THE MISWĀK, AN ASPECT OF DENTAL CARE IN ISLAM

by

GERRIT BOS

Gustav Nachtigal,¹ the famous nineteenth-century traveller and explorer of the Sahara and Sudan, relates that the women of Wadāī, 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 Jamā‘at al-tablīgh⁴ 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 Ḥadīth,⁵ was a fervent supporter of its use. The siwāk was, according to him, a

---

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.
The miswāk, an aspect of dental care in Islam

purgative for the mouth and a pleasure for Allāh. When the Prophet came into his house he first of all used the siwāk. When he woke during the night, he cleansed his mouth with it, then washed himself and prayed. And the only reason he did not declare its use obligatory for the community before every ṣalāt (ritual prayer) was that he feared to burden his followers. His servant ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd was called ṣāḥib al-siwāk since he was the one who took care of the Prophet’s siwāk. When the Prophet was on his deathbed he cleansed his mouth with the siwāk, after Aisha had chewed it so that it became smooth and soft. The extent to which the use of the siwāk, in the Muslim mind, is associated with the Prophet, may be illustrated by the fact that the tree from which the siwāk was prepared was called siwāk al-Nabi or “siwāk of the Prophet” in Algeria. In spite of the Prophet’s example and the importance he attached to the use of the siwāk, Muslim law (Fiqh) did not make its use obligatory, but only desirable at all times.

The kind of wood recommended for the preparation of the toothbrush called siwāk or miswāk is that of the arāk tree. Abū Ḥanīfah al-Dinawārī, 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 hadīths do not prove that the Prophet actually used the miswāk. 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 hadīths 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 hadīths cited.

6 Muslim, Ṭahāra, trad. 43.
7 al-Bukhārī, Adhān, bāb 8.
8 al-Bukhārī, Jum’a, bāb 8.
9 al-Bukhārī, Faḍā’il al-Ṣāḥība, bāb 20.
10 al-Bukhārī, Maqāhīz, bāb 83.
11 Wiedemann, op. cit, note 2 above, p. 182.
12 See Wensinck’s article on the miswāk, op. cit, note 5 above, for a detailed discussion about the use of the miswāk according to Muslim law.
13 Neither term occurs in the Qur’ān, and in Ḥadith only siwāk is used. In medical literature both occur. As the citation from Nachtigal shows, the term siwāk is used for the toothbrush as well as for the tree from which it is made, which is also called arāk; cf. R. Dozy, Supplément aux dictionnaires Arabes, 2nd ed., 2 vols., Leiden and Paris, Brill-Maisonneuve, 1927, vol. 1, p. 707, siwāk: “est l’arbre qui porte aussi le nom de arāk”; see also note 14 below. Moreover the term siwāk is used for the act of brushing the teeth as the citations from al-Majūsī will show; cf. Wensinck’s article on the miswāk, op. cit., note 5 above.
of the *miswāk* from its roots, branches and *ṣuru*.¹⁵ Nachtwigal¹⁶ informs us that this kind of wood has the quality of making the breath of the women of Wadāʾi sweet-smelling. Wiedemann¹⁷ states that the toothbrush used in Egypt is exclusively prepared from this wood. In addition to the *arāk* tree, al-Dīnawārī refers to other kinds of trees, the wood of which is good for the *miswāk*, namely, balsam of Mecca,¹⁸ *iṣḥīl*,¹⁹ turpentine tree,²⁰ *nuʿ*,²¹ *shatth*,²² *yastaʿūr*,²³ roots of *ʿarṣaf*,²⁴ *dārīm*,²⁵ fruitstalks (*ʿarāfīn*) of the palm-tree, small or young palm-trees (*ʿalaf*), and leaves of the *ruḥmā*²⁶ *Al-Washshā*²⁷ (d. 936) author of the *K. al-muwashshā*, a handbook for good manners and etiquette (Adab), mentions, besides the *arāk* tree, sugar-cane,²⁸ roots of liquorice,²⁹ wood of *Prunus mahaleb L.*,³⁰ roots of lemon-grass,³¹ and the nodes of

¹⁵ Abū Ḥanīfa ʿAḥmad b. Dāwūd al-Dīnawārī, *K. al-nabāt* (Alif-Zay), ed. Bernhard Lewin, Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974, p. 225. For the term *ṣuru* cf. E. W. Lane, *An Arabic-English lexicon*, 8 vols, London, Williams and Morgan, 1863–1879, vol. 4, p. 1679, s.v. *ṣur*: “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 Nachtwigal, op. cit., note 1 above, p. 261.

¹⁷ Wiedemann, op. cit., note 2 above, p. 181.


