THE MISWĀK, AN ASPECT OF DENTAL CARE IN ISLAM

by

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Gustav Nachtigal,1 the famous nineteenth-century traveller and explorer of the Sahara and Sudan, relates that the women of Wadāʾi, a region in the Sudan, rarely go out without their toothbrushes in the corner of their mouths. These toothbrushes are, as he says, prepared from the wood of the siwāk (Salvadora persica L.), which has been made fibrous at the end, and as soon as they sit down they use these brushes diligently. Reporting in an article in 1915 the information of Dr Meyerhof, an ophthalmologist who had practised for many years in Cairo, Wiedemann2 declares that the Nubians always carry with them a wooden stick of about 15 to 20 cm, called siwāk, to which they probably owe their shiny white teeth. Von Luschan,3 a privy councillor from Berlin, informed him that this kind of wooden stick could be found not only among the Nubians, but throughout Africa, even among the most southern Bantu tribes. He also told him that there still were, or had been until recently, thousands of caravan-carriers who took nothing else with them but a gourd for water and a “msuaki” (= miswāk). Even nowadays pious Muslims belonging to the religious movement called Jamāʿat al-tabligh4 can often be seen wearing the siwāk in their breast pockets, which they use on every suitable occasion.

In this way, all these Muslims follow the example of their Prophet who according to the Ḥadith,5 was a fervent supporter of its use. The siwāk was, according to him, a

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3 Eilhard Wiedemann, ‘Über Zahnpflege bei den muslimischen Völkern’, Gesammelte Schriften zur Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaftsgeschichte, 1984, 2: 873–8, p. 874. Wiedemann originally published this article in 1918. Von Luschan recommended him not to translate miswāk as “Zahnbürste” but as “Zahnpinsel”.
4 On this religious movement founded in India in the middle of the nineteenth century see Anwarul Haq, The faith movement of Maulānā Muḥammad Ilyās, London, Allen and Unwin, 1972. I thank my friend Yasien Mohammad for this information.
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purgative for the mouth and a pleasure for Allâh. When the Prophet came into his house he first of all used the siwâk.6 When he woke during the night, he cleansed his mouth with it, then washed himself and prayed.7 And the only reason he did not declare its use obligatory for the community before every salât (ritual prayer) was that he feared to burden his followers.8 His servant ‘Abd Allâh b. Mas‘ûd was called šâhib al-siwâk since he was the one who took care of the Prophet’s siwâk.9 When the Prophet was on his deathbed he cleansed his mouth with the siwâk, after Aisha had chewed it so that it became smooth and soft.10 The extent to which the use of the siwâk, in the Muslim mind, is associated with the Prophet, may be illustrated by the fact that the tree from which the siwâk was prepared was called siwâk al-Nabi11 or “siwâk of the Prophet” in Algeria. In spite of the Prophet’s example and the importance he attached to the use of the siwâk, Muslim law (Fiqh) did not make its use obligatory, but only desirable at all times.12

The kind of wood recommended for the preparation of the toothbrush called siwâk or miswâk13 is that of the arâk14 tree. Abû Ḥanîfâ al-Dinawârî, for instance, the ninth-century pharmacologist, states that this tree is best-known for the preparation

7, p. 187. It should be noted that these ḥadîths do not prove that the Prophet actually used the miswâk. It is perfectly possible that they merely try to give authenticity to a later practice by attributing it to the Prophet. For our purpose, however, it is important to realize that these ḥadîths are reflections of a practice current amongst the Muslims, and that these stories, once in vogue, probably strengthened the existing practice by using the Prophet as the model to be imitated. I thank Dr Lawrence Conrad for his valuable remarks on the interpretation of the different ḥadîths cited.

