



"Everything's destined toward demise" | "كُلُّ شَيْءٍ مَصِيرُهُ لِلزَّوَالِ"

Text Information

Author | al-Ḥārith ibn 'Ubād

Language | Arabic

Period | 5-6th century CE.

Genre | Poetry (elegy)

Source | Cheikh, L. 1890. *Kitāb Shu'arā' al-Naṣrāniyyah*. Vol. 1. Beirut: Maṭba'at al-Ābā' al-Mursilīn al-Yasū'iyyīn fī Bayrūt,

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Transcription, translation and introduction by Sherif Abdelkarim.

Introduction to the Text

The seventh-century advent of Islam precipitated a breakthrough in historiography. In the centuries that followed the religion's arrival, linguists, lexicographers, and chroniclers spared no effort to write all they knew of the Arabs' pre-Islamic days, much of it preserved in verse. This poetry commemorated landmarks of the past—events not so much faithfully recorded as artistically imagined to drive home their import.

One such event, the legendary Basūs war between the sibling tribes of Taghlib and Bakr (ca.494-534), comes to us by way of several poems. They relate the following story: a forty-year war broke out with the murder of the Taghlibs' leader, Wā'il ibn Rabī'ah, better known as Kulayb. Not long before, Kulayb's aunt-in-law, al-Basūs bint Munqidh, hosted Sa'd ibn Shumays as a resident under her protection. Sa'd's she-camel, al-Sarāb, pastured with those of Jassās ibn Murrah, her nephew and Kulayb's brother-in-law. Noticing the unfamiliar camel among his herd, Kulayb warned Jassās that al-Sarāb was not welcome to pasture near his land. Jassās responded in kind that none of his camels would pasture without her. Kulayb then threatened that if he saw the camel again, he'd stick an arrow in her breast. If he did so, said Jassās, he'd stick an arrow in Kulayb's neck. Despite this grave promise, Kulayb fatally struck al-Sarāb when he encountered her again. al-Basūs shared her humiliation with her nephew, vowing to kill Kulayb's most prized camel, Ghilāl, in retaliation. Jassās set his mind instead to killing Kulayb, which he did.

Following Kulayb's murder, Taghlib leadership transferred to Kulayb's brother, 'Adiyy ibn Rabī'ah, styled "al-Muhalhil" ("The Refiner") on account of the refinement of his poetry. al-Muhalhil maintained a killing streak for several decades, culminating in the deaths of both Jassās and his half-brother, Hammām. A third half-brother, al-Ḥārith ibn 'Ubād (or 'Abbād), who had avoided the conflict entirely until this point, now intervened, dispatching a letter to al-Muhalhil. The message, sent with al-Ḥārith's son, Bujayr, offered al-Muhalhil the choice of either slaying Bujayr and ending the bloodshed definitively, or releasing him to likewise establish peace. al-Muhalhil proclaimed "bu' bi-shis' na'l Kulayb!" ("Take payback for Kulayb's shoelace!") and slew Bujayr.

al-Ḥārith initially accepted his son's sacrifice for the sake of peace. When he heard al-Muhalhil's taunt, however, al-Ḥārith was incensed and decided to enter the battle, conclusively defeating the Taghlibs and capturing their leader, al-Muhalhil. Failing to recognize who he had captured, al-Ḥārith commanded his prisoner to lead him to al-Muhalhil; the latter promised to do so on the condition that he would not harm him. al-Ḥārith acquiesced. When the prisoner identified himself as al-Muhalhil, al-Ḥārith was true to his word, cutting off al-Muhalhil's forelock (a mark of humiliation in this society) but otherwise leaving him alone.

In the following rithā', or elegy, al-Ḥārith laments the disrespectful slaying of Bujayr (his son), expresses the many hard feelings he endured as a consequence, and showcases images and moods from the day of his battle against the Taghlibs. The poem is best known by its famous refrain, "Qarribā marbaṭ al-Na'āmah minnī," ("Bring me al-Na'āmah's harness"), al-Na'āmah being his unrivaled horse. The poem as it survives exists in multiple versions, though none live up to the claims by medieval historiographers that al-Ḥārith repeated this call over fifty times.

Another text featured in the *Global Medieval Sourcebook*, "Can you make out twilight's ruins?", comprises al-Muhalhil's response to al-Ḥārith's elegy. While these two poems have traditionally been ascribed, respectively, to al-Harith and al-Muhalhil themselves, more research is required to determine their precise transmission and authorship.



Further Reading

Fück, J.W. [1960-2007] 2012. "al-Basūs", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 23 December 2020.

- Offers an overview of the Basus war; includes a helpful bibliography.

Khalidi, T. 1994. *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Surveys how the past was conceived and recorded through the first several centuries of Islamic historical writing.

Rosenthal, F. [1952] 1968. *A History of Muslim Historiography*. 2nd rev. ed. Leiden: Brill.

- Analyzes the period's conceptions of and approaches toward recording the past.



