



"Can you make out twilight's ruins?" | هل عرفت الغدأة من أطلال|"

Text Information

Author | al-Ḥārith ibn ‘Ubād

Language | Arabic

Period | 5-6th century CE.

Genre | Poetry (elegy)

Source | Cheikho, L. 1890. *Kitāb Shu‘arā’ al-Naṣrāniyyah*. Vol. 1. Beirut: Maṭba‘at al-Ābā’ al-Mursilīn al-Yasū‘iyyīn fī Bayrūt, pp. 271-273.

Collection | Making History: Chronicles, Legends and Anecdotes

URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/al_muhalhil_twilights_ruins/

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 Taghib 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 Taghibs' leader, Wa‘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, Taghib 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 Taghibs 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 Taghibs. 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.



al-Muhalhil. "Can you make out twilight's ruins?" | "هل عرفت العدابة من أطلال". Trans. Sherif Abdelkarim. *Global Medieval Sourcebook*. 2021. sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/al_muhalhil_twilights_ruins/.

Another text in the *Global Medieval Sourcebook*, "Everything's destined toward demise," voices al-Ḥārith's elegy for his slain son, Bujayr. "Can you make out twilight's ruins?" presents al-Muhalhil's response to al-Ḥārith's elegy. Here, the Taghibs' leader mourns his brother's murder and responds to al-Ḥārith's call for revenge with a refrain of his own: "Qarribā marbaṭ al-Mushahhar minnī," ("Bring me al-Mushahhar's harness"): just as al-Ḥārith had called on his war horse, al-Na'āmah, so, too, does al-Muhalhil call on al-Mushahhar to enter the battle. al-Muhalhil's poem stands out for its ferocious expressions of jāhilī (pre-Islamic values), including engagement in ceaseless, disproportionate feuding and the murder and plunder of innocents. These were values that the new religion explicitly rejected yet carefully transcribed in its poetic record of pre-Islamic history. 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.



"Can you make out twilight's ruins?" | هل عرفت الغدأة من أطلال|

Can you make out twilight's ruins,
Subject to windstorm and downpour?

A sensible person discerns effaced
Traces—the craft of artisans;
He beholds them. Their people—a constant people— 5
Desired no departure.¹

O my kinfolk, o grief for their agony,
The killing of heroes and champions.

O grief for eyes from which tears rushed²
For Kulayb, overwhelmed with a downpour. 10

For Kulayb, windswept,
The dust-scatterers about him.

I'll visit Bakr's troops,
Among them Ḥārith: he desires my strife.

I brought out rancor from Bakr's family, 15
The clan of Shaybān,³ uncles between us.⁴

How be patient, and you killed Kulayb?
You then suffered for his killing.

By my life, I'll kill for Kulayb
Every chief named among the chiefs. 20

By my life, I stomped Bakr's offspring
For the crime they committed—the stomp of shoelaces.⁵

I went without dogs, women,
Bondswomen, maidservants, dependents.⁶

Now drink what you've come to⁷ 25
And flee badly defeated.

The nation⁸ claimed we are a harmful neighbor;
They maligned us in the claim

The people hadn't seen our likes the day we moved,
Seizing the reign with long spears; 30

The day we moved into 'Auf's tribes
With hordes high as mountains.

Among them Mālik, and 'Amr, and 'Auf;
'Uqayl, and Ṣāliḥ ibn Hilāl.