¹⁹ *iṣḥīl*, cf. al-Bīrūnī, *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)).”

²⁰ *dīrw*, cf. Dietrich, op. cit., note 14 above, bk 1, no. 34: “*Dīrw* is der arabische Name für Pistacia lentiscus [Moench], Mastixstrauß, Anacardiaceae. Sie ist die Stammplante für das zur Gruppe der Kauharze (* لتحقيق* gehörende Mastixharz, das früher zur Festigung des Zahnfleisches, gegen Magenbeschwerden u.a. Verwendung fand.”


²⁵ *dārīm*, Freytag, op. cit., note 21 above, vol. 1, p. 26: “Nomen arboris ei, quae ghādā appellatur, similis”.

²⁶ al-Dīnawārī, op. cit., note 15 above, pp. 225–30. For *ruḥmā* see Issa, op. cit., note 18 above, p. 56, no. 17: “*Convulvulus lanatus* (Convolvulaceae)”.


²⁸ *al-sukkar*, is here qaṣāb 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. *qasab al-sukkar* (article by M. Canard and P. Berthier).


³⁰ *mahlab*, cf. Dietrich, op. cit., note 14 above, bk. 1. no. 65, n. 4: “Prunus mahaleb seu Cerasus L. und Var., Felsenkirche, Weichselkirsche, Steinwechsel, Rosaceae.”


70
The miswāk, an aspect of dental care in Islam

pyrethrum. Al-Washshā′ also remarks that the more often one uses these materials the more perfect one's manners are considered to be. Ibn al-Jazzār44 (tenth century) recommends palm-branches (sa′af) and arāk. Ibn Sīnā35 (980–1037) and al-Majūṣī36 (tenth century) remark that the best kind of wood for a siwāk is that which has astringency (qaḍy) and bitterness (marāra). Ibn Buṭlān37 (eleventh century) recommends the fruit-stalks of the palm-tree, imported from Mecca.5 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 Wiedemann39 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.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.41 Another possible reason for its observance is its contribution to ritual purity.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

34 See quotation on p. 77 below.
36 See citation from his K. al-malākī on p. 78 below.
40 Cf. Helga Venzlaff, Der Marokkanische Drogenhändler und seine Ware, Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977, pp. 96–7, 96–7. She remarks that in Morocco strips of 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.
42 Cf. Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrikh 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 Sulaymān b. Ḥarb who told us on the authority of Abū Hilāl who told us on the authority of Qatāda about Allāh’s saying ‘When Ibrāhīm was tried by his Lord with certain words’ (Qur’ān, 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-zurāfā’ 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 1brähīm.

46 For an extensive list of quotations from Islamic poetry see al-Washshā’, op. cit., note 27 above, Brünnow edition, pp. 102–5; Bellmann translation, vol. 2, pp. 103–9; see also H. Pérès, La poésie andalouse en

72
The miswâk, an aspect of dental care in Islam

She cleaned her teeth for me with a miswâk 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 miswâk 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 miswâk 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 koyoji,48 while the Romans used mastic49 to rub their teeth and as a toothpick.50 Rabbinic literature51 mentions more than once a kind of wooden stick called in Hebrew qeq'am52 and in Aramaic qisâ,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 qeq'am 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 Bezę IV, 6; Tos. Shabbat V, 1; T. Jer. Demai 23b.
55 Cf. Mishnah Shabbat VI, 6.
56 Talm. Jer. Demai 23b: “Ayti li ḫad qiṣ nahže shinnay”; which means: “Bring me a chip so that I can pick my teeth.”

73
use of something sharp which one sticks between the teeth. Preuss also refers to a tradition stating that the qeṣam was carried continuously between the teeth. Another indication that the Jews may have known and used something like the siwāk is the explanation given by Cherbonneau, professor of Arabic in Constantinople, for the term siwāk: “écocres du noyer, avec laquelle les Mauresques et les Juives se frottent les dents et se bruisissent les lèvres”. 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. Although he refers to the miswāk, 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, referring to the Jews of Yemen, states in his explanation of the term miswāk that they did not use this utensil.

As well as the siwāk or toothbrush, the Arabs also used the toothpick, which was called khillāl. Wiedemann 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 nānakhwāh (Ammi visnaga L., Bishops’ weed), which was called by the Egyptians khalla (cf. khillāl for toothpick). This plant was sold in stands in front of mosques to enable Muslims to clean their teeth before prayer.

