-life tyrannus, symmetrical inversion of the bonus princeps, who refines the vices of his predecessors and takes them to unsurpassed heights. The net effect is a dazzling sense of climax and finality at the end of the dynasty: ultimus Antoninorum, grand satrap of pleasure, the cross-dressing, gender-bending, convention-defying showman who turns the principate onto its head and into an amusement park, an endless skein of absurdity in which symbolics overtake reality.<sup>27</sup>

Kadr<sup>28</sup> also mentioned the Sun god in Emesa and suggested that it was likely that the extravagant celebrations performed at the times of Elagabalus, such as ritual incantations, music, and dance, could lead people to madness.

The accounts of Elagabalus' life were supposedly written in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by Aelius Lampridius in *Historia Augusta*, a collection of biographies of emperors whose reliability is uncertain. As a matter of fact, the first political-biographical section of *Vita Heliogabali* is generally considered to be historically accurate, while the second one concerning Elagabalus' legendary excesses appear to have been exaggerated.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, it is the most detailed work that we have about Elagabalus. However, Latin sources do not appear to have been included in any of the Homsian scholars' selected studies for the purpose of the present article, thus *Vita Heliogabali* in *Historia Augusta* was analysed. Despite debates regarding its reliability, it offers an interesting reference to the emperor's foolishness that can add one more piece to the analysis of the article's topic, since in *Vita Heliogabali* it is reported that:

In castris vero milites precanti praefecto dixerunt se parsuros esse Heliogabalo, si et inpuros homines et aurigas et histriones a se dimoveret atque ad bonam frugem rediret his maxime summotis, qui cum omnium dolore apud eum plurimum poterant et qui omnia eius vendebant vel veritate vel fumis. Remoti sunt denique ab eo Hierocles, Cordius et

<sup>26</sup> Edward Lipiński, 'Elaha Gabal D'Émèse Dans Son Contexte Historique' *Latomus* 70, 4, 2011, pp. 1081–1101; Gottfried Mader, 'History as Carnival, or Method and Madness in the *Vita Heliogabali*', *Classical Antiquity* 24, 1, 2005, pp. 131–172; Edgardo Badaracco, *Il culto del Deus Elagabalus. Dal I al III secolo d.C. attraverso le testimonianze epigrafiche, letterarie e numismatiche*, Trecase 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Mader, 'History as Carnival', p. 151.

<sup>28</sup> Kadr, *Ğudūr an-nukta al-ħimşiyya*, p. 100.

<sup>29</sup> Mader, 'History as Carnival', p. 131.



Myrissimus et duo improbi familiares, qui eum ex *stulto stultio*rem faciebant.<sup>30</sup>

In the Camp, on the other hand, the soldiers replied to the entreaties of the prefect that they would spare Elagabalus' life on the condition that he would send away all his filthy creatures, his chariot-drivers, and his actors, and return to a decent mode of living, dismissing particularly those who, to the general sorrow, possessed the greatest influence over him and sold all his decisions, actual or pretended. He did, finally, dismiss Hierocles, Cordius, and Mirissimus and two other base favourites who were making him even more of a *fool* than he was naturally.<sup>31</sup>

It could be assumed plausible that, during the celebration of the Sun god, people used to act in an insane and foolish ways, as did their Emperor Elagabalus, and that witness of this behaviour could have started the legends and histories about madness and foolishness within the region, which were then passed down orally. Even a brief comment like “qui eum ex stulto stultio rem faciebant” may have influenced the stories that followed about the alleged madness and foolishness of Emesians. However, in *Vita Heliogabali* no reference was found about those rituals being specifically celebrated on Wednesdays.

Another version of the events related to Wednesdays is mentioned in the studies of Kadr and Sam'ān.<sup>32</sup> According to the scholars, this version dates back to the Islamic period and it is related to Mu'āwiya Ibn Abī Sufyān, the Muslim leader and founder of the Umayyad dynasty of caliphs, who reigned from 661 to 680. The connection with Wednesdays would relate to times when Mu'āwiya was commander-in-chief and governor of Syria by the order of the caliph, 'Umar Ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb. He was ruling the four *ḡund*<sup>33</sup> of the Greater Syria (*Bilād aš-Šām*): Homs, Damascus, Jordan, and Palestine. Sam'ān<sup>34</sup> reports that 'Amr Ibn al-Āṣ, Mu'āwiya's worker, came to Homs probably on a Wednesday with the intention of leading the soldiers to Šiffīn<sup>35</sup> and urging its people to rush to the battlefield there.