Ḥārith's sword rose not to fight; 35
It surrendered mothers among the dead.⁹

The neighbor averred: we surely slew
For the sandal's strap sundry kinsmen.¹⁰

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| رَهْنٌ رِّيحٌ وَدِيمَةٌ مِّهْطَالٌ | هل عرفت الغدأة من أطلال |
| دَارِسَاتٍ كَصُنْعَةِ الْعَمَالِ | يُسْتَبِينُ الْحَلِيمُ فِيهَا رُسُومًا |
| لَا يَرِيدُونَ نِيَّةً الْإِرْتَحَالِ | قَدْ رَأَاهَا وَأَهْلُهَا أَهْلُ صِدْقٍ |
| وَلِقْتَلِ الْكُمَّاةِ وَالْأَبْطَالِ | يَا لَقَوْمِي لِلْؤْعَةِ الْبَلْبَالِ |
| لِكَلْيَبٍ إِذْ فَاقَهَا بِانْهِمَالٍ | وَلِعِنٍْ تَبَادِرُ الدَّمْعُ مِنْهَا |
| نَاسِفَاتُ التُّرَابِ بِالْأَذْيَالِ | لِكَلْيَبٍ إِذْ الرِّيَاحُ عَلَيْهِ |
| بَيْنَهُمْ حَارِثٌ يُرِيدُ نِضَالِي | إِنَّى زَائِرٌ جُمُوعًا لِبَكْرٍ |
| آلٌ شَيْبَانٌ بَيْنَ عَمٌّ وَخَالٍ | قَدْ شَفَقْتُ الْغَلِيلَ مِنْ آلٍ بَكْرٍ |
| وَشَقِيقُهُمْ بِقْتَلَهُ فِي الْخَوَالِي | كَيْفَ صَبْرِي وَقَدْ قَتَلْتُمْ كَلِيبًا |
| كُلُّ قَيْلٍ يُسَمِّي مِنَ الْأَقِيالِ | فَلَعْمَرِي لَأَقْتَلَنَّ بِكَلِيبٍ |
| مَ بِمَا قَدْ جَنَوْهُ وَطْءَ النَّعَالِ | وَلِعَمْرِي لَقَدْ وَطِئْتُ بْنَي بَكْرٍ |
| وَإِمَاءٌ حَوَاطِبٌ وَعِيَالٌ | لَمْ أَدْعُ غَيْرَ أَكْلِبٍ وَنِسَاءٍ |
| وَاصْدِرُوا خَاسِرِينَ عَنْ شَرِّ حَالٍ | فَاشْرِبُوا مَا وَرَدْتُمُ الْآنَ مِنَّا |
| كَذَبَ الْقَوْمُ عَنَدَنَا فِي الْمَقَالِ | زَعَمَ الْقَوْمُ أَنَّنَا جَارُ سُوءٍ |
| تَسْلُبُ الْمُلْكَ بِالرَّمَاحِ الطَّوَالِ | لَمْ يَرَ النَّاسُ مِثْلَنَا يَوْمَ سِرْنَا |
| بِجُمُوعٍ زُهَّاً وَهَا كَالْجِبَالِ | يَوْمَ سِرْنَا إِلَى قَبَائِلِ عَوْفِ |
| وَغَعْنَيْلٌ وَصَالِحُ بْنُ هِلَالٍ | بَيْنَهُمْ مَالِكٌ وَعَمْرُو وَعَوْفٌ |
| أَسْلَمَ الْوَالِدَاتِ فِي الْأَنْقَالِ | لَمْ يَقُمْ سِيفُ حَارِثٍ بِقِتَالٍ |
| بِقِبَالِ النَّعَالِ رَهْطُ الرَّجَالِ | صَدَقَ الْجَارُ إِنَّا قَدْ قَتَلَنَا |



