The “1000 Nights” fragment at the Oriental Institute was re-used several times after the original story was written down. It makes it difficult to find the original story on the page. So, where is it?

Here is the title page which identified the story for us:

On the next page, you will see the text of the story itself. As you see, the frame story is preserved, but the actual story is not.
Islamic Shadow Plays

It is not clear when shadow plays were introduced into the Islamic world, but they seem to have been in performance by at least the early 11th century AD. In the 13th/14th century, a physician, Ibn Dāniyāl, lived in Cairo and mentions that shadow plays were performed in different venues, including palaces, inns, and even the courtyards of houses. Ibn Dāniyāl also wrote shadow plays, apparently encouraged to do so by a puppet master who had noted that the plays he performed were boring. Three plays written by Ibn Dāniyāl have survived, we will examine Tayf al-Khayāl in this pdf.

Tayf al-Khayāl

After the shadow play master presents the story, the character of a hunchback introduces his friend, Prince Wisāl. Prince Wisāl, after having lived a licentious lifestyle from which his friend the hunchback has already repented, decides it is time to settle down and marry. A matchmaker (known as “Mother Guidance”) arranges a marriage, telling Prince Wisāl that his bride-to-be is beautiful. To his horror, he discovers that his new bride is an ugly grandmother who is so ugly that he passes out when he sees her. The matchmaker dies and Prince Wisāl subsequently forgives her for her actions. He then goes on a pilgrimage to Mecca with the hunchback.

The play begins as follows (translation is from Li Guo. The Performing Arts in Medieval Islam: Shadow Play and Popular Poetry in Ibn Dāniyāl’s Mamluk Cairo. p. 158).

Hey you, brilliant master, || wanton buffoon! || Though your screen is still hanging high, || your curtain is dangling low.

You wrote to tell me that the shadow plays were getting old for the audience, || that the freshness was gone, thanks to repeated performance. || You asked me to write, for you, something of this kind, || something new and fine, with puppet figures that could be stored in a case. || I was utterly humbled by what you wanted from me, || that you intended to stage my work. || But I could see that to shy away from your request || would give you the wrong impression that I didn’t give a damn, || that I was running out of ideas, || that I lacked creativity and imagination, || and that I failed to respond with quick wit.

So here I am: having taken a stroll in the playground || and answered your call momentarily, || I have written a play in several acts, rather bawdy, || but in high literary style, nevertheless! || If you sketch the figures, || cut them according to their parts, || get a quiet place for the crowd, || and project the figures against the candle-lit screen...|| then Voila! you see, the script is being transformed into animated creatures. || O, but indeed, this shadow play is more marvelous than the others!
Islamic Shadow Puppetry in Popular Culture

In 1926, German filmmaker, Lotte Reiniger used shadow puppetry and tales from the One Thousand and One Nights to craft the oldest surviving animated feature film. The Adventure of Prince Achmed, a beautiful and colorful silent film, uses several themes from One Thousand and One Nights to tell the story of Prince Achmed. Unlike traditional shadow puppetry, Reiniger’s puppets were not manipulated in real time, instead, they were shot frame by frame and played back to simulate movement, a technique that would become the standard of animated filmmaking.

The Adventures of Prince Achmed is part of the Criterion Collection of DVD’s, and, unrestored and unscored versions may be found on YouTube.

The Ol had planned to screen The Adventures of Prince Achmed this spring as part of our Ol film series exploring Middle Eastern epics in popular cinema. While all of our spring events are currently canceled, we will reschedule this screening in the future.

Examples of Shadow Puppets from Egypt dating to the 14th–18th Century AD

(above) After Paul Kahle, “Islamische Schattenspielfiguren aus Egypten II,” Der Islam 2 (1911): Fig. 43; (far right) After Paul Kahle, “Islamische Schattenspielfiguren aus Egypten I,” Der Islam 1 (1910): Fig. 8; (right) After Paul Kahle, “Islamische Schattenspielfiguren aus Egypten I,” Der Islam 1 (1910): Fig. 11.