Sam'ān<sup>36</sup> finds that one of the Homsians, acting as a spokesperson, expressed the intention of postponing going into battle a day or two because they do not want to miss Friday prayer, since Muslims would usually perform Friday prayers and then march over new territories in the following days. So, 'Amr Ibn al-Āṣ proposed to

<sup>30</sup> See Web references: Latin text is taken from 'Digital library of late-antique Latin texts'.

<sup>31</sup> See Web references: English translation is published online and transcribed from the Loeb Classical Library edition, 1924.

<sup>32</sup> Kadr, *Ġudūr an-nukta al-ḥimṣiyya*, pp. 25–27; Sam'ān, 'Qiṣṣat yawm al-arbi'ā' fi Ḥimṣ'.

<sup>33</sup> Military settlements and districts in which Arab soldiers were quartered.

<sup>34</sup> Sam'ān, 'Qiṣṣat yawm al-arbi'ā' fi Ḥimṣ'.

<sup>35</sup> The Battle of Šiffīn, dated 657, was a crucial one, fought between two Muslim armies, the Iraqi forces of Caliph 'Alī Ibn Abi Ṭālib and the Syrian forces of Mu'āwiya.

<sup>36</sup> Sam'ān, 'Qiṣṣat yawm al-arbi'ā' fi Ḥimṣ'.

them to perform the prayer on that day, a Wednesday, instead of Friday. The Homsians agreed and had their Friday prayer on a Wednesday. Thus, people of neighbouring towns attributed to Homsians a lack of intelligence, or “foolishness” since Friday prayers are not performed on Wednesdays. Sam‘ān also notes that in the work *Murūğ ad-dahab wa-ma‘ādin al-ğawhar*<sup>37</sup> by Al-Mas‘ūdī a letter sent by Mu‘āwiya is referenced, which mentioned people who were not able to differentiate between a male and a female camel and who prayed Friday prayers on Wednesdays. This likely referred to Homsians, which would increase the plausibility of the belief, since it would be based on a historical source.<sup>38</sup>

The last link of the folk belief regarding Wednesdays as a special day in Homs, orally passed down from generation to generation, is related to the arrival in Homs of the Turco-Mongol conqueror Timur Lank (Taymūr Lang, 1336–1405), also known as Tamerlane.

Al-Aḥmad<sup>39</sup> states in his study that, when the inhabitants of Homs discovered that Tamerlane was about to reach the town, they gathered round and decided to dress up in an odd way, as a deterring strategy: they dangled clogs on their chest, they covered their faces with sieves, and they cast around pieces of broken jars, so that everything would appear in disarray. When the fierce warrior arrived, they welcomed him, waving palm leaves and olive branches. When interpreters translated what the Homsians were saying, he happily sat at on the throne they offered and received their gifts and loyalty. Tamerlane and his counselors were so astonished and caught off guard by the friendly and welcoming reaction that they decided that taking the city was not worthwhile. Al-Aḥmad adds that it is said that Tamerlane spent the night in Homs, and that it was a Wednesday, but that in the early morning he and his warriors left the town and headed to Damascus, where the inhabitants were massacred.

Kadr<sup>40</sup> also reports the story of Tamerlane and presents historical evidence, provided by other scholars, which attests that Tamerlane passed, in fact, through Homs without destroying it.

Even though this account is the most popular in the local oral tradition, no official sources about the Homsians’ mad performance have been found yet to confirm its reliability. If this version is true, perhaps it could be posited that at the time a belief existed that madness was airborne, leading Tamerlane and his army to flee the town, in order to escape from the curse of madness which seemed to have affected Homs inhabitants.

By way of conclusion, regarding Wednesdays and Day of the Fool, thanks to the comparison of the three studies on which this article is based, it is possible to summarise that al-Aḥmad<sup>41</sup> did not settle on a specific position on the topic. In fact, he just mentions both the story of the Sun god in Emesa and the story of Tamerlane’s arrival at

<sup>37</sup> Also mentioned in: Kadr, *Ğuđūr an-nukta al-ħimşiyya*, p. 28.

<sup>38</sup> This account is also mentioned in: Kadr, *Ğuđūr an-nukta al-ħimşiyya*, pp. 27–28.

<sup>39</sup> Al-Aḥmad, *‘Adāt wa-mu‘taqadāt fi muḥāfazat Ĥimş*, pp. 80–81.

<sup>40</sup> Kadr, *Ğuđūr an-nukta al-ħimşiyya*, pp. 40–47.

<sup>41</sup> Al-Aḥmad, *‘Adāt wa-mu‘taqadāt fi muḥāfazat Ĥimş*, pp. 79–81.

