

Love, Death, Fame

Glossary of Style, Themes, and Motifs

MARCEL KURPERSHOEK



Style

Signature Verse

The signature verse in and of itself is not typical of Nabaṭī poetry. The earliest known Nabaṭī poet, Abū Ḥamzah al-ʿĀmirī (who eulogized Kubaysh ibn Maṣṣūr ibn Jammāz, a sharif of Medina who was killed in 1307), does not employ the signature verse, and his style is much more sophisticated than the tribal dithyrambs of the Banū Hilāl. The connection of the signature verse with Banū Hilāl rather points to origins in oral tradition.

Examples given by the historian Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406) are:¹

These are the wise verses of the generous brave Khālīd:
the poetry he recites hits the mark without fail;
The words of a smart sage, possessed of intelligence,
not a harebrained babbler who chatters away.

yigūl bilā jahlin fitā al-jūd Khālīd
migālat gawwālin w-gāl ṣiwāb
migālat ḥabrin dhāt dhihnin w-lam yikun
harījan walā fīmā yigūl dhahāb

These are the verses of the sharif Ibn Hāshim, ʿAlī,
my entrails are on fire from my hot sighs.

gāl ash-sharīf ibn Hāshim ʿAlī
tarā kabdī ḥarri shikat min zifīrahā

These are the verses of the tribe's maiden, Sa'dā, stirred
by wails from the departing caravan
If you ask about the grave of al-Zanātī Khalīfah,
I can describe the route and don't forget my words.

tigūl fitāt al-ḥayy Sa'dā w-hāḍahā
lahā fī ḡ'ūn al-bākirīn ʿawīl
ayā sā'ili ʿan gabr az-Zanātī Khalīfah
khidh an-na't minnī lā tikūn hibīl

¹ Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn*, 587, 590, 593.

Ibn Khaldūn's examples are paralleled closely by the Banū Hilāl and al-Ḍayāghim verses of the oral tradition, e.g.:¹

Abū Zayd al-Hilālī tells the story in verse
a storm of dust covered the valley around the sheep.

yigūl abā Zēd al-Hilālī w-mā jarā
'ajājīn ghashā l-baḥḥā w-'ajj sarāyih

These are the verses of the Zu'bi brave, Dhyāb ibn Ghānim:
my resolve is more trenchant than a scraping plane's edge of steel.

yigūl al-fitā az-Zu'bī Dhyāb ibn Ghānim
lī rāy agsā min ḥadīd al-mibrād

These are the verses of al-Zanātī, al-Zanātī Khalīfah:
a fellow willy-nilly must accept his mortality.

yigūl az-Zanātī wa-z-Zanātī Khalīfah
nafs al-fitā lā biddhā min zawālih

And the legendary ancestor of the al-Rmāl subtribe of Shammar in the Nafūd desert, Shāyī' al-Amsah:²

These are the verses of Ibn Mirdās, the generous brave Shāyī':
I soar from lofty peaks like a falcon.

yigūl ibn Mirdāsīn fitā al-jūd Shāyī'
ashūm kimā ḥirr al-marāgib shām

These are the verses of Ibn Mirdās, the generous brave Shāyī',
scion of a noble lineage, not some upstart.

gāl ibn Mirdāsīn fitā al-jūd Shayī'
min al-jadd al-agṣā mā ghyāyī girīb

I am Ibn Mirdās, the generous brave Shāyī':
I shield the oppressed and take good care of my kin.

anā bn Mirdāsīn fitā al-jūd Shāyī'
azabbīn al-maḍyūm rīf al-girāyīb

1 Sawayan, *Ayyām al-'Arab*, 1035–45.

2 Sawayan, *Ayyām al-'Arab*, 269–93.

These are the verses of Ibn Mirdās, the generous brave Shāyi‘:

I am a hero but my fellows are weaklings.

yigūl Ibn Mirdāsin fitā al-jūd Shāyi‘

anā baṭal lā shakk rabī halāyim

Similarly, for Rāshid al-Khalāwī, see the Introduction and notes listed in the index of *Love, Death, Fame*.

Ibn Zāhir, Jabrid, and Other Early Najdī Nabaṭī Poetry: Frequency of Rhymes

A comparison of rhymes and their features, as they evolved in the early centuries of Nabaṭī poetry, serves as an auxiliary tool in determining the approximate period in which its practitioners flourished, more useful than the less-varied meters. For this edition, 273 poems have been compared by way of experiment. They were chosen from the verses of the Banū Hilāl, the kindred al-Ḍayāghim cycle of verse and narrative, Shāyi‘ al-Amsaḥ, the collected poetry of Rāshid al-Khalāwī, and the poetry of Ḥmēdān al-Shwē‘ir (early eighteenth century) and Ibn Sbayyil (second half of the nineteenth century).

In doing so, one point was assigned for a fully identical rhyme, i.e., identical rhyme consonant, *al-rāwī*; for the vowel of its appendix, *al-ṣilah*; and for a long vowel that precedes the consonant, *al-ridf*. A half point was assigned for an identical rhyme consonant and either identical *ṣilah* or *ridf*. And a quarter point was assigned for the same consonant but with different preceding and following vowels.

In percentages, the overlap with rhymes used by Ibn Zāhir is, in descending order:

- 1 Banū Hilāl (in *al-Shi‘r al-nabaṭī*): 65 percent.
- 2 Shāyi‘ al-Amsaḥ: 60 percent.
- 3 Rāshid al-Khalāwī: 52 percent.
- 4 Jabrid poets: 44 percent.
- 5=6 (tie) Abū Ḥamzah al-‘Āmirī and Banū Hilāl (in *Ayyām al-‘Arab*): 42 percent.
- 7 Rumayzān, Rushaydān ibn Ghashshām, and Jabr ibn Sayyār (their poetical correspondence in the second half of seventeenth century): 38 percent.
- 8=9 (tie) The al-Ḍayāghim saga and Ibn Sbayyil: 36 percent.
- 10 Āl Ḥumayd—era poetry: 23 percent.
- 11 Ḥmēdān al-Shwē‘ir: 14 percent.

For the purpose of analysis, such a comparison has no more than indicative value. With this proviso, the outcome would seem to corroborate impressions based on the

use of the signature verse: the three highest scores are for poetry that also comes closest in certain formal elements of style to Ibn Zāhir, even though they are different and less sophisticated in structure, thought, and artistic finesse than his qasidas.

The low score of Ḥmēdān al-Shwē‘ir should not come as a surprise given the highly innovative character of his poetry. By the same token, Ibn Sbayyil’s score might fit this poet’s return to more conventional formal elements, accompanied by a new fluency of diction. One might expect a higher score than average for the two Jabrid poets who are especially remarkable for their use of signature verses. This indeed holds true for al-Jumaylī (70 percent overlap), but not for Abū Zayd (37.5 percent), a difference that is largely accounted for by Abū Zayd’s use of the *qāf* as a rhyming consonant in four of his poems, a *rāwī* not found in Ibn Zāhir’s work; without it, the congruence of their rhymes would be 62 percent.

Ibn Zāhir and Jabrid Poets

The original homeland of the Jabrid rulers was in eastern Arabia. Their hunting grounds were in the general area of the al-Dahnā’ sands, the tribal haunts of the classical Bedouin poet, Dhū l-Rummah. His beloved, Mayy, follows the seasons as the Jabrid princes did later:¹

My greetings to both abodes of Mayy:²
will the days of yore ever return?

[. . .]

Their camel-borne litters descend in the desert and at other times
at sweet waters of an oasis, not tainted with frogs.³

a-manzilatay Mayyi salāmun ‘alaykumā
hali l-azmunu allāti maḍayna rawāji‘ū

[. . .]

zā‘ā’nu yaḥlulna l-falāta wa-tāratan
mahāḍira ‘adhbīn lam takhuḍhu l-ḍafādi‘ū

Some of the parallels between Ibn Zāhir’s verses and the poetry of Dhū l-Rummah, especially in his scene of the abandoned camp and the departure of his beloved’s tribe, as illustrated in endnote 25 of the printed volume, may stem from a Jabrid connection

1 Dhū l-Rummah, *Dīwān*, 1273, 1282.

2 I.e., her summering in a palm oasis and her passing the cool season in the desert.

3 I.e., limpid, sweet water.

through its Banū Hilāl branch with the earlier poet's heritage from this area, though such a possibility remains to be investigated.

The same goes for the putative influence of "Jabrid" poets on Ibn Zāhir's work (detailed in the notes). Again, parallels do not offer proof of such a connection. It is certain that his poetry was informed by the art of his predecessors, but there is no other evidence than the poetry itself. Direct borrowings are the clearest example. Beyond the poetry that has survived in manuscripts, reliable facts about the Jabrid poets are virtually nonexistent. Some facts can be gleaned from names and allocutions in the poems themselves, such as the name of the poet and the ruler or other person he addresses.