6 Muslim, Țahâra", trad. 43.
7 al-Bukhârî, Adhân, bâb 8.
8 al-Bukhârî, Jum’a, bâb 8.
9 al-Bukhârî, Faḍā’il al-Șâhâba, bâb 20.
10 al-Bukhârî, Maqâhîz, bâb 83.
11 Wiedemann, op. cit., note 2 above, p. 182.
12 See Wensinck’s article on the miswâk, op. cit., note 5 above, for a detailed discussion about the use of the miswâk according to Muslim law.
13 Neither term occurs in the Qur’ân, and in Ḥadîth only siwâk is used. In medical literature both occur. As the citation from Nachtiâgil shows, the term siwâk is used for the toothbrush as well as for the tree from which it is made, which is also called arâk; cf. R. Dozy, Supplément aux dictionnaires Arabes, 2nd ed., 2 vols., Leiden and Paris, Brill-Maisonneuve, 1927, vol. 1, p. 707, siwâk: “est l’arbre qui porte aussi le nom de arâk”; see also note 14 below. Moreover the term siwâk is used for the act of brushing the teeth as the citations from al-Majâsî will show; cf. Wensinck’s article on the miswâk, op. cit., note 5 above.
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of the miswāk from its roots, branches and šuru'. Nachtigal informs us that this kind of wood has the quality of making the breath of the women of Wadā'ī sweet-smelling. Wiedemann states that the toothbrush used in Egypt is exclusively prepared from this wood. In addition to the arāk tree, al-Dinawari refers to other kinds of trees, the wood of which is good for the miswāk, namely, balsam of Mecca, ishil, turpentine tree, nuq, shathth, yasta'ūr, roots of 'arfaj, dārim, fruitstalks (arāğin) of the palm-tree, small or young palm-trees (alaj), and leaves of the ruḥāmā, Al-Washshā, (d. 936) author of the K. al-muwashshā, a handbook for good manners and etiquette (Adab), mentions, besides the arāk tree, sugar-cane, roots of liquorice, wood of Prunus mahaleb L., roots of lemon-grass, and the nodes of

15 Abū Ḥanīfa Aḥmad b. Dāwūd al-Dinawari, K. al-nabāt (Alif-Zay), ed. Bernhard Lewin, Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974, p. 225. For the term šuru' cf. E. W. Lane, An Arabic-English lexicon, 8 vols, London, Williams and Morgan, 1863–1879, vol. 4, p. 1679, s.v. šarḥ: “A twig, or rod, drooping, or hanging down, to the ground, falling upon it, but with its base upon the tree, so that it remains falling in the shade, the sun not reaching it, and therefore becomes more soft, or supple, than the branch [from which it hangs], and more sweet in odour; and it is used for rubbing and cleaning the teeth.”

16 Nachtigal, op. cit., note 1 above, p. 261.
17 Wiedemann, op. cit., note 2 above, p. 181.
19 ishil, cf. al-Birūnī, Book on pharmacy and materia medica, edited with English translation by Hakim Mohammed Said, Karachi 1973, p. 25. no. 49: “It is a tree, the shoots of which are used as miswāk”; and p. 60. no. 141: “Salvadora oleoides Done. (family, Salvadoraceae).”
28 al-sukkar, is here qaṣab al-sukkar or sugar cane. The term sukkar refers to many different forms of sugar; cf. Dietrich, op. cit., note 14 above, bk. 2. no. 65 and Encyclopaedia, op. cit., note 5 above, vol. 4, pp. 682–4, s.v. qaṣab al-sukkar (article by M. Canard and P. Berthier).
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pyrethrum.\textsuperscript{32} Al-Washshā\textsuperscript{33} also remarks that the more often one uses these materials the more perfect one's manners are considered to be. Ibn al-Jazzār\textsuperscript{34} (tenth century) recommends palm-branches (sa'af) and arāk. Ibn Sīnā\textsuperscript{35} (980–1037) and al-Majūsī\textsuperscript{36} (tenth century) remark that the best kind of wood for a siwāk is that which has astringency (qabd) and bitterness (marārā). Ibn Butlān\textsuperscript{37} (eleventh century) recommends the fruit-stalks of the palm-tree, imported from Mecca.\textsuperscript{38} The wood is made fit for this purpose by chewing its end so that it becomes smooth and fibrous. Its size varies from 4 cm to 20 cm, and its diameter from 1 to 1.5 cm, from what I have seen personally. According to Wiedemann\textsuperscript{39} its length varies from 15 to 20 cm. The miswāk is not only prepared from the branches or roots of the arāk tree, but also from its bark.\textsuperscript{40}