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Everything's destined toward demise Besides my Master, ¹ and good works.	غير ربي وصالح الأعمال	كل شيء مصيره للزوال
You see the people, all looking, Unable to cheat their demise.	ليس فيهم لذاك بعض احتيال	وترى الناس ينظرون جميعا
Tell the highborn's mother, ² mourning Bujayr, A barrier's set between men and their wealth.	5 حيل بين الرجال والأموال	قل لأم الأغرّ تبكي بجيراً
I'll mourn Bujayr, by my life, As water runs down mountaintops.	ما أتى الماء من رؤوس الجبال	ولعمري لأبكين بجيراً
My misery, Bujayr, when Horses coursed, intractable war day.	10 جالت الخيل يوم حربٍ غُضال	لهف نفسي على بجيرٍ إذا ما
The courageous exchanged fatal raids. Whites appeared from canopies' bellies, ³	وبدا البيض من قباب الحِجَال	وتساقى الكُماة سُماً نقيعاً
While every freewoman raced, calling, "Bakr! ⁴ "—honorable as idols.	يا لبكرٍ غزاةً كالتمثال	وسعت كل حُرّة الوجه تدعو
O opulent Bujayr, ⁵ no peace until We fill the wasteland with men's heads.	15 نملا البید من رؤوس الرجال	يا بجير الخيرات لا صلح حتى
Eyes will smile after crying Once blood quenches arrowheads.	حين تسقي الدما صدور العوالي	وتقرّ العيون بعد بُكاها
Wā'il's children wailed from war, The wailing of encumbered camels.	20 ب عجيح الجمال بالأثقال	أصبحت وائل تبعج من الحر
I played no part in this war, Allāh knows; I feel its heat today.	وإني لحرّها اليوم صال	لم أكن من جناتها علم الله
I avoided Wā'il, that they might come around, But Taghlib refused my seclusion. ⁷	فأبت تغلب عليّ اعتزالي	قد تجنبت وائلاً كي يفيقوا
They greyed my forelock with Bujayr, Killed him wrongly, without cause.	25 قتلوه ظلماً بغير قتال	وأشابوا ذوؤأبتي ببجير
Killed him in exchange for Kulayb's lace— The noble's kill for a string's expensive! ⁸	إن قتل الكريم بالشسع غال	قتلوه بشسع نعل كليب
Children of Taghlib! ⁹ Take heed: We drank pure Death indeed.	30 قد شربنا بكأس موت زلال	يا بني تغلب خذوا الحذر إنّا
Children of Taghlib! You killed a precious one, now slain, We haven't heard the likes of him!	ما سمعنا بمثله في الخوالي	يا بني تغلب قتلتم قتيلاً
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— ¹¹ Wā'il's war bore fruit, after infertility.	لَقَحَتْ حَرْبٌ وائلاً عن حِيال	قرباً مربط النعامة مّي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— I don't intend words, but deeds.	35 ليس قولي يُرادُ لكن فِعالِي	قرباً مربط النعامة مّي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— The women's wails turned earnest.	جدّ نوح النساء بالأعوال	قرباً مربط النعامة مّي