As well as being found in the Jabrid poets, many features of Ibn Zāhir's poetry are found in Najdī seventeenth-century poets, about whom more is known from chronicled history: Rumayzān ibn Ghashshām and Jabr ibn Sayyār, the predecessor of Ḥmēdān al-Shwē'ir in the town of Qaşab, and many others. Yet another category for textual comparison is the poetry of the more famous Banū Hilāl, first presented by the historian Ibn Khaldūn, and later poets who were influenced by their style, such as Rāshid al-Khalāwī, whose work has been singled out by Emirati critics for its considerable affinity with Ibn Zāhir's poetry.

Ibn Zāhir and the Najdī Ethos

Rāshid al-Khalāwī is often compared to Ibn Zāhir on account of shared stylistic elements, such as the signature verse, its attendant vaunting of poetic accomplishments, and the pervasive presence of verses of gnomic wisdom. Yet the Hilālī-style poetry of this approximate contemporary is imbued with the combative spirit of the Najdī tribal ethos and therefore could not be more different. For example:¹

Do not forgive the undeserving:
 forgiving your enemy will only increase his appetite.

walā t'iff' amman lā yarā al-'afw minnih
fa-d-didd 'afwin 'anh ykawwī raghāybih

Your ancestor's enemy loathes you, even if he seems pleasant,
 and if he cries tears of blood he is misleading you.

¹ Ibn Khamīs, *al-Khalāwī*, 123–24.

w-ḥarīb jaddik law šifā mā ywiddik
w-‘ēnāh law tabkī lk ad-damm kādhbah

If you do not protect your distant pastures sword in hand,
 you'll be ousted from your camp and despoiled;
 Not attacking the enemy with sword and lance
 to keep your grip on land whets the appetite of foxes.
 Beware of leaving the heads of the harmless untouched:
 many knights were dispatched by a negligible foe.
 A head that's cut off poses no danger:
 a soul without a head won't come to fight.

w-min lā y'addī 'an marā'ī jdūdih
bi-s-sēf 'idday 'an marā'ī rikāybih
w-min lā yiridd aḍ-ḍidd bi-s-sēf wa-l-ganā
w-yahmiy al-ḥmā taṭma' 'alēh ath-tha'ālbah
w-ḥadhrā tbaḡgī rās min hān gadrih
f-kam fārisin afnāh min lā ygās bih
w-rāsīn tigīṣṣih tiktifī bās sharrih
w-nafsin bi-lā rāsīn fa-lā jāt ḥārbih

Themes

Main Themes in Ibn Zāhir's Poetry

Not counting the poem attributed to Ibn Zāhir's daughter, a thematic matrix of the poems would look roughly as follows. Five somewhat shorter poems are monothe-matic: §§2, 6 (on love), 7, 11, and 15 (on wisdom). One poem is atypical: §13.

The long polythematic poems are the core of his oeuvre. Of these, some of the relatively shorter ones are mostly on the subject of love: §§3 and 9. That leaves the core: §§1, 4, 5 (but with a predominance of wisdom), 8, 10, 12, 14 (the latter two predominantly on the theme of love), and 16.

One might draw up a similar matrix for rain sections: the longest of these are contained in §16 (twenty verses) and §8 (eighteen verses); next come the rain sections in §§4, 5 (ten verses each), and 2 (nine verses). The longest section of gnomic wisdom is found in §11 (forty-seven out of a total of fifty-one verses) and §5 (polythematic, but with forty-one wisdom verses), §15 (twenty-seven verses), §10 (twenty verses), §7 (nineteen out of a total of twenty verses). A further division is the thematic ordering:

for instance, the prelude is followed by the theme of love in §§1, 3, 4, 9, 10, and 14; and by a section of wisdom verses in §§5, 8, and 16.

Verses on Oral Poetry

The repeated mention of transmitters of poetry (*al-rwāt*; CA *rawī*, pl. *ruwāh*) in the opening lines shows the poet's concern with the critical reception of his verses by an audience of connoisseurs, who are instrumental in spreading his renown, as they have done for generations of predecessors: *tarāthāh*, "they inherited the verses from one another" (CA *tawāratha*) or, in an alternative reading, "told each other, recited to each other" (*tarāwāh*).

This "inheritance," one of many key words Ibn Zāhir's poetic language shares with the Jabrid poets, occurs in the first line of a poem by Ibn Ḥammād in reply to Ibn Zayd's poem in praise of the Jabrid ruler Ajwad ibn Zāmil (approximately 1470–1505):

Verses composed by the masterful Ibn Ḥammād,
a perpetuated inheritance to spite the enemy.

yigūl ibn Ḥammādīn w-min lā yikūdih
mithāyilin tirthā bi-l-hijā wi-t'ād

His boast that in poetry no challenge is too difficult for him (*lā yikūdih*) is a riposte to Ibn Zayd's opening verse with the claim that he cannot be outdone. Like Ibn Zāhir in this verse, he refers to reciters (*ar-rwāt*) who spread his words from mouth to mouth:¹

The poet Ibn Zayd composes judicious verses,
words that throw down the gauntlet to all reciters.

yigūl Ibn Zaydīn rā'ī mithāyil
migālin 'alā kill ar-rwāt mkād

However, the importance of not taking a transmitter's words at face value is stressed in the saying, "Transmitters are the blight of oral reports" (*mā āfat al-akhbār illā rwāthā*).²

In the preludes of Poems 2, 3, and 5, throngs of admirers press around (*zāl*, *yizūl*, *tizāwal*; noun *zōl*, *ziwīl*) the poet: the aficionados who are the next important category

1 Sowayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭī*, 300.

2 Al-Juhaymān, *Amthāl*, 7:5.

after competitors and the jury of transmitters. Like all performers, poets pride themselves on their popularity with the audience, as in this poem composed in 1708:¹

For me, it is a matter of honor to tell nothing but truths
 that are proudly repeated everywhere
 I go back and forth among themes
 that are affirmed with approval in crowded assemblies
 Until, upon the completion of the end of times,
 we hear the command to proceed to judgment

lākin a'idd aṣ-ṣidg ma' waḍḥ an-nigā
bi-fakhrin yṭarrā fī jimī' al-mawāḍī'
miḍēnā w-ʿidnā fī maʿānin laʿalhā
ʿalā z-zēn tiṭrā fī miṭāl al-mijāmi'
ilā mā tanāhā sālif ad-dahr w-īṭifā
lanā dāʿiyin tiṣghī ilayh al-misāmi'

Among the admirers, a special place is reserved for their elite, the connoisseurs: *rimmās*, pl. of *rammās*. In Emirati idiom, the verb *rimas* means “to speak, talk”; but more specifically “to recite poetry, to narrate stories, in social gatherings.” Therefore, the connoisseurs, *al-rimmās*, are those who actively participate in assemblies where traditional tribal lore is a prominent subject of conversation. As a transmitter of the Āl Murrah tribe explains, the origin of the word might be related to *ramṣah*: “conversation, the delicate and nice words lovers exchange” (*ar-ramṣah mithl gōlat at-tāʿallil wa-s-suwālif ad-dgāgah bēn al-ʿaṣhig w-ʿaṣhigtih*).²

“Building” Poetry

The frequent occurrence of the verb “to build” (*binā*) in the opening verses reflects the poet’s pride in his mastery as a craftsman and his awareness that he builds on the solid foundations of ancient tradition. In doing so, the poet may allude to both the oral and written tradition (see n. 73 to §4.1). His “well-designed buildings” (*ʿadlāt al-mibāni*) resemble those of the Jabrid poet Ibn Zayd:

This is the speech of Ibn Zayd who molds his verses
 into a new building, the delight of connoisseurs.

1 Sawayan, *al-Shiʿr al-nabaṭī*, 541.

2 Sawayan, *Ayyām al-ʿArab*, 1009.

yigūl Ibn Zēdin gīl bānī mithāyil
jdād al-bnā li-l-fāhimīn tishūg

and those of Shāyī‘ al-Amsah:¹

Lofty buildings of a major tribe

rfā‘ al-mibāni kbār al-ḥamāyil

and al-Khalāwī:²

Al-Khalāwī molds the hardest verses with ease:

a new build of precious poems.

yigūl al-Khalāwī allidhī mā yikūdiḥ
jidīd al-bnā min ghāliyyāt al-giṣāyid

Often it is made clear that that these structures not only provide living quarters, but are primarily strongholds in the perpetual poetic warfare with rival poets and their cohort of supporting critics: unscalable castle walls (*banāyā gšūrhā*; the plural of *gaṣr*, “castle”). This position of unassailable truth and strength of composition claimed by the poet speaks from the content: a durable philosophy of life that offers its audience a fair measure of security (n. 73 to §4.1).

In the Emirates, Ibn Zāhir is upheld as a model of poetic probity because he does not curry favor by means of flattery (*madīḥ*, laudatory poetry), and does not seek to achieve the same end by the opposite means, i.e., invective poetry (*hijā‘*). Instead, he positions himself ostentatiously on a moral high ground. But the boasting of his opening verses, and even verses where he claims this moral high ground for himself, leaves no doubt that in his mind he is in competition with other poets and that defense is part of his strategy to attain mastery.