The use of the siwāk, however, was not introduced under Islam. It is an old pre-Islamic custom, which was adhered to by the ancient Arabs to get their teeth white and shiny. For white shiny teeth were a symbol of beauty and attractiveness. The white teeth of the beloved are often compared with a string of pearls in ancient pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.\textsuperscript{41} Another possible reason for its observance is its contribution to ritual purity.\textsuperscript{42} This custom was then, according to the Ḥadīth, adopted and Islamized by the Prophet.

In the early Islamic period proper use of the siwāk became part of a cultivated and elegant mode of life. Al-Washshā' remarks:

Know that it belongs to the etiquette of fine, respectable, well-educated, pious, and proud people to use the siwāk for cleaning the teeth. For this is, according to them, the most noble cleanliness, the best ritual purity and the most perfect respectability. This is


\textsuperscript{34} See quotation on p. 77 below.


\textsuperscript{36} See citation from his K. al-malākī on p. 78 below.


\textsuperscript{38} Taqwīm al-siḥḥa, pp. 106–7, 215.

\textsuperscript{39} Op. cit., note 2 above, p. 182.

\textsuperscript{40} Cf. Helga Venzlaff, Der Marokkanische Drogenhändler und seine Ware, Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977, pp. 96–7. She remarks that in Morocco strips of about 20 cm long and 1 cm wide which have been rolled up, are sold in the market, and that pieces of about 3 cm long are broken off and their ends chewed.


\textsuperscript{42} Cf. Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Ja'far al-Ṭabārī, Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa-al-mulūk [Annales], ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., 3 series, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1879–1901, series 1, p. 311, 11. 16–20: "Ibn Bashshār told us on the authority of Abū a Hilāl who told us on the authority of Qatāda about Allāh's saying 'When Ibrāhīm was tried by his Lord with certain words' (Qur'an, Sura 2: 124);
the aim of fine and noble people. The *siwāk* has recognized qualities. Moreover it belongs to the Sunna [custom] of the Prophet.43

He also formulates certain rules for its proper use:

For the cleaning of the teeth with the *miswāk* definite times [of the day] and places have been prescribed. One should not use it at improper times nor should one go beyond the times fixed for it. One may use it in the morning and evening, during the afternoon, before daybreak and after prayer. It is also permitted to use the *miswāk* on an empty stomach, before going to sleep and during the daytime when fasting. Fine, well-educated people are not allowed to use the *siwāk* in certain places as, for instance, in the toilet, in the bath, in the middle of the street, and among many people. None of them cleans his teeth when standing, reclining upon his side, or lying down. Neither does he clean them when everyone is looking at him, or when he is speaking. To use the *siwāk* on the toilet and in the bath belongs to the bad habits of the low and common people, for such an abuse weakens the gums and worsens the breath of the mouth. Well-educated, respectable and fine people never behave in that way.44

I have quoted this text in its entirety because it not only informs us about the correct way fine and well-educated people (*al-zurafā‘ wa-al-udabā‘*) should use the *siwāk*, but also contains unique information about the extravagant use the low and common people (*al-sifla wa-al-‘awāmm*) made of it in those days. They used it all the time, in all positions and circumstances. They used it even when they were in the toilet, talking to someone, taking a bath, in the middle of the street, or even when at the centre of everyone’s attention. Neither did they care very much if their *siwāk* was completely used up, nor did they protect it from dirt and dust as may be clear from al-Washshā‘s following statement:

> It is a custom of well-educated people not to use the *miswāk* too long so that the end is worn out. This is, according to them, a despicable habit [of the low, common people]. On the contrary, they prepare for their *miswāks* wrappers of raw silk or bindings of floss silk to save them from defilement and to protect them from dust and dirt.45