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| Ibn 'Ubād! ¹¹ The killing will not weary. Take patience: I've neither forgotten nor calmed. | | صَبِّرْ النَّفْسَ إِنَّمَا غَيْرُ سَالٍ | لَا تَمْلَأِ الْقِتَالَ يَا ابْنَ عُبَادٍ |
| Friends! ¹² Draw near me this day Every neighter, red and black. ¹³ | | كُلُّ وَرْدٍ وَأَدْهَمٌ صَهَّالٌ | يَا حَلِيلَيْ قَرْبَا الْيَوْمَ مِنِّي |
| Draw Mushahhar's harness near— ¹⁴ For Kulayb, who grayed my head. | | لِكُلَّيْبِ الَّذِي أَشَابَ قَذَالِي | قَرْبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشَهَّرِ مِنِّي |
| Draw Mushahhar's harness near— Ask, but don't prolong my inquiry. | 45 | وَاسْأَلَانِي وَلَا تَطِيلَا سُؤَالِي | قَرْبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشَهَّرِ مِنِّي |
| Draw Mushahhar's harness near— Brides will be revealed to us. ¹⁵ | | سَوْفَ تَبَدُّلُنَا ذَوَاتُ الْحِجَالِ | قَرْبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشَهَّرِ مِنِّي |
| Draw Mushahhar's harness near— My speech matches my deeds indeed. | 50 | إِنَّ قَوْلِي مُطَابِقٌ لِفَعَالِي | قَرْبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشَهَّرِ مِنِّي |
| Draw Mushahhar's harness near— For Kulayb, may my uncles be ransomed! ¹⁶ | | لِكُلَّيْبِ فَدَاهُ عَمَّيْ وَخَالِي | قَرْبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشَهَّرِ مِنِّي |
| Draw Mushahhar's harness near— For the embrace of soldiers and heroes. | | لَا عَنَاقَ الْكُمَّا وَالْأَبْطَالِ | قَرْبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشَهَّرِ مِنِّي |
| Draw Mushahhar's harness near— I'll feed the flames of Bilāl's family. | 55 | سَوْفَ أَصْلِي نِيرَانَ آلِ بِلَالِ | قَرْبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشَهَّرِ مِنِّي |
| Draw Mushahhar's harness near— Should their men meet mine. | | إِنْ تَلَاقَتْ رِجَالُهُمْ وَرِجَالِي | قَرْبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشَهَّرِ مِنِّي |
| Draw Mushahhar's harness near— My night stretched. My critics shrank. ¹⁷ | 60 | طَالَ لَيْلِي وَأَفْسَرَتْ عَدَالِي | قَرْبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشَهَّرِ مِنِّي |
| Draw Mushahhar's harness near— Bakr! Where's our rendezvous? | | يَا لَبَكِ وَأَينَ مِنْكُمْ وَصَالِي | قَرْبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشَهَّرِ مِنِّي |
| Draw Mushahhar's harness near— For fighting, should they want my fight. | | لِنِضَالِ إِذَا أَرَادُوا نِضَالِي | قَرْبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشَهَّرِ مِنِّي |
| Draw Mushahhar's harness near— For a slain man scattered by the north wind. ¹⁸ | 65 | لِقْتِيلِ سَقْتُهُ رِيحُ الشَّمَالِ | قَرْبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشَهَّرِ مِنِّي |
| Draw Mushahhar's harness near— With a straight, supple spear. | | مَعْ رُمْحٍ مُثَقَّفٍ عَسَالِ | قَرْبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشَهَّرِ مِنِّي |
| Draw Mushahhar's harness near— Bring it, and bring my armor, | 70 | قَرْبَاهُ وَقَرْبَا سِرْبَالِي | قَرْبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشَهَّرِ مِنِّي |
| Then tell every ready adult male From Bakr's offspring: unsheathe for bloodshed. | | مِنْ بْنِي بَكْرٍ جَرِّدُوا لِلْقِتَالِ | ثُمَّ قَوْلًا لِكُلِّ كَهْلٍ وَنَاثِ |
| We owned you, so become slaves! You have no leeway from our reign. | | مَا لَكُمْ عَنْ مِلَاكِنَا مِنْ مَجَالٍ | قَدْ مَلَكْنَاكُمْ فَكُونُوا عَبِيدًا |
| Take heed, resolve, and vie; Brace for battle after battle. | 75 | وَاصْبِرُوا لِلنَّزَالِ بَعْدَ النَّزَالِ | وَحْدُدُوا حِذْرُكُمْ وَشُدُّوا وِجْدُوا |
| Thus Bakr's forces became As 'Ād, torn up in the sands. ¹⁹ | | مِثْلَ عَادٍ إِذْ مُرْقَتْ فِي الرِّمَالِ | فَلَقَدْ أَصْبَحَتْ جَمَائِعُ بَكْرٍ |



Kulayb: answer a suppliant's plea,
Heartsore, ever-anxious.