Not incidentally, duels with visiting poets are a principal component of the narratives; even the stories about the poet’s search for a suitable location for his grave become part of the poet’s quest for artistic immortality. It is not uncommon for the one-upmanship of the era’s poets to acquire commercial overtones that stem from a sedentary environment, such as al-Khalāwī’s boast:³ “I command high prices for my verses, like expensive goods at a market” (*bi-l-gīl aghālī mithl ghālī al-jalāyib*).

1 Sowayan, *Ayyām al-‘Arab*, 290.

2 Ibn Khamīs, *al-Khalāwī*, 365.

3 Ibn Khamīs, *al-Khalāwī*, 84.

The comparison of compositions to impregnable fortresses has a long tradition before Ibn Zāhir, with roots in perpetual warfare among towns, tribes, families, and rulers of all stripes, not only during the beginnings of Nabaṭī poetry, but much earlier. Lyall observes that “the pile or building is the glory of the tribe, treated metaphorically.”¹ From antiquity, and not only Arab antiquity, as among the Bedouin in more recent times, it has been a common belief that in the mythical days of yore men and things were stronger: Nestor’s boast of being old enough to have been a companion of “the strongest generation of earth-born mortals,” is an early example.² The ancestors built better fortresses, too. Often, reference is made to the ancient people of ‘Ād, e.g., by Rāshid ibn Shihāb:³

I have built a tower of stone in Thāj,
 a stronghold impregnable for my enemies;
 Proudly it rises, even birds cannot alight on it;
 it is built of blocks of stone that Iram, the son of ‘Ād, quarried for it of old.

banaytu bi-Thāji mījḍalan min ḥijārati
li-aj’alahu ‘izzan ‘alā raghami man ragham
ashamma ṭuwālā yadḥaḍu l-ṭayru dūnahu
lahu jandalun mimmā a’addat lahu Iram

Until recent times, Arabian poets would liken their poems to fortresses, free of imperfections and cracks that can be exploited by rivals to demolish their work, e.g., al-Dindān:⁴

I am building a villa with blind round walls,
 cemented with electrified iron, poured by Syrian masons
 The foundations are rooted in the seventh earth,
 while its roof’s ridge scrapes the supports of heaven’s throne

followed by more outrageous hyperbole.

1 Lyall, *The Mufaddaliyat*, 1:424; 2:157.

2 Homer, *The Iliad*, 82.

3 Lyall, *The Mufaddaliyat*, 1:614; 2:248.

4 Kurpershoek, *The Poetry of ad-Dindān*, 179.

Love, Youth, and Old Age (al-shayb wa-l-shabāb)

Keywords: old age, gray hair (*shayb*); youth (*shabāb*); love, passion, dalliance (*ṣibā*, *taṣābī*; for CA *ṣabā*, “he indulged in amorous dalliance”);¹ whenever the word *‘aṣr* occurs with the meaning of “time, period,” it is followed by “dalliance, playful love” (*‘aṣr at-tiṣābī*, *‘aṣr aṣ-ṣibā* in §1.38, §2.7, §17.24).

Youth

Youth is always situated in an imagined past, whereas in the poetry old age is situated in the present. This contrast animates the poem’s development. Lamenting his youth, the Jabrid poet Fayṣal al-Jumaylī exclaimed:²

I don’t know if I cry hot tears about life or a lost love
 or about myself and my gentle nature
 I wish God would salvage me and my halcyon days . . .

fa-lā adri anā abkī al-‘umr aw lām khillah
aw abkī ‘alā rūḥī wa-ḥilwa ṭbu’hā
yā-lēt aṣ-ṣibā w-anā ilā allāh rāji’ . . .

The poets Rumayzān and Jabr remind one another:³

O Jabr, if only our time of dalliance would return,
 and bring solace to an ailing and desiccated heart.

yā-Jabr law yarja’ lanā ‘aṣr aṣ-ṣibā
yirūf bi-l-galb al-‘alīl al-mimḥil

Even the hard-boiled picaresque poet Shāyī’ al-Amsaḥ makes an exception for the passing of youth as valid reason for shedding tears:⁴

Except for tears shed at sweet youth’s farewell:
 I do not blame whoever cries for those marvelous nights.

illā min yabkī ladhdhat shibābih
mā alūm min yabkī liyālī l-‘ajāyib

1 Lane, *Lexicon*, s.v. *ṣ-b-w*.

2 Sawayan, *al-Shi’r al-nabaṭī*, 396.

3 Sawayan, *al-Shi’r al-nabaṭī*, 458.

4 Sawayan, *Ayyām al-‘Arab*, 292.

The poetry assumes that the “days of dalliance” as a period of memories will meet with recognition from all men with similar sensitivities. The obsession with the loss of youth is fixated on the svelte and curvy figure of a Bedouin belle about whose feelings nothing is revealed. Nor is there any indication that young women go through similar gut-wrenching anxieties as they advance in age. In fact, this particular male’s obsession overshadows the existence of all others and reaches the stage of complete self-absorption. The more charitable view of the poet-lover’s predicament is that it purports to represent symbolically all beings subject to the general human condition.

Other poets of the period equate beauties with amorous youth (*ṣibā*), e.g., Rushay-dān ibn Ghashshām:¹

Beautiful and in the flower of juicy youth;
on beholding her you are blown away by her stunning looks.

mzayynitin rayyānitin ḥasnat aṣ-ṣibā
lyā gābilat sharraf bahāhā gibīlahā

and Jabr ibn Sayyār:²

Such is the caprice of youth’s creamy-skinned succulent damsels,
who play with the heart of fools crazed by love.

hādhi swāt al-bīḍ ghudḍāt aṣ-ṣibā
yāl’abin bi-glūb al-ghwāt al-hibbilī

In general, in this genre of poetry young women do not have more of an independent existence than the hunter’s favorite prey, the gazelle: they are doomed to die in beauty or shrivel like a juicy stalk in the hot blasts of midsummer winds. The verses of Ibn Zāhir’s daughter can be seen as an indictment of this one-sided view.

In a ubiquitous conceit, the poet does his best to turn the young lady into a real gazelle, as in Rumayzān’s verse:³

By God, if not for her necklace and anklets,
I’d say a gazelle browsing on pristine desert pastures

1 Sowayan, *al-Shi’r al-nabaṭī*, 443.

2 Sowayan, *al-Shi’r al-nabaṭī*, 459

3 Sowayan, *al-Shi’r al-nabaṭī*, 461.

w-allāh law lā tōgahā wi-hjūlhā
lā agūl ḡabyin rāti'in bi-gfūrahā

An early elaborate version of the trope is given by Dhū l-Rummah. The verse's commentary tells that on a walk in the sands of al-Dahnā', the poet was addressed by his brother Mas'ūd:

Your comparison of her to a gazelle is apposite,
 but you did not ask the elegant creature, "Are you a gazelle or Umm Sālim?"
 You've put two horns on her head,
 and two black hooves below her legs.

fa-law tuḡsinu l-tashbīha wa-l-na'ta lam taqul
li-shāti l-naqā ā anti am ummu Sālimī
ja'alta lahā qarnayni fawqa qiṡāṡihā
wa-ḡilfayni musawwadayni tahta l-qawā'imī

whereupon the poet began his verse with "she looks like," etc.¹ Ibn Zāhir's gazelle similes follow in the footsteps of this exchange between Dhū l-Rummah and his brother.

Old Age

Old age comes without warning, e.g., in the eighteenth-century poet al-Mushannaq:²

It comes all of a sudden, without foreboding,
 no traveler or warner to raise the alarm.

tijīh 'alā ghirrin wu-hu mā darā b-hā
walā jāh minhā ṡārish w-nidhīr

and Jabr ibn Sayyār:³

Old age takes many by surprise,
 when its scouts and raiders attack from an unexpected distance

kam wāḡḡīn fihā y'ammār ghāfil
tijīh ghārāt an-niyā wi-sbūrahā

1 Dhū l-Rummah, *Diwān*, 768–69; *al-Aghānī*, 2:20; 18:5.

2 Sawayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṡī*, 551.

3 Sawayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṡī*, 486, 462.

This affliction is compared to an enemy in relentless pursuit. Its arrival is heralded by streaks of white hair in lieu of youth's raven-black locks. He drives the raven away, which is here a good omen, unlike the raven hopping on the remains of a deserted camp after the departure of the beloved and her tribe: "This black crow, contrary to what is normally accepted [ghurāb al-bayn 'the crow of separation'], is appreciated and symbolizes joy, good fortune and freedom from care, not the sinister desolation of wastelands."¹ This is the raven intended in a similar verse by al-Muraqqish the Elder:²

If you see hoariness driving away youth
the raven still hops in my locks.