Classical Arab poetry also reflects the use of the *siwāk*, where it figures as a symbol for the fragrant mouth, the white teeth, the love and beauty of the beloved.46 One of the most subtle seems to me the one by Bashshār b. al-Burd (eighth century):

that the latter verse means that He tried him with circumcision, the shaving of the pubes, the washing of the anterior and posterior parts, the *siwāk*, the shaving of the mustache, the cutting of the nails, and the plucking of the hair of the armpit." Though it is quite probable that the ancient Arabs also used the *miswāk* for the sake of ritual purity which was so important to them (see J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, 3rd ed. Berlin, Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1961, p. 172), it is impossible to prove this from the *hadith* cited. For it merely authorizes, as Dr Lawrence Conrad rightly pointed out to me, an Islamic custom by attributing it to the great pre-Islamic figure of Ibrāhīm.

46 For an extensive list of quotations from Islamic poetry see al-Washshā‘, op. cit., note 27 above, Brünnnow edition, pp. 102–5; Bellmann translation, vol. 2, pp. 103–9; see also H. Pérès, *La poésie andalou en
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She cleaned her teeth for me with a miswāk and by this wanted to tell me how pleasant the taste of her mouth was, how she wanted to improve herself.

And really! When the miswāk brought to me the spittle of her mouth, cold as ice, like pure water over my hand, then I kissed that which had caressed her mouth and called to it: O would that I could be the miswāk which, my mistress, was so close to you!47

It is interesting to observe that this kind of toothbrush was not used by the Arabs alone, but other people used something akin to it. The Japanese, for example, called it koyojī,48 while the Romans used mastix49 to rub their teeth and as a toothpick.50 Rabbinic literature51 mentions more than once a kind of wooden stick called in Hebrew qeṣam52 and in Aramaic qīṣā,53 which the Jews used for cleaning the teeth. Though this term is usually translated as toothpick, Preuss54 supposes that it is more probably a kind of toothbrush. Though Preuss may be right that sometimes the qeṣam was used in this way, it should be noted that the same term is also used for the small wooden stick with which young girls used to keep the holes in their ears open.55 It is easier to imagine that the size of this stick was that of a toothpick, rather than that of a toothbrush. Moreover, the terminology employed in one source56 refers clearly to the

48 Wiedemann, op. cit., note 3 above, p. 875.
51 See Mishnah Beṣa IV, 6; Tos. Shabbat V, 1; T. Jer. Demai 23b.
55 Cf. Mishnah Shabbat VI, 6.
56 Talm. Jer. Demai 23b: “Ayti li ḥad qis ṣalḥe shinnay”; which means: “Bring me a chip so that I can pick my teeth.”
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use of something sharp which one sticks between the teeth. Preuss\textsuperscript{57} also refers to a tradition stating that the \textit{qes\=a\=m} was carried continuously between the teeth. Another indication that the Jews may have known and used something like the \textit{siw\=a\=k} is the explanation given by Cherbonneau, professor of Arabic in Constantinople, for the term \textit{siw\=a\=k}: “écorce du noyer, avec laquelle les Mauresques et les Juives se frottent les dents et se brunissent les lèvres”.\textsuperscript{58} It is perfectly possible that Cherbonneau learned about this custom from the Jews of Constantinople. One of these, Moses Hamon, a sixteenth-century court physician of Sulaymān the Magnificent, was the author of a compendium on dentistry.\textsuperscript{59} Although he refers to the \textit{misw\=a\=k},\textsuperscript{60} there are two reasons which make it impossible to conclude that it was used by his compatriots. First because his work is based on Arabic medical literature, and second because he was practising at the Ottoman court. Piamenta,\textsuperscript{61} referring to the Jews of Yemen, states in his explanation of the term \textit{misw\=a\=k} that they did not use this utensil.