Homs whereas Kadr<sup>42</sup> digs deeper into the origins of Day of the Fool and sees it as having a religious-mythological matrix related to the Christian celebration of Carnival. It is explained in Kadr's study that this holiday takes place between February and March before the start of Lent: in the days leading up to the Lenten fast, people dedicated themselves to amusement and joy, thus Wednesday represents the last day of freedom before Lent. He also highlights that the origin of the folk belief on Wednesday goes back to the ancient secular mythology, considering that the feast called Carnival is centuries old for Christianity and Islam. Referring to the fact that Homsians are considered as *mağādīb* (fools), Kadr concludes<sup>43</sup> that it is just a way to promote revenge and nastiness, in fact according to him the Feast of Fools was one of the celebrations of the Spring Feast which it used to fall on Thursdays. Since the celebrations included licentious behaviours, thus merchants, travellers, and voyagers interpreted it as a deviant behaviour, so they believed that those people were affected by foolishness. Furthermore, Kadr<sup>44</sup> claims that the Spring's feasts that used to take place in Homs between March and April, including the so-called *Hamīs al-mağnūna* (Crazy Thursday); thus, he believes that the Day of the Fool must have been on a Thursday and not on a Wednesday, because, on the Wednesday, preparations for the Thursday feasts were taking place.<sup>45</sup>

As for Sam'ān,<sup>46</sup> he affirms that the most plausible version relating to Wednesdays and Day of the Fool is the one concerning the performance of Wednesday prayers in lieu of Friday prayers, at the times of Mu'āwiya.

Concerning the version related to Tamerlane, unfortunately no written accounts about Tamerlane were found. It is possible that written sources about Tamerlane's story existed, but they might have been destroyed or lost. If we accept as true that the Homsians acted in a crazy way in front of Tamerlane to avoid the town's conquest and that they succeeded, that would be indicative of their great cleverness, rather than madness or foolishness, since they would have managed to avoid the city's destruction by using their shrewdness.

## Conclusions

By taking into account the weight of popularity of the belief of alleged madness and foolishness of the Homsians, this article aimed at presenting a historical and folkloristic reconstruction of the events that plausibly led to its creation and diffusion through the comparative discussion of three studies by the Homsian intellectuals Al-Aḥmad (2011), Sam'ān (2018) and Kadr (2019).

<sup>42</sup> Kadr, *Ġudūr an-nukta al-ḥimṣiyya*, pp. 82–83.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, p. 89.

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, p. 95.

<sup>45</sup> For further reading see Jean-Yves Gillon, *Les anciennes fêtes de printemps à Homs*, Damas 1993.

<sup>46</sup> Sam'ān, 'Qiṣṣat yawm al-arbi'ā' fi Ḥimṣ'.

The analysed sources showed a reasonable level of consistency and coherence. We will likely never know for sure if all the claims presented in the study are true or not. In fact, we need to note that since Emesa was an important junction, connecting the inner territories to the Mediterranean Sea, throughout history it was conquered and ruled by many dynasties who destroyed and rebuilt Homs every time. In addition, there have been natural disasters, including earthquakes, which may have destroyed essential documents.<sup>47</sup> Further investigation on this topic and a more in-depth comparison to cross-disciplinary sources is needed, especially of the Latin sources.

In conclusion, if the claims were false, then the accounts about the alleged madness and foolishness of Homs' inhabitants and their feasts would be still interesting nonetheless for their anthropological value, in fact they still belong to the local tradition; as a matter of fact, Homsians are fond of such legends. Furthermore, despite the funny jokes that people make about the simple-mindedness of Homsians and what people say about crazy Wednesdays in Homs, Homsians do not expend much effort to counter this custom, nor are they offended by it, as they try to face life with a smile, even in the current tragic circumstances.