*fa-in yuz'ini l-shaybu l-shabāba fa-qad turā
bihi limmatī lam yurma 'anhā ghurābuhā*

The poet inveighs against the loss of freedom that comes with bodily decay, as expressed by Shāyī' al-Amsaḥ:³

No one growing old escapes infirmity:
his travels and sojourns are confined to his dwelling

*w-killin yā shāb 'āb
w-ṣār bi-l-bēt raḥḥāl w-nazzāl*

Similar to the way Nestor towers over his younger fellows in The Iliad, insight gained in the ephemerality of all being gives the poet-sage an advantage over younger and fitter men, as expressed by Rāshid al-Khalāwī:⁴

This is my advice, my boy, remember it well,
for my time of living is almost up;
The counsel of graybeard supported by a cane,
his powerful stride turned into a shuffle of short steps.

*w-ūṣīk yā-waldī wṣātin tiḍummahā
ilā 'ād mā lī min midā l-'umr zāyid
wiṣiyītin 'ōdin thālith rijlih al-'aṣā
w-gaṣrat khṭāh illī min awwal ba'āyid*

1 Arazi, "al-Shayb wa 'l-shabāb."

2 Lyall, *The Mufaddaliyat*, 1:484; 2:180.

3 Sawayan, *Ayyām al-'Arab*, 260.

4 Ibn Khamīs, *al-Khalāwī*, 365.

Departure, Separation, and Loss

Key words: world (*dunyā*); fate (*dahr*); time (*ayyām, layālī, zamān*); fateful events (*ḥawādith, ḥādithāt, ṣurūf ad-dahr*); distance (*maṣrūf an-niyā*, lit. “the dictates of distance”).

Love Near or Far

The pair of youth and old age has its counterpart in the pair of union and distance, i.e., the presence of the beloved or her absence because of departure and separation. And just as old age is represented as a ruthless raider, in this poetry distance (*an-niyā*, CA *al-na'y*) and separation become marauding enemies. In both cases, these adversarial actions result in grievous wounds that the poet seeks to nurture through his memories of better days, as in Dhū l-Rummah’s verses:¹

Separation carried them off willy-nilly,
 Mayy and her lady friends one way and me the other.

wa-ajlā na'āmu l-bayni wa-nfatalat binā
nawā 'an nawā Mayyi wa-jārātihā shazrū

Whether distance carried Ṣaydā' away for a while,
 or she is nearby, it makes no difference;
 If the tribe's wanderings bring her back
 or carry her away, I feel poleaxed just the same.

'adā al-nay'u 'an ṣaydā'a ḥīnan wa-qurbuhā
ladaynā wa-lākin lā ilā dhāka rābihū
sawā'un 'alayka l-yawma anṣā'ati l-nawā
bi-ṣaydā'a am anḥā laka l-sayfa dhābihū

The same expression is used by the earliest known Nabaṭī poet, Abū Ḥamzah al-‘Āmirī: “If the machinations of distance took you or me away” (*law bān bik ṣarf an-niyā aw bān bi*).²

The pain caused by the beloved’s distance is reflected in the popular saying, “Distance is injustice” (*al-bi'd majfāt*).³

1 Dhū l-Rummah, *Diwān*, 566, 873.

2 Sawayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭī*, 264.

3 Al-‘Ubūdī, *Amthāl*, 1:270.

Departure and the Seasons

Arabic poetry's primeval scene of the beloved's departure is intimately bound up with the seasons. The word for "year," *ḥawl*, refers to the full cycle of the seasons. It has its equivalent in the "wheel of Time." Seasons and years follow one another in endless repetition, but the process of aging is linear from cradle to grave. Hence the feeling of loss at the separation from the beloved, generally at the time of the date harvest at the end of summer. The season will return, and with it perhaps the beloved, but he and she will no longer be the same. As put by al-Khalāwī:¹

We count the nights and the nights count us;
our lives come to an end but the nights will endure.

n'idd al-liyālī wa-l-liyālī ti'iddnā
wa-l-a'mār tafnā wa-l-liyālī bi-zāyidih

This, in Ibn Zāhir's vision, sums up the human condition.

Hence, the dominant themes in Ibn Zāhir's poetry are youth and old age; departure and separation; the endless succession of seasons and days revolved by the wheel of Time; and the concept of Fate. These themes give expression to his underlying vision, which in itself is expounded in his poems with slight variations, as regularly as the return of the seasons.

In his poetic idiom, different motifs and tropes associated with departure and separation (the lady's camel-borne litter chair, her profusion of long black hair, the crowns of palm trees at the time of the date season, and the date harvest) are visually merged. Mostly, this effect is achieved through comparison of swaying movement and color, e.g., Imru' al-Qays:²

Don't you see the ladies' camel litters early in the morning,
like palm trees of Shawkān at the time of the date harvest?

aw mā tarā aẓ'ānahum bawākiran
ka-l-nakhli min Shawkāna ḥina širāmī

and in early Nabaṭī poetry, Jabr ibn Sayyār:³

1 Ibn Khamīs, *al-Khalāwī*, 369.

2 Imru' al-Qays, *Dīwān*, 162.

3 Sawayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭī*, 437.

In the morning, after marching all night, their haunches look like
palm branches with clusters of dates hanging from a giant tree.

lākinn ayātilhā duḥā ghibb as-sarā
‘irjūnin anḥā min gnā jabbārahā

and the earliest known Nabaṭī poet, Abū Ḥamzah al-‘Āmirī, who compares the camels and their litters (*za‘āyin*) with palm trees of al-Qaṭīf, whose heavy loads of dates move gently in the breeze.¹

In the Emirates, this phenomenon of seasonal separation is a relatively recent memory, as expressed in the saying, “You have separated us, O midsummer [*gēz*, CA *qayz*], O father of the *ruṭab* dates, and you have reunited us, O winter, in our happy dwellings” (*farragtanā yā-l-gēz yā-bū khlālah wa-jamma‘tanā yā-shtā bi-ṭīb al-manāzil*). It refers to the fact that family members in Abu Dhabi used to travel to al-‘Ayn to spend the summer in the oasis, while many of the men would stay four months at sea during the pearling season. In winter, all would be reunited in Abu Dhabi. Hence, summer was the season of separation for many families who lived in the coastal areas.² And: “Summer came with its presents, followed by winter with its misery” (*sār al-gēz b-hadāyāh w-yānā shtā balāyāh*), i.e., in summer, those who remained at the coast would look forward to gifts of fruit and dates brought by those who had gone to spend the summer in the inland oases of al-‘Ayn.³ From a purely Bedouin point of view, the seasonal and emotional cycles are detailed in verses of Dhū l-Rummah, where many details read like a paraphrase of Ibn Zāhir’s scenes.⁴

Because of commerce at sea, the Emirati seasons of reunion and separation differed slightly from the Najdī Bedouin’s ninety days of summering at village wells, from the disappearance of the Pleiades until the appearance of Canopus, approximately from June to September.

Ibn Zāhir’s departure scenes do not necessarily tell us much about the habits of the Bedouin at his time and location, or about his own. In his poetry, the arrival and departure of the Bedouin are situated at the abstract level of inherited Najdī convention, perhaps influenced by the Jabrid Banū Hilāl and their predecessors. Some verses may suggest that they spent the summer at palm oases like al-‘Ayn and Līwā and departed after the date harvest. Other references, such as the final verses of Ibn Zāhir’s daughter

1 Sowayan, *al-Shi‘r al-nabaṭī*, 270.

2 Al-‘Amārah, *Yaqūl al-mutawaṣṣif*, 253.

3 Al-‘Amārah, *Yaqūl al-mutawaṣṣif*, 221.

4 Dhū l-Rummah, *Dīwān*, 825–32.

and the narrative lore, mention a relatively short migration from locations near the coast to al-Buraymī and al-‘Ayn or Līwā. But these might be later interpretations.

For the poet, the seasons are mainly of interest as a way of measuring the distance or proximity of the beloved. As such, the seasons also symbolize the fickleness of fate. Both are present in these lines by Mhannā Abū ‘Angā, the poet of the al-‘Uray‘ir dynasty in eastern Arabia:¹

If they wish, the nights show a pleasant face,
 only to spoil my food and water with treachery;
 As enjoyable days of the hot season
 are followed, by God’s decree,
 By a life of cold and hunger in winter,
 and the wholesome days of spring;
 It taught me to live with good and evil,
 all beings are made to taste from the healthy and harmful.

wa-l-liyālī law baghat taṣfī zimān
kaddirat bi-l-ghadr maṭ‘ūmī w-māh
mithl ayyām al-miḡiḏ w-ṭibahā
tagṭifihā maṭ ṭigādīr al-ilāh
‘īshat ayyām ash-shtā bardīn w-jū‘
wa-r-ribī‘ w-ṭib ayyāmih giḡāh
mithl dhā aghḏā ‘alā khubthīn w-ṭib
kill ḡayyin dhāyigīn ṭibih w-ādhāh

The World, Fate, and Time: Appearances and Truth

In the poet’s universe, the dimensions of time and distance work more harm than good. They often appear as a synonym for “ominous fate” (*ṣrūf an-nāybāt* and *ṣrūf al-liyālī* in §1.11 and §5.40). The “world” (*dunyā*) is the theater where these sinister forces play out, but, like “distance” and “the nights,” in the poet’s imagination it becomes an active, independent agency of Fate. Hence, “the world” is synonym for whimsical Fate, like *al-dahr* (“inscrutable fate”), *al-ayyām* (“the days”), *al-layālī* (“the nights”), and “time” (*al-waḡt*). In the scheme of things, its role is to lead people astray and ensnare them in its nefarious plots, as does the Devil.