As well as the \textit{siw\=a\=k} or toothbrush, the Arabs also used the toothpick, which was called \textit{khiliil}. Wiedemann\textsuperscript{62} refers to information which he got from Dr Schweinfurth, the great traveller and expert on the flora of Egypt, according to which the plant regularly used for a toothpick was \textit{nānakhwāh}\textsuperscript{63} (\textit{Ammi visnaga L.}, Bishops’ weed), which was called by the Egyptians \textit{khalla} (cf. \textit{khiliil} for toothpick). This plant was sold in stands in front of mosques to enable Muslims to clean their teeth before prayer.\textsuperscript{64}

From the foregoing it is clear that the use of the \textit{siw\=a\=k}, a pre-Islamic custom, was very common among Arabs throughout history. In the early Islamic period the common people used it so often and in such an ostentatious, unesthetic and unhygienic way that rules were fixed for the cultured and well-mannered prescribing how, when and where to use it, and, even more important, when and where not.

An important question concerning the use of the \textit{siw\=a\=k} and the \textit{khiliil}, especially when used so often and sometimes in such an unhygienic way, is how they affected the different parts of the mouth such as teeth, gums and palate from a medical rather than an aesthetic point of view.\textsuperscript{65} Al-Washshā’ remarks:

\textsuperscript{57} Preuss’s reading of this tradition recorded in Tos. Shabbat V. 1, follows that of M. S. Zuckermandel’s edition (\textit{Tosefta}, repr. Jerusalem, Wahrman, 1970), which is the same as that of the first edition and of the Erfurt and London MSS. Their version is: “Yoze adam be-qes\=am she-be-shinnav (we) she-be-sandalo”, which means: “One may go out (on Shabbat) with a chip of wood between the teeth (and) in one’s shoes.” This reading was adopted in later halakhic literature as well. The original version, however, was, as pointed out by Saul Lieberman (\textit{Tosefta ki-fshutah}, New York, 1962): “Yoze adam be-qes\=am she-be-shenez sandalo”, which means: “one may go out (on Shabbat) with a chip of wood between one’s shoesaces.”


\textsuperscript{59} See Arslan Terzioglu (ed.), Moses Hamons Kompendium der Zahnheilkunde, Munich, 1977.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., fol. 52a; cf. Introduction, p. xxviii.


\textsuperscript{62} Wiedemann, op. cit., note 2 above, p. 182.

\textsuperscript{63} See Dietrich, op. cit., note 14 above, bk 3, no. 59; Issa, op. cit., note 18 above, p. 13, no. 2, translates it as pick-tooth.

\textsuperscript{64} Wiedemann, op. cit., note 3 above, p. 875.

\textsuperscript{65} It is a pity that the editors of such a prestigious project as \textit{The encyclopaedia of Islam} decided to reprint for the entry on the \textit{misw\=a\=k} Wensinck’s article from the former \textit{Enzyklopädie des Islams} which deals with it only from the points of view of \textit{hadith} and \textit{fiqh} while omitting the medical aspect.
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The approaching death did not stop the Prophet—may Allah bless and save him—from requesting a siwāk, for this is verily the most noble object which one can use and approve of. For it whitens the teeth, purifies the mind, is good for the foul breath of the mouth, extinguishes [the fire of] the bile, dries the phlegm,66 strengthens the gums, strengthens the flesh between the teeth,67 makes the sight clear and sharp, puts an end to constipation and stimulates the appetite.68

But at the same time we saw that even al-Washshā had to admit that under certain conditions it can have a detrimental effect on the different parts of the mouth. A more convincing source of information is the clinical experience of those physicians69 who witnessed the harmful effects of the siwāk on the oral health of their patients. It is worth considering their opinion.

Huṣayn b. Ishāq70 (809–873) wrote a work on dentistry, namely, K. ḥifz al-ḥuwa7 wa-al-litha (On the Preservation of the Teeth and Gums)71 which is still in manuscript. Fragments, however, are cited by al-Rāzī72 (865–925) in his medical compendium K. al-ḥawī (Liber Continens).73 Quoting Ḥunayn he remarks:

and if someone wants his teeth and gums to stay healthy . . . he should beware of pieces of food left between the teeth, he should clean his teeth painstakingly without unsettling them and without wounding the gums. For an excessive use of the toothpick (idmān al-khila7) and playing with it wounds the gums; therefore if a person avoids this, his teeth and gums will remain healthy.74

