



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

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, pages 271-273

Collection | <add>

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 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 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



Taghlibs' 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-Hārith 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 الغداة من أطلال"

Can you make out twilight's ruins, Subject to windstorm and downpour?	رَهْنِ رِيحٍ وَدِيمَةٍ مِهْطَالٍ	هل عرفت الغداة من أطلال
A sensible person discerns effaced Traces—the craft of artisans;	دارساتٍ كصنعة العَمَّالِ	يستبين الحليم فيها رُشوماً
He beholds them. Their people—a constant people— Desired no departure. ¹	لا يريدون نيّة الارتحال	قد رآها وأهلها أهل صدقٍ
O my kinfolk, o grief for their agony, The killing of heroes and champions.	ولَقَتْلِ الكُماةِ والأبطال	يا لَقُومي لِلوَعَةِ البَلْبَالِ
O grief for eyes from which tears rushed ² For Kulayb, overwhelmed with a downpour. 10	لِكَلْبِ إِذْ فاقها بانهمال	ولعين تبادر الدَّمْعُ منها
For Kulayb, windswept, The dust-scatterers about him.	ناسفاً التُّرابِ بالأذْيال	لكليب إِذِ الرِّياحُ عليه
I'll visit Bakr's troops, Among them Hārith: he desires my strife.	بينهم حارثٌ يُريدُ نِضالي	إنِّي زائرٌ جُموعاً لبَكْرٍ
I brought out rancor from Bakr's family, The clan of Shaybān, ³ uncles between us. ⁴ 15	أَلِ شَيْبانَ بينَ عَمٍّ وَخالٍ	قد شَفَيْتُ الغَلِيلَ من آلِ بَكْرٍ
How be patient, and you killed Kulayb? You then suffered for his killing.	وشَقِيتُم بِقَتْلِهِ في الخوالي	كَيْفَ صَبْرِي وقد قَتَلْتُم كَلِيباً
By my life, I'll kill for Kulayb Every chief named among the chiefs. 20	كُلَّ قَبِيلٍ يُسَمَّى من الأقبال	فلَعَمْرِي لأَقْتُلَنَّ بكليبٍ
By my life, I stomped Bakr's offspring For the crime they committed—the stomp of shoelaces. ⁵	م بما قد جَنَّوْهُ وَطَءَ النِّعالِ	ولعمري لقد وَطِئْتُ بني بَكْرٍ
I went without dogs, women, Bondswomen, maidservants, dependents. ⁶	وإماءٍ حواطِبٍ وعبالٍ	لم أَدَعِ غَيْرَ أَكْلَبٍ وَنِساءٍ
Now drink what you've come to ⁷ And flee badly defeated. 25	واضِدُّوا خاسرينَ عن شَرِّ حالٍ	فاشربوا ما وردتُم الآنَ مَنّا
The nation ⁸ claimed we are a harmful neighbor; They maligned us in the claim	كَذَبَ القُومُ عَندنا في المَقالِ	زَعَمَ القُومُ أَنّا جارٌ سَوءٍ
The people hadn't seen our likes the day we moved, Seizing the reign with long spears; 30	نَسَلَبُ المُلْكِ بِالرِّمَاحِ الطَّوالِ	لَمْ يَرَ النَّاسُ مِثْلنا يَومَ سِرْنا
The day we moved into 'Auf's tribes With hordes high as mountains.	بِجُمُوعٍ زُهاؤُها كالجِبالِ	يَومَ سِرْنا إِلى قَبائِلِ عَوفٍ
Among them Mālik, and 'Amr, and 'Auf; 'Uqayl, and Ṣāliḥ ibn Hilāl.	وَعَقِيلٌ وَصالِحُ بَنِ هِلالٍ	بَيْنَهُم مَالِكٌ وَعَمْرُو وَعَوفٌ
Hārith's sword rose not to fight; It surrendered mothers among the dead. ⁹ 35	أَسْلَمَ الوالِداتِ في الأَثقالِ	لَمْ يَقُمْ سَيْفٌ حارِثٍ بِقَتالٍ
The neighbor averred: we surely slew For the sandal's strap sundry kinsmen. ¹⁰	بِقَبالِ النِّعالِ رَهْطَ الرِّجالِ	صَدَقَ الجارُ إِنّا قَدْ قَتَلنا