Treachery is the essence of its nature, as expressed by the Jabrid poet Ibn Zayd:²

1 Sawayan, *al-Shi‘r al-nabaṭī*, 530–31.

2 Sawayan, *al-Shi‘r al-nabaṭī*, 310.

[May God annihilate] those who put their faith in this world and its people,
even if they are skilled and smart

w-min yāmin ad-dunyā w-min yāmin ahalhā
ilā kān min dhāt al-glūb al-ḥadhāyig

and al-Rumayzān ibn Ghashshām:¹

Have no faith in the world and its glory days:
it smiles on you one day, swoops on you the next

lā tāmin ad-dunyā w-ṭib ayyāmahā
law hī ṣīfat lik sā'tin ṣayyūr

and al-Khalāwī:²

If you are in the world's good books today, tomorrow she humbles you,
even if your pride and rank have risen to the Pleiades

w-min 'azzat ad-dunyā girībin tidhillih
w-law kān 'izzih bi-th-thurayyā manāṣbih

These passages merely elaborate on the saying: "Beware of the world," i.e., the unexpected blows of fate (*lā tāmin ad-dunya*).

In the eyes of some, unpredictability may enhance the appeal of the world's treachery: like a game of chance, it suddenly may lift the fortunes of the down and out, as in the verses of the pre-Islamic poet al-Muraqqish al-Aṣghar:³

How many rich men have I seen,
whose fortunes fell victim to cruel fate
And how many stout and proud stalwarts
were battered by blows and scarred for good
One's life of ease and comfort may vanish without warning,
while prosperity lands in a pauper's yard
One man resolves on arduous journeys,
then stays put, while a stay-at-home rushes off

1 Sowayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭī*, 462

2 Ibn Khamīs, *al-Khalāwī*, 232.

3 Lyall, *The Mufaddaliyat*, 1:506–7; 2:193.

kam min akhī tharwatīn ra'aytuhu
ḥalla 'alā mālihi dahrūn ghashūm
wa-min 'azīzi l-ḥimā dhī man'atin
aḏḥā wa-qad aththarat fihi l-kulūm
baynā akhū namatin idh dhahabat
wa-ḥuwwilat shiqwatun ilā na'im
wa-baynā zā'imun dhū shuqqatin
idh ḥalla raḥlan wa-idh khaffa l-muqīm

How many paupers have been restored to sufficiency, by God's will,
 and how many rich men end up despoiled.

kam min faqīrin bi-idhni llāhi qad jabarat
wa-dhī ghinan bawwa'athu dāra maḥrūbī

A similar verse by al-Khalāwī is today one of the most quoted in Saudi Arabia:¹

Tell poverty's dwelling it may yet strike it rich,
 just as a wealthy house may be reduced to poverty.

f-qūlū li-bēt al-fagr lā yāmin al-ghinā
w-bēt al-ghinā lā yāmin al-fagr 'āyid

These antithetic constructions, frequently deployed by Ibn Zāhir, were popular in his time, as shown by sixty-four verses by Rumayzān, starting with:²

How many hardships lead you to well-being,
 and how many times your comfort ends in calamity.

fa-kam shiddatin tilfik ilā ḥadd raḥah
wa-kam raḥatin tāzī 'ālēk wbāl

Often, poets represent the world in the guise of an attractive woman who frivolously amuses herself by playing with men's hearts.

While the World plays cat and mouse with humans, Time is synonymous not so much with opportunity for enjoyment and success in the world as with the inevitability of remorseless fate: "days" and "nights" refer to inescapable evil events, al-ḥādithāt, as in the pre-Islamic verses by Mutammim ibn Nuwayrah:³

1 Ibn Khamīs, *al-Khalāwī*, 56, 378.

2 Sawayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭī*, 425.

3 Lyall, *The Mufaddaliyat*, 1:77; 2:23.

For some time good fortune smiled on me,
but then inevitably there comes the day of gruesome evil;

[. . .]

I know for certain that there is no escape
from the blows of fate, so should I stand in fear of it?

wa-laqad ghubiṭtu bi-mā ulāqī ḥiqbatan
wa-la-qad yamurru ‘alayya yawmun ashna’ū

[. . .]

wa-la-qad ‘alimtu wa-lā maḥālata annanī
li-l-ḥādithāti fa-hal taraynī ajza’ū

Wisdom and Maxims

A possible sign of the poet’s sedentary roots, Ibn Zāhir’s verses do not feature the theme of desert travel, particularly in midsummer heat, with the aim of highlighting his intrepidity and mettle, as does Rabī‘ah ibn Maqrūm:¹

Often I visited wells [with foul water] when the Pleiades fall at the end of night,
under my saddle a stout and fast riding camel.

waradtu wa-qad tahaqqarat al-Thurayyā
wa-taḥta waliyyatī wahmun wasā’ū

For Ibn Zāhir, the desert symbolizes the world’s dangers and the need to proceed with caution. The mirage is an apt symbol for the world’s trickery, and “mirage” (*lāl*, from CA *al-āl*) often stands for hazardous desert conditions in general. “They plunge into the mirage” (*wārdīn al-lāl*) is another way of saying “to embark on a perilous desert crossing.” One step further, and the mirage signifies the treacherous “world,” as expressed by the Jabrid poet al-Kulayf:²

The enemy speaks soothing words at times of calm,
like a mirage that hovers in shimmering air;
With a smiling face like a well
that dazzles with the glitter of water and a shaft that collapses like a trap.

¹ Lyall, *The Mufaddaliyat*, 1:377; 2:137.

² Sawayan, *al-Shi‘r al-nabaṭī*, 296.

yi'fik bi-r-rāḥāt agwālin wi-hī
shirwā sarābin ṭāfiḥin fī lālhā;
w-bashāshitin bi-l-wajh mithl rikiyyah
barrāgtin bi-l-mā hayārin jālhā

The illusion of the mirage deludes and leaves one with one's hands empty, as expressed by the late-eighteenth-century poet Muḥsin al-Hazzānī:¹

Their words are a mirage wrapped in shimmering heat;
a little puddle that does not quench one's thirst;
No more than a hazy reflection at noon
of midsummer's scorching flames: no water at all!

ḥakihum lik mithl lālin fī sarāb
ḍaḥḍaḥin mā yirwī al-'aṭshān māh
mā yikūn illā sarābin fī ḥajīr
shams gēḍin lays yirwī min z-māh

Similarly, in al-Khalāwī's conceit, wisdom poetry is as essential for survival as a waterskin in the desert:²

Our poems come in three sorts: all others
are a mirage, and a mirage does not quench one's thirst.

w-ash'ārnā tajrī thalāthin w-ghērḥā
sarābin walā yirwī sarābin li-shāribih

The sage's guidance immunizes people against the danger of falling victim to the mirage. His solid truths unmask the falsity of the world's appearances, as in the line of Rumayzān:³

Similar to the early noon mirage, it attracts the thirsty with its glitter

ka-lāl aḍ-ḍuḥā yidniy az-zmā bi-t-tibārig

1 Sowayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭi*, 534.

2 Ibn Khamīs, *Al-Khalāwī*, 172.

3 Sowayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭi*, 479.

Al-Khalāwī boasts that his verses quench the thirst, while the rhymes of others are a mere mirage.¹ It has become an Emirati saying:² “A mirage doesn’t quench your thirst” (*al-lāl mā yirwī al-‘atshān*).