In another statement he declares: “One should not persist in [rubbing] the teeth with the toothbrush (wa-yanbaghī an lā yulañja ‘alā al-ḥuwa bi-l-siwa7), for this takes away their smoothness, makes them rough and thereby causes them to become rotten75 (hafr) and filthy.” To this he adds: “The toothbrush (siwāk) and also warm toothpowders (sanīnāt) cause injuries to the soft edge of the gums connected with the

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66 Didactic literature also recommends the use of the miswāk because of this quality. For by drying the superfluous phlegm in the brain which is the major cause of forgetfulness, it strengthens the student’s memory; cf. al-Zarnūjī, K. Ta’lim al-muṭa’ālim li ta’ālim tariq al-ilm, Kasaq, 1998, (comp. 1203), p. 113.


75 hafr, cf. Lane, op. cit., note 15 above, vol. 2, p. 600: “A scaling in the roots of the teeth or a rottenness . . . or an erosion of the roots of the teeth by a yellow incrustation between those parts and the gum . . . or a cankering of the teeth or a yellowness upon the teeth.”
teeth. This happens because the sticky natural moisture contained in the edges of the gums which helps the gums to stick to the teeth is annihilated by [the persistent use of toothbrush] and warm toothpowders.\textsuperscript{76} It is clear that in his medical practice Hunayn often treated patients who suffered from diseases of the teeth caused by an excessive use of toothbrush and toothpick. While recognizing their wholesome effect when used moderately, Hunayn warns emphatically against their excessive use. It is very probable that these patients belong to the same section of the population as those mentioned by al-Washshā, namely, the common people.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Īsā b. Māsawayh,}\textsuperscript{77} also quoted by al-Rāzī, remarks: “The toothbrush (siwāk) dries the tongue and is good for the foul breath of the mouth; it purifies the brain, refines the senses, polishes the teeth, and strengthens the gums. Everyone should take that kind of toothbrush that suits him”.\textsuperscript{78} As a remedy for those suffering from weak gums he advises dipping the toothbrush in extract of roses\textsuperscript{79} and rubbing the teeth with red sandalwood\textsuperscript{80} and cubeb pepper,\textsuperscript{81} of each one part; half a part of the ashes of reed;\textsuperscript{82} half a part of “seafoam”;\textsuperscript{83} pyrethrum and mountain raisins,\textsuperscript{84} of each one sixth of a part; and one third of a part of fragrant aloewood.\textsuperscript{85}

The close similarity between his praise of the siwāk and that of al-Washshā is remarkable as the following table shows:
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Substance & Use in Medicine \\
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\textit{qasab} & Cf. Dietrich, op. cit., note 14 above, bk 1, no. 54: “Qaṣab is eine allgemeine Bezeichnung für zahlreiche, meist hochschäftige Pflanzen.” \textsuperscript{82} \\
\textit{zabad al-bahr} & Cf. Dietrich, op. cit., note 14 above, bk 1, no. 9, n. 3: “aus Schwämmen, Algen u.a. Substanzen bestehende Restprodukte, die vom Meer ausgeworfen worden (\textit{άλκυνων} bei DG V 118 oder \textit{άλκύρκης} V 119);” J. M. Riddle, \textit{ Dioscorides on pharmacy and medicine}, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1985, p. 158: \textit{άλκυνων}: “various species of zoophytes, \textit{άλκυρκης}: a slaty efflorescence on the herbage of marshes (probably calcium chloride and other salts);” Levey, op. cit., note 32 above, p. 272, no. 118: “Cuttle fish bone, jellyfish, and others. The Ar. name may refer to many different things. Later, it seems to have settled into the meanings given above”; al-Kindi employs it in a prescription for arresting the deterioration of the gums and in other dentifrices. \textsuperscript{84} \\
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\textit{ūd} & Cf. Dietrich op. cit., note 14 above, bk 1, no. 19: “Das Wort \textit{ūd} “Holz”, dann “Aloeholz”, steht, wie in diesem Kapitel fast durchweg entsprechend seiner Herkunft für \textit{ūd hindū}, die indische Aloe. Es handelt sich wahrscheinlich um Aquilaria agallocha Roxbgr (Alóëxylon agallochum Lour.), Aloë-Holz, Thymelaeaceae”; al-Kindi has aloewood in a prescription to remove the decayed part of teeth, to treat bad breath, to polish the teeth, and to protect the mouth (Levey, op. cit., note 32 above, pp. 307–8, no. 210).
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<th>'Īsā b. Māsawayh</th>
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<td>1) dries the tongue</td>
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<td>3) purifies the mind</td>
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<td>4) refines the senses</td>
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<td>5) polishes the teeth</td>
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<td>6) makes the gums strong</td>
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<td>puts an end to constipation</td>
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<td>stimulates the appetite</td>
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This kind of recommendation which does not refer to the negative aspects of the use of the siwāk, and which is probably derived by one author from the other, is obviously a kind of more general statement also used by non-physicians.86