80

You were not one to shun the mighty,
Neither weak nor lazy.

We butchered Bakr's family's children,
Thrashed their militia viciously,

Charged them repeatedly, leaned in
With swords slitting joints.

They submitted, every wife, and other maidens,
Enclosed, white as the crescent.²⁰

So threaten, Bakr, all you wish
Or can, for there's no end to our plunder.

85

90

مُوجِعُ الْقَلْبِ دَائِمٌ الْبَلْبَالِ

سِ وَلَا وَاهِنٍ وَلَا مَكْسَالِ

وَقَهْرَنَا كُمَانَهُمْ بِالنَّضَالِ

بِسُيُوفٍ تَقْدُّمُ فِي الْأَوْصَالِ

ذَاتٌ خَدِيرٌ غَرَاءً مِثْلَ الْهَلَالِ

وَاسْتَطَعْتُمْ فَمَا لِذَا مِنْ زَوَالٍ

يَا كُلَّيْبَا أَجِبْ لِدَعْوَةِ دَاعِ

فَلَقَدْ كُنْتَ غَيْرَ نِكْسٍ لَدَى الْبَأْ

قَدْ ذَبَحْنَا الْأَطْفَالَ مِنْ آلِ بَكْرٍ

وَكَرِزْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ وَانْثَنِينَا

أَسْلَمَوْا كُلَّ ذَاتٍ بَعْلٍ وَأُخْرَى

يَا لَبَكْرٍ فَأَوْعَدُوا مَا أَرْدَتُمْ



Critical Notes

- 1 We may read these enigmatic opening lines as a threat to al-Ḥārith's Bakr tribe. Presumably, al-Muhalhil will reduce the rival clan to the wasteland he has just described. Any sensible person who beholds these ruins must conclude that the land's inhabitants were violently uprooted.
- 2 Literally, "And for an eye from which the tear rushed."
- 3 Shaybān: a sub-clan of the Bakr tribe.
- 4 Literally: "The family of Shaybān between paternal and maternal uncles," a possible allusion to the shared blood of the Bakr and Taghlib tribes, derived from the siblings Bakr and Taghlib.
- 5 al-Muhalhil reportedly killed Bujayr, al-Ḥārith's son, in compensation for the mere shoelace of his brother, Kulayb. See Introduction.
- 6 That is, al-Muhalhil vowed to renounce these and other pleasures until he took vengeance for his brother's murder.
- 7 Literally, "Drink what [body of water] you've arrived at now from us."
- 8 Presumably the Bakr tribe.
- 9 Ḥārith's sword may here serve as a synecdoche for the Bakr tribe's army, which failed to protect its women.
- 10 That is, many men were slain for Kulayb's shoelace.
- 11 That is, al-Ḥārith.
- 12 In keeping with dramatic convention, Muhalhil calls out to two imagined companions, as did his rival, al-Ḥārith.
- 13 That is, horses, according to the color of their coats.
- 14 Muhalhil's ride, Na‘āmah's match.
- 15 Bakr's women, literally, "the ones of the curtained canopies," "dhawāt al-ḥijāl," prospective prisoners of war.
- 16 To wish that a person (or persons) be ransomed for another conveys the seriousness of a subject or situation while communicating the latter's dearness to the oathmaker.
- 17 Probably from riding or raiding.
- 18 Presumably, Kulayb's corpse was left exposed to the elements.
- 19 'Ād: the notorious tribe obliterated by a windstorm.
- 20 Collectively, Bakr's women, screened by a green veil. See note 15 above.