Warnings against setting out on desert expeditions without a sufficient supply of water, or putting one’s faith in a mirage, underline the importance of taking precautions, as for example in the early classical line of al-Ḥārith ibn Zālim:³

Like the folly of a scout who drinks his fill . . .
 pours away the rest of his water, and follows the mirage
saḫāta fārīṭin lammā tarawwā harāqa l-mā’i wa-ttaba’a l-sarābā

In Ibn Zāhir’s era, al-Khalāwī:⁴

God dooms those who toil at a miserable well,
 or start building on a less than solid bottom
 Who embark on a desert journey with a leaky waterskin,
 or who attack the enemy without proper arms

maḥā allāh min yarkiz ‘alā ghēr ‘ēlam
w-yabnī ‘alā ghēr al-‘azāz liyāḥ
w-min yaḍrib al-baydā’ ridīyy ṣimīlīh
w-min yanṭaḥ al-‘āyil b-ghēr slāḥ

and ‘Āmir al-Samīn:⁵

In a desert scorched by heat you will not slake
 your thirst if your bucket’s rope is too short to reach the water in the well”

fa-lā yarwī al-‘atshān ‘an lāhib aẓ-ẓmā
ilā warrad al-mā min ḥbālīh giṣīrhā

Precautions are no more than due diligence, however, and cannot guarantee protection. Ultimately, one’s only defense against the wiles of the world are the tenets of religious faith, especially the practice of taqwā, not in the sense of being on one’s guard against the world, but as the nurturing of an abiding fear of God in anticipation of the

1 Ibn Khamīs, *al-Khalāwī*, 172.

2 Ḥanzal, *Jāmi’ al-amthāl*, 305.

3 Lyall, *The Mufaddaliyat*, 1:619; 2:254.

4 Ibn Khamīs, *al-Khalāwī*, 62–63.

5 Sowayan, *al-Shi’r al-nabaṭī*, 345).

Last Judgment. In other poetry of Ibn Zāhir's time, it is sometimes used as part of the traditional tribal ethos and its moral obligations, as in the verse of Rumayzān:¹

You must show your virtue [*tagwā*], for nothing is more injurious
to a fellow's reputation than being derelict in duty [i.e., in the context of the
prevailing social ethos]

w-*'alēk bi-l-tagwā fa-mā 'āb al-fitā*
shayyin b-agbaḥ minh tark al-wājibā

As this example shows, in practice religious benefit is not always sharply distinguished from traditional tribal virtue. Rumayzān's poetic correspondent Jabr ibn Sayyār combines both aspects in his advice:²

Stand in fear of God! This is your best harness
to save you in time from the fires of Hell
Be patient in paying your share of blood money and reparations;
regale your guests with trays overflowing with food.

'alēk bi-t-tagwā hī afkhar malbasin
tinjik fī ghad min liḏā nīrānahā;
mithammalin gharm al-bilād mshājirin
aḏ-ḏēf ti'bā lih ghizīr jfānahā

Clouds, Rain, and Winds

Rain Clouds

Ibn Zāhir is not unique among poets of his era in showing a fascination with the spectacle of violent rainstorms, e.g., the Jabrid poet Ibn Zayd's verses:³

Wherever they alight, let the soil be drenched by rains,
from clouds that thunder like big drums in towns
Rains that kill gazelles when they strike,
and hail that drags along debris like a crazy drunk

1 Sowayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭī*, 432.

2 Sowayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭī*, 452.

3 Sowayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭī*, 305.

sigā kill mā ḥallaw min al-arḍ mirzīm
alkan diyādīm al-miṣārī r'ūdahā
mgattilt al-ghizlān ṣādigt al-ḥayā
tijirr al-ghathā jarr as-sikārā brūdahā

Clouds, like camels in the sky, are milked for water, in this case by the wind, especially the east wind, *al-ṣabā*. An ancient stock image of Bedouin poetry,¹ it was still popular with Jabrid poets such as al-Nābighah ibn Ghannām:²

A huge front of clouds slowly rises, ablaze with lightning,
 while it expands and is milked for torrential rain
 A pitch-black, heavy cumulus that groans and roars,
 while its water pours down in incessant sheets.

lahā 'ārīḍin raznin w-bi-l-barg yūḍī
wa-n-naww mistāsi' w-bi-l-wabl ḥālib
mḥinnin mrinnin mirjaḥinnin mḥaltam
ḥagūgin difūgin hāṭil al-ghēth sākib

An aspect of poetry's anthropomorphizing imagery, the stock characters of the Arabic game of love are popular in this context too. It is conventional for lightning to be compared to the flashing smile and glittering teeth of a beautiful woman, e.g., in the verses of the early Nabaṭi poet Ibn Zēd:³

Heavy showers came pouring down, amid crying and laughter,
 from a broad front moving at a crawl to inundate the soil
 Lightning's flashing smiles illuminated
 the pitch-dark gloom like burning torches.

ṣidūgin difūgin bēn bākin w-dāḥik
'ārīḍin mrīḍin bēn hāmin w-hāṭil
lakin ibtisām al-barg fih ilā njalā
dijā khirmis aḡ-ḡalmā rfā' al-mishā'il

1 E.g., Lyall, *The Mufaddaliyat*, 1:54; 2:17.

2 Sawayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭi*, 291; see also Hussein, "The Lightning-Scene in Ancient Arabic Poetry."

3 Sawayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭi*, 317–18.

Wind

Wind belongs to the abandoned-camp scene's inventory of set pieces. In Ibn Zāhir's preludes, wind gives expression to emotional turmoil roused by memory. Therefore, as in classical poetry, winds are often made to blow from different directions at the same time, e.g.:¹

When hot winds burst the *safā* plants,
the east wind plays with dry stalks to the right,
the south wind with those to the left

idhā ḍarraja l-hayfu l-safā la'ibat bihi
ṣabā l-ḥāfati l-yumnā janūbun shimālahā

Wind also plays the role of the herald of good fortune. Because winds drive rain clouds to their destination, as raiders goad captured camels, they are a metaphor for a lucky person, auspicious and welcome company as a good omen. Common expressions are, for example: "Your wind blows" (*habbat riḥak*); "the winds of fortune are blowing" (*habbat habāyin as-s'ad*); and in Emirati speech, as said about Ibn Zāhir: "By God, he is more generous than the winds of fortune; his generosity is unrivaled, he is the epitome of generosity" (*yā-llah, akram 'an dhawāri al-mahab, fī l-karam, mā ḥad yrūmah, kirīm*).²

*Sundry Motifs*Early Ancestors as Sources of Authority (*al-awwilīn*)

"From our early ancestors": *al-awwilīn*, lit. "the first ones, early ones," is used in Arabian poetry and narratives as a reference to the source of the earliest, hence most authoritative, version of a statement. In this, it fulfills a function similar to the tribal lineage system according to which one traces back one's origins to a first, often mythical, ancestor. In both cases, the system is validated by an implicit assumption that the position of the ancestor and his lineage is generally accepted by other participants in this tribal system as a whole. It is expressed in common narrative speech as a certificate of truth: "the old days" (*il-awwal*); "the customs of the real old-timers" (*'ādāt*

¹ Dhū l-Rummah, *Dīwān*, 503–4.

² Alameemi, *Ibn Zāhir*, 203.

il-awwalīyyīn killish);¹ “according to what we have heard from the ancient graybeards” (*ḥasab mā simi’ nā mn ash-shībān al-awwilīn*).²

A related usage is the term “graybeards” (*shuwwāb*) and those old enough to have heard a version of a story, poem, or other oral traditions from even earlier sources. This vague definition of textual authority is itself a trope of Arabian storytelling, e.g., “a brief account according to what we have heard from the ancient graybeards” (*ash-shībān al-awwilīn*).³ Often, these earlier oral sources would belong to the same family or tribe, or have some other close affiliation with the subject.

The jump from ancestors within living memory to those of more than a thousand years earlier is easily made. Their presence was a “very long time ago” (*yōm ad-dahar al-awwili*), “the earliest times, primeval age” (CA *dahr*, “time, long time, eternity, fate, destiny”). Like *al-awwilīn*, this term situates the story in an undetermined, mythical past, often with the implicit notion that in that golden age people were vastly superior to the present generation. The same notion already moved the pre-Islamic poet Rāshid ibn Shihāb to boast that his sword dated back to the times of the people of ‘Ād:⁴

These weapons I acquired from a store that belonged to the people of ‘Ād.

li-‘ādiyyatin mina l-silāḥi sta‘artuhā

The name ‘Ād is used here to indicate immemorial antiquity. As the early example shows, poets use the presumed authenticity of earlier generations as props for their vaunts, e.g., the legendary early Nabaṭī poet Shāyī‘ al-Amsah:⁵

We are the real men of old, the others a new breed:
we draw our buckets from wells brimming with water.

ḥinnā l-‘atīgīn wa-l-jidāidīn ghēr nā
ḥinnā kimā kawkab tāṭī dlāwih dhirīf

Not surprisingly, this verse is followed by a boast that he himself is the last representative of that last generation of men who truly adhered to the good old customs .