Ibn al-Jazzār,87 author of the influential medical compendium Zād al-musāfīr (Viaticum), remarks as part of a treatment of someone suffering from a bad smell of the mouth (bakhr) that he should brush his teeth continuously with toothbrushes (wa-yuwāṣīb ‘alā al-siwāk bi-l-masāwīk)88 prepared from palm-branches89 and from the arāk tree.90 Ibn al-Jazzār mentions the miswāk and recommends its frequent use only in this specific case. We therefore do not know if he would recommend or reject such a frequent use for the general preservation of the health of one’s teeth.

Ibn Sīnā91 states in a chapter on the preservation of the health of the teeth that if someone wants his teeth to remain intact he should observe eight things:

1) He should not take too often certain kinds of food and drink which corrupt quickly in the stomach, such as milk, salt fish, ṣaḥnā.92
2) He should not vomit continuously.
3) He should avoid chewing that which is tough and hard to chew (‘ālik).
4) He should avoid breaking [with his teeth] hard (ṣulb) things.
5) He should avoid that which sets his teeth on edge (muḍarrisāt).
6) He should avoid everything which is very cold, especially after something warm, and something which is very warm, especially after something cold.
7) He should persist in cleaning his teeth with a toothpick, but not in an extreme and

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89 sa‘af, Lane, op. cit., note 15 above, vol. 4, p. 1365: “palm-branches”.
90 Zād al-musāfīr, bk 2, ch. 23, MS Dresden 209, fol. 67a.
92 Lane, op. cit., note 15 above, vol. 4, p. 1656: “A certain condiment, or seasoning, made of fish, of small fish, which has the property of exciting appetite, and rectifying the state of the stomach”.

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immoderate way (min ghayr istiqā' wa-ta'addīn) which might cause injuries to the gums and the flesh between the teeth and remove it from there or move the teeth.

8) He should avoid those things which are especially harmful for his teeth, such as leeks, which are very harmful for the teeth and the gums, and the other drugs which I have mentioned in the chapter on the simple drugs.

Concerning the use of the toothpick, Ibn Sīnā makes the same reservation as Hunayn, namely, that one should use it in a moderate way. About the toothbrush he then remarks:

The toothbrush should be used in a moderate way (bi-l-i'tīdāl), one should not use it to excess because this takes away the whiteness and moisture of the teeth and makes them disposed to receive the deflections and vapours which arise from the stomach and which then cause a fissure. But when one uses the toothbrush in a moderate way one gets white and strong teeth and strong gums, one prevents rotten teeth (ḥafr), and it is good for foul breath.94

It is clear that in the case of the toothbrush Ibn Sīnā had the same kind of experience as Hunayn; he therefore, like him, warns against its excessive use.