From the foregoing it is clear that the use of the siwāk, 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, unaesthetic 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 siwāk and the khillāl, 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. Al-Washshā remarks:

57 Preuss’s reading of this tradition recorded in Tos. Shabbat V. 1, follows that of M. S. Zuckerman’s edition (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-qaṣam she-be-shinnaw (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 (Tosefta ki-fshutah, New York, 1962): “Yoze adam be-qeṣam she-be-sheneq sandalo”, which means: “one may go out (on Shabbat) with a chip of wood between one’s shoelaces.”


60 Ibid., fol. 52a; cf. Introduction, p. xxviii.


62 Wiedemann, op. cit., note 2 above, p. 182.

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.

64 Wiedemann, op. cit., note 3 above, p. 875.

65 It is a pity that the editors of such a prestigious project as The encyclopaedia of Islam decided to reprint for the entry on the miswāk Wensinck’s article from the former Enzyklopädie des Islams which deals with it only from the points of view of ḥadith and fiqh while omitting the medical aspect.
The miswāḵ, an aspect of dental care in Islam

The approaching death did not stop the Prophet—may Allah bless and save him—from requesting a siwāḵ, 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, strengthens the gums, strengthens the flesh between the teeth, makes the sight clear and sharp, puts an end to constipation and stimulates the appetite.\(^{66}\)

But at the same time we saw that even al-Washshāḥ 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 physicians\(^69\) who witnessed the harmful effects of the siwāḵ on the oral health of their patients. It is worth considering their opinion.

Ḫunayn b. Ishāq\(^70\) (809–873) wrote a work on dentistry, namely, \(K. \, \text{ḥifz} \, \text{al-asnān} \, \text{wa-al-litha}\) (On the Preservation of the Teeth and Gums)\(^71\) which is still in manuscript. Fragments, however, are cited by al-Rāzī\(^72\) (865–925) in his medical compendium \(K. \, \text{al-ḥāwī} \) (Liber Continens).\(^73\) Quoting Ḫunayn 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 (\(\text{idmān} \, \text{al-khīlāl}\)) 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 (\(\text{wa-yanbāghī an lā yulajja ‘alā al-asnān bi-l-siwāḵ}\)), for this takes away their smoothness, makes them rough and thereby causes them to become rotten\(^75\) (\(\text{ḥafr}\)) and filthy.” To this he adds: “The toothbrush (siwāḵ) and also warm toothpowders (\(\text{sanānāt}\)) cause injuries to the soft edge of the gums connected with the

\(^{66}\) Didactic literature also recommends the use of the miswāḵ 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, \(K. \, \text{Ta’līm al-muṭa’allim li ta’āllum ǧāriq al-ilm}\), Kāsān, 1898, (comp. 1203), p. 113.

\(^{67}\) The Arabic text reads: “\(\text{yuqawwī al-‘umūr}’\);” cf. Lane, op. cit., note 15 above, vol. 5, pp. 2154–5; \(‘\text{amr}: \) “The flesh that is between the teeth.”


\(^{69}\) The Arabs did not have specialists for dental diseases. Their treatment and cure was part of a physician’s work; cf. Ullmann, op. cit., note 35 above, p. 215. Ullmann also gives a survey of Arabic sources which discuss dental diseases (pp. 215–16). For many sources in translation see S. Elias Khalifa and I. Sami Haddad, ‘Dental gleanings from Arabic medicine,’ \(J. \, \text{Am. dent. Assoc.}, \) 1937, 24: 944–55, and ‘Arabian description of dental caries in the tenth century’, ibid., pp. 1847–1952, as well as Spies, op. cit., note 41 above.


\(^{71}\) See Ullmann, op. cit., note 35 above, p. 118; Sezgin, op. cit., note 70 above, vol. 2, p. 117, no. 10 gives as the title: \(\text{Qaul fi hifz al-asnān wa-stijājīhāh}. \)

\(^{72}\) See Ullmann, op. cit., note 35 above, pp. 128–36; Sezgin, op. cit., note 70 above, pp. 274–94.


\(^{75}\) \(\text{ḥafr}, \) 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.”

75
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. It is clear that in his medical practice Ḥunayn 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, Ḥunayn 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.

Īsā b. Māsawayh, 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”. As a remedy for those suffering from weak gums he advises dipping the toothbrush in extract of roses and rubbing the teeth with red sandalwood and cubeb pepper, of each one part; half a part of the ashes of reed; half a part of “seafoam”; pyrethrum and mountain raisins, of each one sixth of a part; and one third of a part of fragrant aloewood.