1 Holes, *Glossary*, 25–26; *Dialect*, 328.

2 Sawayan, *The Arabian Oral Historical Narrative*, 86–87.

3 Sawayan, *The Arabian Oral Historical Narrative*, 87.

4 Lyall, *The Mufaddaliyat*, 1:613; 2:247.

5 Sawayan, *Ayyām al-‘Arab*, 262, 275.

Banū Hilāl and Hunting with Cheetahs

Hunting with cheetahs (*ṣēd nimr*, lit. “hunting with panthers”) is attested in the earliest known Nabaṭī poetry, which is also notable for the lack of reference to firearms. The cheetah is mentioned in a poem by al-Nābighah ibn Ghannām in praise of Ajwad ibn Zāmil (d. 1507):¹

Like a growling cheetah from Hadramawt,
rough around the shoulders, its claws well-shaped

ka-mā ḥaḍramiyyin anmarī mshakkhif
ghaliḏ adh-dhrāʿen drimiyy al-makhālib

and in a poem by Ibn Zēd:²

His intrepid hunting cheetah has beautiful ears;
it sprints at its prey and pounces

yizill bi-nimran zīnat al-gūf jāsrah
ʿalā ṣ-ṣēd mirjāmin ḥagūg aṭ-ṭawārig

In Ibn Zāhir’s verse, the cheetah hunt occurs in the context of the Jabrid Banū Hilāl, the offspring of Ajwad’s brother, Hilāl, who continued the Jabrid presence in parts of Oman. Hunting with cheetahs is also found in Najdī oral traditions that feature the more famous Banū Hilāl: “At that time they used to hunt with cheetahs and they came racing on horses to kill gazelle and oryxes and ostriches” (*hāk al-ḥīn ʿindihum fhadāt yagniṣūn bhin ʿalā l-khēl wi-yṭarriḥūn az-ḏbā wa-l-wḍēḥi wa-n-naʿām*).³

Pearling and Poetry

The pearl trade, which played such an important part in the Gulf economy, is also found in the poetry of the area—in the case of Ibn Zāhir as a metaphor for his exquisite verses. Wealthy pearl merchants stood at the cradle of early Emirati efforts to register and collect poetry in manuscripts, as well as advances in the domain of religion, education, and culture. “The pearl merchant (*ṭawwāsh*) may also act as the middleman between a trader and the captain of a pearling ship. But when we talk about the ‘cultural elite of pearl merchants’ we refer to men of culture at the end of the nineteenth

1 Sawayan, *al-Shiʿr al-nabaṭī*, 290.

2 Sawayan, *al-Shiʿr al-nabaṭī*, 308.

3 Sawayan, *Ayyām al-ʿArab*, 1032.

and beginning of the twentieth centuries who endeavored to improve matters with regard to education, the economy and health and to increase contact with other Arab centers, some influenced by Wahhabism, others by enlightened Arab intellectuals. [. . .] Their ranks included religious scholars from Zubayr, Najd, and other Gulf emirates. But the merchants were instrumental in bringing books, printed materials, and other media; in opening of schools and establishing cultural institutions, in addition to their majlis sessions where poetry was recited, discussions were held, and publications were distributed. The elite was a curious mixture of pearl merchants like Ibn ‘Utaybah from Abu Dhabi, Āl ‘Uways, Āl al-Maḥmūd, Āl Madfa’ in Sharjah; rulers and high-ranking members of society and religious scholars. [. . .] Nabaṭī and classical poets rose to prominence in these circles, like Sālīm ibn ‘Alī al-‘Uways, Mubārak al-‘Uqaylī, Ṣaqr al-Qāsimī, and the exceptional poet Rāshid al-Khiḍra, a poetic efflorescence facilitated by a newly prosperous commercial class that took advantage of the great improvements in communication.¹ Mentioned examples of improvements in communication include the opening of the Suez Canal and the desert road from Damascus to Baghdad, and from there to Basra for transportation by sea.

The high esteem in which heavy pearls were held, mentioned in §8:7, reflects the divers’ common view: “The experts of the Persian Gulf assert that the largest, whitest, heaviest, and most perfect pearls are obtained in deep water, while the shallow beds, though prolific, yield pearls of less specific gravity and tinged invariably with a shade of some colour; this stain of colour they attribute to the influence of the light of the sun, and they hold that there is a tendency to distortion in pearls grown between islands and the mainland, and that deep water is favourable to perfect sphericity as well as to lustre and to other qualities conferring value.”²

Jinn

In poetry, the appearance or sound of the jinn is the mark of a particularly lonely and bleak stretch of desert, as in the verse of the pre-Islamic poet Bishr ibn Abi Khāzim:³

I crossed many desert wastes where the jinn are heard playing their tunes
and waterless spaces where the hot winds whistle shrilly

1 Thānī, *Ibn Zāhir*, 58–62.

2 Lorimer, “Appendix D: Date Production and the Date Trade in the Persian Gulf Region,” in *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia Online*, 22.

3 Lyall, *The Mufaddaliyat*, 1:651; 2:274, 276.

wa-kharqin ta'zifu l-jinnānu fīhi
fayāfīhi taḥimnu bihā l-sahāmū

and Dhū l-Rummah:¹

In those wastes the jinn raise their plaintive song at night
as the wind howls through the dry, outspread branches of the 'ayshūm tree

li-l-jinni bi-l-layli fī arjā'ihā zajalun
kamā tanāwaha yawma l-rīḥi 'ayshūmū

and:²

Many deserts as wide as the sky did I cross,
and fields of stone painted black by night
Spooked by eerie sounds of the wilderness,
as if humans were singing and calling to each other.

wa-dawīyyatin mithli l-samā'i 'tasaftuhā
wa-qad ṣabagha l-laylu l-ḥaṣā bi-sawādī
bihā min ḥasīsi l-qafri ṣawtun ka-annahu
ghinā'un anāsiyyun bihā wa-tanādī

As here, such encounters are also likely to occur in the period of the greatest heat,
for instance in these lines of Jabr ibn Sayyār:³

When stones are baked red hot by the noon sun,
and lizards stand like clerics calling for prayer,
The jinn leave their hideouts in trenches,
and foxes come out of their holes.

lā ḥamyat ar-ramḍā migāyilhā l-ḥaṣā
shirwā mitāwi'tin bi-rūs manārḥā
wa-l-jinn mā taktann fī 'arṣāthā
wa-hajārisin mā takhtifī b-ahjārḥā

1 Dhū l-Rummah, *Dīwān*, 408.

2 Dhū l-Rummah, *Dīwān*, 658–86.

3 Sawayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭi*, 437.

Doves

The cooing of a dove is the musical accompaniment to a lover's woe, repeated in countless poems. A typical example is found in verses by Zayd ibn 'Uray'ir, the last prince of the Āl Ḥamīd dynasty in eastern Arabia before it was crushed by the nascent Saudi state:¹

It pained my heart and roused my mind
 to hear the dove's plaintive cooing on its perch at the abandoned camp;
 Please, dove, stop your wailing in tremulous tones:
 fly away from your lookout over the ruins!
 You moan as if you were deserted by your mates:
 yes, what else can one do when separated from his friends!

wa-mimmā shijā galbī wa-hayyaḍ l-khāṭirī
wargin talā'ā fōg al-aṭlāl shārifiḥ
yā-warg lā tal'ī bi-ṣōtin mgharriḍ
walā ta'tilī al-aṭlāl w-iyyā l-mishārifiḥ
yaḥinn alladhī min yōm fārag wilīfiḥ
ajal kēf min fārag jimāyi' walāyifiḥ

Formulaic Numbers

The ninety thousand victims of a flood, mentioned in §4.51, must be a formulaic number. Ninety and multiples of it are common in the poetry. Some examples are: "Rider who sets out with nine hundred mounts, ninety, ninety more, and another thousand";² "We have nine thousand milk camels [. . .] and ninety herds of old and young she-camels";³ and:⁴

After he had collected a stable of ninety pedigree mares,
 and ninety slaves armed with lances

min 'igb mā ribaṭ tis'īn ṣafrā
w-tis'īn naggāl al-gnā min 'abīdih

1 Sawayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭī*, 512.

2 Kurpershoek, *Arabian Romantic*, 53.

3 Lerrick, *Taghribat Bani Hilal*, 49–50.

4 Sawayan, *Ayyām al-'arab*, 1027.

and:¹

Two thousand came to the well, watered, and left;
 and another two thousand descended from the sandy heights to the well;
 We stitched ninety leather buckets made of female camels' hide,
 and another ninety made of young male camels' hide.

alfēn ward al-mā w-alfēn ṣadrih
w-alfēn ma' rūs al-'dām wrūd;
kharaznā dlāhum jild tis'in bakrah
w-tis'in ma' tis'in jild gi'ūd

It has remained a feature of narratives and poetry associated with the Hilālī saga, e.g., the Zu'biyyah, the daughter of Ibn Ghāfil (see Introduction to the printed volume): “We gave him ninety sorrel mares” [. . .] “ninety fillies” [. . .] “ninety and ninety and two thousand horsemen” [. . .] “ninety pair of horns” [. . .] “ninety nights” [. . .] “ninety men from both sides were killed.”²

Graves

In Emirati oral culture, the line “this is the place where the eye sleeps in peace” (§13.33, *al-'ēn ṭāb manāmhā*) is associated with Ibn Zāhir's search for a suitable grave, which led him to Rās al-Khaymah. Almost a thousand years earlier, the same connection between good soil and ease of mind was made by Dhū l-Rummah:³