## References

- Al-Aḥmad, 'Awād Ḥālid, *'Ādāt wa-mu'taqadāt fī muḥāfaẓat Ḥimṣ*, Wizārat at-Taḳāfa, Dimašq 2011.
- Allen, Roger, *La letteratura araba*, (trans.) Bruna Soravia, Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna 2006.
- Badaracco, Edgardo, *Il culto del Deus Elagabalus. Dal I al III secolo d.C. attraverso le testimonianze epigrafiche, letterarie e numismatiche*, Youcanprint, Tricase 2017.
- Burns, Ross, *Monuments of Syria. An Historical Guide*, I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, Bridgend 1994.
- Ad-Dimašqī, Šams ad-Dīn, *Kitāb nuḥbat ad-dahr fī 'aḡā'ib al-barr wa-al-baḥr*, Imperial Academy of Arts, Saint Petersburg 1865.
- Elisséeff, Nikita, 'Ḥimṣ', in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, CD-ROM Edition v.1.1., Brill, Leiden 2001.
- Gillon, Jean-Yves, *Les anciennes fêtes de printemps à Ḥomṣ*, Institut français de Damas, Damas 1993.
- Al-Hamawī, Yāqūt, *Mu'ḡam al-buldān*, Dār Šādir, Bayrūt 1956.
- Ibn Baṭṭūta, *Riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūta. Tuḥfat an-nuẓẓār fī ḡarā'ib al-amṣār wa-'aḡā'ib al-asfār*, Dār Iḥyā' al-'Ulūm, Bayrūt 1987.
- Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb šūrat al-arḍ*, Manšūrāt Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, Bayrūt 1992.
- Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb al-masālik wa-al-mamālik*, Brill, Leiden 1872.
- Ibn Ġubayr, *Riḥlat Ibn Ġubayr*, Dār Šādir, Bayrūt 1964.
- Al-Idrīsī, *Nuḥat al-muštāq fī iḥtirāq al-āfāq*, Vol. 1, Maktabat at-Taḳāfa ad-Dīniyya, Al-Qāhira 2002.
- Kadr, Ġürġ, *Adab an-nukta. Baḥṭ fī ḡudūr an-nukta al-ḥimṣiyya*, Dār Raslān, Dimašq 2009.
- Kadr, Ġürġ, *Ḡudūr an-nukta al-ḥimṣiyya. Ḥarb al-īdiyūlūġiyā al-fikāhiyya wa-litūrġiyā al-maḡānīn al-mundaṭira*, Dār Mamdūḥ 'Udwān li-an-Našr wa-at-Tawzī', Dimašq 2019.
- Krueger, Derek, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1996.
- Lipiński, Edward, 'Elaha Gabal D'Ēmèse Dans Son Contexte Historique', *Latomus* 70, 4 (2011), pp. 1081–1101.
- Mader, Gottfried, 'History as Carnival, or Method and Madness in the *Vita Heliogabali*', *Classical Antiquity* 24, 1 (2005), pp. 131–172.

<sup>47</sup> Mohamed Reda Sbeinati, Ryad Darawchek, Mikhail Mouty, 'The historical earthquakes of Syria: an analysis of large and moderate earthquakes from 1365 B.C. to 1900 A.D.', *Annals of Geophysics* 48, 3 (2005), pp. 347–350.

- Al-Manşūr, Muḥammad ʿĪd, *Ḥimş fī-ʿuyūn ar-raḥḥāla*, Wizārat at-Taqāfa, Dimaşq 2015.
- Al-Masʿūdī, Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī, *Murūğ aḍ-ḍahab wa-maʿādin al-ğawhar*, Vol. 1, Dār al-Fikr, Bayrūt 1973.
- Al-Masʿūdī, Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī, *Murūğ aḍ-ḍahab wa-maʿādin al-ğawhar*, Vol. 3, Dār al-Ḥiğra, Qom 1830.
- Al-Muqaddasī, Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī-maʿrifat al-aqālīm*, Wizārat at-Taqāfa wa-al-Irşād al-Qawmī, Dimaşq 1980.
- Samʿān, Nihād, ʿQişşat yawm al-arbiʿāʿ fī Ḥomşʿ, *Madā* 5 (2018), Viewed 1 September 2020, <<http://sy-mada.com>>.
- Sbeinati, Mohamed Reda, Ryad Darawcheh, Mikhail Mouty, ʿThe historical earthquakes of Syria: an analysis of large and moderate earthquakes from 1365 B.C. to 1900 A.D.ʿ, *Annals of Geophysics*, 48, 3 (2005), pp. 347–435.
- Seyrig, Henri, ʿAntiquités Syriennes: 95. Le Culte Du Soleil En Syrie a Lʿépoque Romaineʿ, *Syria* 48, 3–4 (1971), pp. 337–373.
- Zakariyyā, Waşfī Aḥmad, *Ğawla aḡariyya fī baʿd al-buldān aš-şāmiyya*, Dār al-Fikr, Dimaşq 1934.

### Web References

- Syrian Cities Damage Atlas*, United Nations Institute for Training and Research, Viewed 2 September 2020, <[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reach\\_thematic\\_assessment\\_syrian\\_cities\\_damage\\_atlas\\_march\\_2019\\_reduced\\_file\\_size\\_1.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reach_thematic_assessment_syrian_cities_damage_atlas_march_2019_reduced_file_size_1.pdf)>.
- Historia Augusta*, Viewed 1 September 2020, <[https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia\\_Augusta/Elagabalus/1\\*.html#18](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia_Augusta/Elagabalus/1*.html#18)>.