The close similarity between his praise of the siwāk and that of al-Washshā’ is remarkable as the following table shows:

77 It is reasonable to assume that this name is a mistake of the Hyderabad printed text of the K. al-hāwī for the well-known physician Yuḥannā ibn Māsawayh (777–857), who, according to Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a (‘Uyūn al-anbā’, 255), composed a treatise on the siwāk called K. fi al-siwi̇k wa-al-sanānār.
79 mā’ al-ward, cf. Dietrich, op. cit., note 14 above, bk 1, no. 68.
81 kabāba: cf. Wörterbuch der klassischen arabischen Sprache, Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1970 ff, vol. 1, p. 16: “Fruit of Piper Cubeba L.”; al-Kindī has cubeb in a drug for gum and mouth pustules, drugs for a sore throat, a Jewish tooth medicine, and a tooth powder that polishes the teeth, removes decay, and protects the mouth (Levey, op. cit., note 32 above, p. 321, no. 249).
82 qasab, cf. Dietrich, op. cit., note 14 above, bk 1, no. 54: “Qaṣab ist eine allgemeine Bezeichnung für zahlreiche, meist hochschäftige Pflanzen.”
83 zabād 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 (ἄλκυνοι bei DG V 118 oder ᾿ἄλκυνας V 119);” J. M. Riddle, Dioscurides on pharmacy and medicine, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1985, p. 158: ᾿ἄλκυνα: “various species of zoophytes, ᾿ἄλκυνας: 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-Kindī employs it in a prescription for arresting the deterioration of the gums and in other dentifrices.
85 ād, cf. Dietrich, op. cit., note 14 above, bk 1, no. 19: “Das Wort ād “Holz”, dann “Aloeholz”, steht, wie in diesem Kapitel fast durchweg entsprechend seiner Herkunft für ād hindī, die indische Aloe. Es handelt sich wahrscheinlich um Aquilaria agallocha Roxb. (Alōéxylon agallochum Lour.), Alōé-Holz, Thymelaeaceae”; al-Kindī 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).
The miswāk, an aspect of dental care in Islam

ʻĪsā b. Māsawayh

1) dries the tongue
2) is good for the foul breath of the mouth
3) purifies the mind
4) refines the senses
5) polishes the teeth
6) makes the gums strong

al-Washshā’

dries the phlegm
is good for the foul breath of the mouth
purifies the mind
makes the sight clear and sharp
whitens the teeth
strengthens the gums
extinguishes [the fire] of the bile
puts an end to constipation
stimulates the appetite

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-muṣāfir (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-yuwāzib ʿalā al-siwāk bi-l-maṣāwīk)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, ʿaḥnā’.92
2) He should not vomit continuously.
3) He should avoid chewing that which is tough and hard to chew (ʿalik).
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

---


88 MS Berlin 252, fol. 13b reads: “wa-yuwāzib ʿalā al-tasāwūk bi-l-siwāk”; MS Oxford 302, fol. 18a reads: “wa-yuwāzib ʿalā al-tasāwūk bi-maṣāwīk”.

89 saʿaf, Lane, op. cit., note 15 above, vol. 4, p. 1365: “palm-branches”.

90 Zād al-muṣāfir, 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”.
immoderate way (*min ghayr istiqâ' wa-ta'addin*) 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 Sinâ 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'tidâl*), 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 (*hafr*), and it is good for foul breath.

It is clear that in the case of the toothbrush Ibn Sinâ had the same kind of experience as Hunayn; he therefore, like him, warns against its excessive use. Al-Majûst, author of the famous *K. kâmîl al-sînâ' al-tîbîya* which is also called *al-Kitiib al-malakî*, states in a chapter entitled “On the regimen of the bodies the members 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 (*hafr*) by brushing his teeth in a moderate way without exaggerating (*bi-l-siwâk al-mu'tadîl min ghayr ifrâj*) 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 (*siwâk*) from wood containing bitterness and astringency with sweet

---

97 *al-mîlîh al-jarîsh*, cf. *Lane*, op. cit., note 15 above, vol. 2, p. 410, *jarîsh*: “applied to salt it signifies *mā lām yutayyâb* [app. meaning such as has not been purified].”
99 *shîf*, cf. *Dietrich*, op. cit., note 14 above, bk 3, no. 26: “ist bei den Arabern anscheinend Sammelname für viele oder alle Beifussarten”; *al-Kindî* 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 (afsada) 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 (ʿūfuna) of the flesh in the mouth, or by corruption (taʿaffun) and decay (taʾakkul) of the teeth, or by corrupt (ʿafin) 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 Ḥadīth 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.

---

100 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).


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


105 Ibn Buṭlān, op. cit., note 37 above. The Arabic text reads: “yukrah li-l-insān ... wa-ma’dr mā yakasiruhā wa-al-ilḥāḥ 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, Bakhṭīshū and Yūhannā.