In a land of wholesome soil sprinkled by rains of spring,
 healthy and free from salt and agriculture
 There one's mind feels at ease, as if perfumes
 come wafting to it with the coolness of night.

bi-arḍi hijāni l-turbi wasmiyyati l-tharā
'adhātin na'at 'anhā l-mulūḥatu wa-l-baḥrū
taṭību l-arwāḥu ḥattā ka-annamā yakhūḍu
l-dujā fī bardi anfāsihā l-'iṭrū

1 Sowayan, *Ayyām al-'Arab*, 1031.

2 Kurpershoek, *The Poetry of ad-Dindān*, 211–17.

3 Dhū l-Rummah, *Dīwān*, 574–75.

In today's Emirates, the first half of this verse by Ibn Zāhir is considered a succinct description of the country's coastal and inland desert areas. In the roughly contemporary work of al-Khalāwī, a similar point is made:¹

If a free man is in dire straits
tossed about by the world and hard-pressed;
[. . .]
A fellow is not confined to a particular place:
one's place is where one can benefit.

idhā l-ḥirr gallat ḥiltih thumm ghādarat
ṭṣaffig bih ad-dinyā w-ḍāgat midhāhibi
[. . .]
fa-d-dār mā yiḥṣar 'alēhā wlēdhā
dār al-fitā mā ṭāb fihā mikāsbih

Friends

In his maxims, Ibn Zāhir is at pains to stress the importance of friends, but only if they are true friends. Many friends are effectively one's enemies. Statements such as "with friends like you, who needs enemies" are common in complaints about insufficiently loyal friends, e.g., Rumayzān:²

Many a friend's presence is as good as his absence;
even if sated, he acts as if he is starving
w-kam min ṣidīgin ḥāḍirin mithl ghāyib
w-law kān shab'ānin fa-hū mithl jāyi'

and the early Nabaṭī poet al-Sharīf Jarī al-Jinūbī:³

No matter how many friends you count,
in your hour of need few will remain
ilā mā akthar al-khillān yōm ti'idhum
kithīrin w-'ind al-mūjibāt gilil

1 Ibn Khamīs, *al-Khalāwī*, 59.

2 Sawayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭī*, 423.

3 Sawayan, *al-Shi'r al-nabaṭī*, 592.

and al-Khalāwī:¹

Be on your guard against an enemy once,
but beware of a malicious friend a thousand times

w-iḥḍhar ‘aduwik fī l-malā fard marrah
w-iḥḍhar ṣidig as-suwu alfin thāt bih

and Ḥmēdān al-Shwē‘ir.²

Not much better are undependable friends, as in the saying, “Fair-weather friends, count them as enemies” (*khillān ar-rakhā ‘iddhum gōm*);³ and: “A useless friend is effectively an enemy who does no harm” (*ṣidij mā yinfa‘ak mithil ‘aduw mā yiḍarrik*).⁴ A related piece of advice is not to tell anyone about your plans and hidden thoughts except your most trusted friends, e.g., the Jabrid poet ‘Āmir l-Samīn in a string of wise counsels similar to the ones given by Ibn Zāhir;⁵ and in 1735 the headman of al-Bīr, Muḥammad ibn Manī‘ al-‘Awsajī al-Badrānī al-Dawsarī:⁶

To entrust your secret thoughts to the rabble,
is short-sighted and will not further your goals.

w-min wadda‘ awbāsh al-barāyā sdūdiḥ
fa-hū ‘ādīm ash-shōfāt mikhtī gṣūdiḥ

The need for dependable friends when “the music of the good life stops” (*ayyām at-taghānī*, lit. “days of luxury”) explains poetry’s repeated advice to deal gently with friends who in one’s view commit a mistake, e.g., Jabr ibn Sayyār:⁷

Show great patience when dealing with the mistakes of friends,
for only the patient will attain their high ambitions;
Even if your companion cold-shoulders you on purpose,
he yet may be steadfast when your enemies surge against you

1 Ibn Khamis, *al-Khalāwī*, 58.

2 Kurpershoek, *Arabian Satire*, 27, 53, 107.

3 Al-Juhaymān, *Amthāl*, 3:38.

4 Ḥanzal, *Jāmi‘ al-amthāl*, 185.

5 Sawayan, *al-Shi‘r al-nabaṭī*, 345.

6 Sawayan, *al-Shi‘r al-nabaṭī*, 514.

7 Sawayan, *al-Shi‘r al-nabaṭī*, 488.

wa-ṣabrin ‘alā zallāt al-aṣḥāb ṭūlih
fa-lā yidrik at-ṭolāt illā ṣībūrḥā;
riḥḥārik w-law jāfāk yōmin ti‘ammad
fa-hū ‘ind zomāt al-‘dā fī nḥūrāḥā

and Muḥammad ibn Manī‘ al-‘Awsajī al-Dawsarī:¹

Always respond with gentle intelligence to the mistakes of a friend

wa-bi-l-ḥilm ‘an zallāt al-aṣḥāb ṭūlih

and in a poem by Fāyiz ibn Nḥēt, dated 1699:²

Every trustworthy man on becoming chief in his land,
 remains loyal to his friend if he commits an offense;
 And if he makes a second mistake, he will forgive him;
 if he is at fault for a third time, he overlooks it with a heavy heart.

w-kill ākhā thigitin w-in shākh bi-waṭnih
yahfiḥ ṣidīgih ilā mā dās zallāt;
w-in bān lih zallitin ukhrā ‘afā ‘anhā
w-in bānat ath-thālithah f-idmaḥ m‘ānāḥ

The same point is made in the saying, “A chief looks the other way if one of his men commits thirty wrongs” (*ash-shēkh yasmaḥ ‘an thalāthīn zallah*).³

Wealth and Poverty

The relation between one’s social standing and wealth is expressed by the saying, “The poor are not held in esteem as real men” (*min gall mālih ṣār mā hūb rajjāl*).⁴ The poetry of this period frequently strikes a note of indignation at the fall in social rank caused by poverty, e.g., Ḥmēdān al-Shwē‘ir and his predecessor in the same town, Jabr ibn Sayyār, in this verse:⁵

1 Sowayan, *al-Shi‘r al-nabaṭī*, 514.

2 Sowayan, *al-Shi‘r al-nabaṭī*, 547.

3 Al-Juhaymān, *Amthāl*, 4:90.

4 Al-Juhaymān, *Amthāl*, 8:216.

5 Sowayan, *al-Shi‘r al-nabaṭī*, 466.

If one is poor and stands with empty hands,¹ he is disregarded,
scorned, his voice carries no weight in the tribal assemblies.

w-min kân miftigr al-iyādi fa-gadrih
mhānin malfūh al-ḥaky fi ḥamāyilih

The contribution of wealth to one's status in society is summed up in the saying, "Wealth is a man's weapon" (*al-māl slāḥ ar-rjāl*);² and in the Emirati saying, "If you have your own money, you are under no one's foot" (*bi-flūsik maḥḥad yidūsik*).³

Ibn Zāhir's view of the balance between honor and wealth is echoed in the earliest Arabic poetry, e.g., the line of al-Muthaqqib al-'Abdī:⁴

He does not care and happily agrees
to spend all his wealth to keep his honor safe.

lā yubālī ṭayyibū l-nafsi bihī
talafa l-māli idhī l-ʿirḍu salimū

It is intertwined with the notion that the accumulation of wealth without spending it is a losing proposition, as expressed by Tamīm ibn Abī Muqbil:⁵

Spend it all and prosper, for wealth is a dishonor;
eat it, for it will be wiped out and eaten by fate.

fa-atlif wa-akhlif innamā l-mālu ʿaratun
wa-kulhū maʿa l-dahri lladhī huwa ākilu

Similarly, Ibn Zāhir's Najdī contemporary, al-Khalāwī:⁶

Generous men use their wealth to maintain their social position;
mean fellows sacrifice their standing for the sake of wealth.

wa-l-ajwād dūn al-ḥāl bi-l-māl tittigī
wa-l-andhāl dūn al-māl bi-l-ḥāl ḥālbih

1 I.e., as in the verse of Ibn Zāhir, unable to maintain his social standing by properly entertaining guests.

2 Al-Juhaymān, *Amthāl*, 7:140.

3 Ḥanzal, *Jāmiʿ al-amthāl*, 293.

4 Lyall, *The Mufaddaliyat*, 1:593; 2:234.

5 Lyall, *The Mufaddaliyat*, 1:660.

6 Ibn Khamīs, *al-Khalāwī*, 284.

If there is no wealth to spend to begin with, a different saying applies: “A man without means cannot be a real man” (*rajlin blā mālin mā hūb rajjāl*).¹ It shades into a related group of sayings about the debilitating effect of poverty on a man’s making a name for himself as a generous host. Much of Ibn Zāhir’s saga revolves around the suspense of seeing the poet teetering on the brink of thus being undone by poverty.

¹ Al-Juhaymān, *Amthāl*, 3:178; see also §10.48.