Al-Majūst, author of the famous Kāmil al-ṣinā' al-tibbiyya which is also called Kitāb al-malakī, states in a chapter entitled “On the regimen of the bodies of which suffer from harm caused by a bad temperament”:

If someone’s teeth are set on edge (daras) he should take purslane and coarse salt, but he should be careful not to take ice-cold water after a warm meal, and he should guard himself against the occurrence of rotten teeth (ḥafr) by brushing his teeth in a moderate way without exaggerating (bi-l-siwāk al-mu'taddī min ghayr ifrāt) with sweet things such as burned barley flour, burned wormwood, “seafoam”... One of the things which strengthens the teeth and the gums and is good for bad breath is to use a toothbrush (siwāk) from wood containing bitterness and astringency with sweet

97 al-miḥl al-jarīsh, cf. Lane, op. cit., note 15 above, vol. 2, p. 410, jarīsh: “applied to salt it signifies mā lam yatayyab [app. meaning such as has not been purified].”
99 shīh, cf. Dietrich, op. cit., note 14 above, bk 3, no. 26: “ist bei den Arabern anscheinend Sammelname für viele oder aller Beifußarten”; al-Kindī employs Armenian wormwood in a tooth medicine to polish the teeth, remove the decay, treat bad breath, and protect the mouth (Levey, op. cit., note 32 above, p. 296, no. 177).
The miswāk, an aspect of dental care in Islam

cyperus, lemon-grass and red alum. One should, however, not use the toothbrush too much because it abrades (ṣahaja), corrupts (afṣada) and decreases (naqasa) the gums, and it moves the teeth. But one should rub (dalaka) one’s teeth with a coarse piece of cloth with a cleaning toothpowder if one wants them to be clean and white.

In a chapter dealing with the stench and bad breath of the mouth which is caused by corruption (ʿuylvania) of the flesh in the mouth, or by corruption (taʾaffun) and decay (taʾakkul) of the teeth, or by corrupt (ʿafṣin) phlegm in the stomach, he describes a compound medicine to be chewed and then states: “The patient should use the toothbrush (siwāk) continually according to my prescription with sweet cyperus, and white sandalwood, for this is beneficial for a bad smelling mouth.” As in the previous cases al-Majūsī recognises the value of a moderate use of the siwāk but warns against excesses.

Concerning the toothpick, Ibn Buṭlān states that one should not use it continuously between the teeth. about the siwāk he says that it should be used with a piece of linen moistened with extract of roses. It is probable that this advice is intended to prevent damage to gums and teeth.

In summary, it may be said that there was a pre-Islamic custom of cleaning the teeth with the siwāk to get them white and shiny. Although we do not know the extent to which the siwāk was used during the pre-Islamic period, it was certainly very popular in the Islamic period. We can derive this from the different Ḥadith narrations about the intensive use of the siwāk by the Prophet. For these stories try to authorize a current practice by attributing it to him and by setting him as a standard. Probably due to the literal imitation of the Prophet, the siwāk became so excessively used by the common people that it caused a twofold response: 1) from the educated elite who felt the need to limit the use of the siwāk to certain times and places, 2) from the physicians who strongly recommended the moderate use of the siwāk, because in this manner it would whiten the teeth and strengthen the gums. But its immoderate use, according to them, would injure the gums and displace the teeth. Thus, their warning in this respect is loud and clear.

su’d, cf. Dietrich, op. cit., note 14 above, bk 1, no. 4: “Gemeint ist wohl Cyperus longus L. und Var., der Wilde Galgant, Cyperaceae”; al-Kindī uses it in a toothpowder to polish the teeth and to treat bad breath (Levey, op. cit., note 32 above, p. 282, no. 143).


MS Ayasophia 4713 a, facs. ed. Frankfurt am Main 1985, pt 2, first half, ch. 17, pp. 60–1.


Ibn Buṭlān, op. cit., note 37 above. The Arabic text reads: “yukrah li-i-insān ... wa-madr mā yukasirruhā wa-al-ilḥāh bi-l-khilāl baynahā”. Elkhadem’s translation (p. 215) for baynahā: “dans les intervalles” should be corrected to “between them”, namely, the teeth. Ibn Buṭlān makes this statement while referring to three authors, namely, al-Rāzī, Bakhtīshū’ and Yūḥannā.