Draw Na'āmah's harness near— My head greyed; haters knew me not.		شَابَ رَأْسِي وَأَنْكَرْتَنِي الْقَوَالِي	قَرَّبَا مَرْبَطَ النَّعَامَةِ مَنِّي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— For riding: nighttime, morning, afternoon.		لِلسُّرَى وَالْغُدُوِّ وَالْأَصَالِ	قَرَّبَا مَرْبَطَ النَّعَامَةِ مَنِّي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— My night's surpassed the longest nights.	40	طَالَ لَيْلِي عَلَى اللَّيَالِي الطُّوَالِ	قَرَّبَا مَرْبَطَ النَّعَامَةِ مَنِّي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— For close embrace: Champions 'gainst Champions.		لَاعْتَنَقَ الْأَبْطَالُ بِالْأَبْطَالِ	قَرَّبَا مَرْبَطَ النَّعَامَةِ مَنِّي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— Discard the words of the heedless. ¹²	45	وَأَعْدِلَا عَنْ مَقَالَةِ الْجُهَّالِ	قَرَّبَا مَرْبَطَ النَّعَامَةِ مَنِّي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— My heart will not forgo warring.		لَيْسَ قَلْبِي عَنِ الْقِتَالِ يَسَالِ	قَرَّبَا مَرْبَطَ النَّعَامَةِ مَنِّي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— Even as Boreas' tailwind roared. ¹³		كُلَّمَا هَبَّ رِيحٌ ذَيْلُ الشَّمَالِ	قَرَّبَا مَرْبَطَ النَّعَامَةِ مَنِّي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— For Bujayr, Breaker of Chains.	50	لَبَجِيرٍ مُفَكِّكَ الْأَغْلَالِ	قَرَّبَا مَرْبَطَ النَّعَامَةِ مَنِّي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— For a noble, Beauty-crowned.		لَكَرِيمٍ مُتَوَجِّجٍ بِالْجَمَالِ	قَرَّبَا مَرْبَطَ النَّعَامَةِ مَنِّي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— We don't sell men for shoes. ¹⁴	55	لَا نَبِيعُ الرِّجَالِ بِنَيْعِ النَّعَالِ	قَرَّبَا مَرْبَطَ النَّعَامَةِ مَنِّي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— For Bujayr, may my uncles be ransomed.		لَبَجِيرٍ فِدَاهُ عَمِّي وَخَالِي	قَرَّبَا مَرْبَطَ النَّعَامَةِ مَنِّي
Bring it ¹⁵ — to haughty Taghlib, For the warriors' embrace the day of battle.		لَاعْتَنَقَ الْكُمَاةُ يَوْمَ الْقِتَالِ	قَرَّبَاهَا لِحَيٍّ تَغْلِبُ شُوسًا
Bring it— and bring my breastplate, A sleek cuirass blunts arrows' edge.	60	عَا دِلَاصًا تَرْدُ حَدَّ النَّبَالِ	قَرَّبَاهَا وَقَرَّبَا لَأُمْتِي دِرْ
Bring it— with slashing swords, For the clash of champions on battle day.		لِقِرَاعِ الْأَبْطَالِ يَوْمَ النَّزَالِ	قَرَّبَاهَا بِمُزْهَفَاتٍ حَدَادٍ
Often I faced an army, ¹⁶ hurling Death from lightly-armored chargers.	65	تَ عَلَى هَيْكَلٍ خَفِيفِ الْجِلَالِ	رُبَّ جَيْشٍ لَقِيْتُهُ يَمْطُرُ الْمُؤْ
Ask noble Kinda, inquire into Bakr, Interrogate Madhij and Hilāl. ¹⁷		وَاسْأَلُوا مَذْجَا وَحْيٍ هَلَالِ	سَائِلُوا كِنْدَةَ الْكِرَامِ وَبَكْرًا
When they reached us with a massive troop, Ready to attack, severe in their seizure;		مُكَفْهَرٍ الْأَذَى شَدِيدِ الْمَصَالِ	إِذْ أَتَوْنَا بَعْسَكِرٍ ذِي زُهْهَاءِ
When they craved congress we met them, Welcomed every keen sword's edge.	70	كُلُّ مَاضِي الذُّبَابِ عَضْبِ الصَّقَالِ	فَقَرَّيْنَاهُ حِينَ رَامَ قِرَانَا



Critical Notes

- 1 Allah.
- 2 Bujayr's mother.
- 3 "Whites" here perhaps refers to the warriors' unsheathed, shining weapons, or more likely to the faces of the Banī Bakr's women, peeking out of their enclosures. This latter reading lends itself to the verse that follows, **as it** does the legend of al-Ḥārith's entrance into the fight. As medieval commentators have it, the fateful day he joined the battle would be remembered as the Day of Shearing (Yawm al-Taḥāluq), or the Day of Haircutting Past the Earlobes (Yawm Taḥlāq al-Limam), on account of Bakr's tribesmen cutting their hair in order for their women to identify them: al-Ḥārith had ordered them to attend onto the battlefield to finish off Taghlib's wounded and nurse their own.
- 4 Bakr being the name of al-Ḥārith's tribe
- 5 The Arabic, "Ya Bujayr **al-khayrāt**", plays on the name Bujayr, which means (of a belly) "filled with water or **milk**". Here, the poet endearingly declares Bujayr full of "the best": "al-khayrāt."
- 6 Wā'il being the parent of Taghlib and Bakr.
- 7 That is, al-Ḥārith's avoidance of the war.
- 8 That is, the murder of Bujayr for a shoelace is unacceptably **disproportionate**
- 9 That is, the Taghlib tribe, named after Taghlib, son of Wā'il.
- 10 al-Na'āmah: al-Ḥārith's formidable horse
- 11 In the original Arabic, the repeated command verb employed, "qarribā," takes the dual form, although a plural audience is targeted. Classical Arabic poets rely on this addressing of two imaginary bystanders for dramatic effect, most famously Imru' al-Qays (d.c.545) in his ode's opening, "Qifā nabki min dhikrā ḥabīb wa-manzili" ("Stop! Let's weep, recalling lover and lodge").
- 12 A general judgment on boasts unsubstantiated by action, though perhaps it refers to some specific rumors arising out of al-Ḥārith's tribulation.
- 13 Literally, whenever the north wind's tail stirred.
- 14 See Introduction and note 8 above.
- 15 That is, the harness.
- 16 An instance of meiosis (understatement for rhetorical effect). The term "rubba" ("perhaps"), in the line "rubba jaysh laqītuḥu" ("perhaps I faced an army"), signals not uncertainty or infrequency but their opposites. See Ibn Manẓur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, s.v. ر ب ب .
- 17 Kinda, Bakr, Madhḥij, Hilāl: notable Arabian tribes.