Ibn 'Ubād! ¹¹ The killing will not weary. Take patience: I've neither forgotten nor calmed.	40	صَبِرِ النَّفْسِ إِنِّي غَيْرُ سَالٍ	لَا تَمَلَّ الْقِتَالَ يَا ابْنَ عُبَادٍ
Friends! ¹² Draw near me this day Every neighter, red and black. ¹³		كُلُّ وَرْدٍ وَأَذْهَمٍ صَهَالٍ	يَا خَلِيلِي قَرِّبَا الْيَوْمَ مِنِّي
Draw Mushahhar's harness near— ¹⁴ For Kulayb, who grayed my head.		لِكُلَيْبِ الَّذِي أَشَابَ قَذَالِي	قَرِّبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشْهَرِّ مِنِّي
Draw Mushahhar's harness near— Ask, but don't prolong my inquiry.	45	وَاسْأَلَانِي وَلَا تَطِيلَا سُؤَالِي	قَرِّبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشْهَرِّ مِنِّي
Draw Mushahhar's harness near— Brides will be revealed to us. ¹⁵		سَوْفَ تَبْدُو لَنَا ذَوَاتُ الْحِجَالِ	قَرِّبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشْهَرِّ مِنِّي
Draw Mushahhar's harness near— My speech matches my deeds indeed.	50	إِنَّ قَوْلِي مُطَابِقٌ لِفِعَالِي	قَرِّبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشْهَرِّ مِنِّي
Draw Mushahhar's harness near— For Kulayb, may my uncles be ransomed! ¹⁶		لِكُلَيْبٍ فَدَاهُ عَمِّي وَخَالِي	قَرِّبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشْهَرِّ مِنِّي
Draw Mushahhar's harness near— For the embrace of soldiers and heroes.		لَاعْتِنَاقِ الْكُمَاةِ وَالْأَبْطَالِ	قَرِّبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشْهَرِّ مِنِّي
Draw Mushahhar's harness near— I'll feed the flames of Bilāl's family.	55	سَوْفَ أَضْلِي نِيرَانَ آلِ بِلَالٍ	قَرِّبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشْهَرِّ مِنِّي
Draw Mushahhar's harness near— Should their men meet mine.		إِنْ تَلَاقَتْ رِجَالُهُمْ وَرِجَالِي	قَرِّبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشْهَرِّ مِنِّي
Draw Mushahhar's harness near— My night stretched. My critics shrank. ¹⁷	60	طَالَ لَيْلِي وَأَقْصُرْتُ عُدَّالِي	قَرِّبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشْهَرِّ مِنِّي
Draw Mushahhar's harness near— Bakr! Where's our rendezvous?		يَا لِبَكْرٍ وَأَيْنَ مِنْكُمْ وَصَالِي	قَرِّبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشْهَرِّ مِنِّي
Draw Mushahhar's harness near— For fighting, should they want my fight.		لِنِضَالٍ إِذَا أَرَادُوا نِضَالِي	قَرِّبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشْهَرِّ مِنِّي
Draw Mushahhar's harness near— For a slain man scattered by the north wind. ¹⁸	65	لِقَتِيلٍ سَفَتَهُ رِيحُ الشَّامَالِ	قَرِّبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشْهَرِّ مِنِّي
Draw Mushahhar's harness near— With a straight, supple spear.		مَعَ رُمْحٍ مُتَقَفِّفٍ عَسَالٍ	قَرِّبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشْهَرِّ مِنِّي
Draw Mushahhar's harness near— Bring it, and bring my armor,	70	قَرِّبَاهُ وَقَرِّبَا سِرِّيَالِي	قَرِّبَا مَرْبَطَ الْمُشْهَرِّ مِنِّي
Then tell every ready adult male From Bakr's offspring: unsheathe for bloodshed.		مَنْ بَنِي بَكْرٍ جَرِّدُوا لِلْقِتَالِ	ثُمَّ قُولَا لِكُلِّ كَهْلٍ وَنَاشٍ
We owned you, so become slaves! You have no leeway from our reign.		مَا لَكُمْ عَنْ مِلَاكِتِنَا مِنْ مَجَالٍ	قَدْ مَلَكْنَاكُمْ فَكُونُوا عَبِيدًا
Take heed, resolve, and vie; Brace for battle after battle.	75	وَاصْبِرُوا لِلنِّزَالِ بَعْدَ النَّزَالِ	وَحْذُوا حِذْرَكُمْ وَشُدُّوا وَجْدُوا
Thus Bakr's forces became As 'Ād, torn up in the sands. ¹⁹		مِثْلَ عَادٍ إِذْ مُزِّقَتْ فِي الرَّمَالِ	فَلَقَدْ أَصْبَحَتْ جَمَائِعُ بَكْرٍ



Kulayb: answer a suppliant's plea, Heartsore, ever-anxious.	80	مُوجِعِ الْقَلْبِ دَائِمِ الْبَلْبَالِ يا كُليْبًا أَجِبْ لِدَعْوَةِ دَاعٍ
You were not one to shun the mighty, Neither weak nor lazy.		سِ ولا واهنٍ ولا مِكْسَالٍ فلقد كنتَ غَيْرَ نَكْسٍ لَدَى الْبَأْ
We butchered Bakr's family's children, Thrashed their militia viciously,		وقهرنا كُماَتَهُم بِالنُّضالِ قد ذبحنا الأَطْفالَ مِنْ آلِ بَكْرٍ
Charged them repeatedly, leaned in With swords slitting joints.	85	بِسُيُوفٍ تَقْدُّ فِي الْأَوْصالِ وَكَرَزْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ وَاثْنَيْنَا
They submitted, every wife, and other maidens, Enclosed, white as the crescent. ²⁰		ذاتَ خِدرٍ غُرَاءٍ مِثْلَ الْهلالِ أَسْلَمُوا كُلَّ ذَاتِ بَعْلٍ وَأُخْرَى
So threaten, Bakr, all you wish Or can, for there's no end to our plunder.	90	واستطعتم فما لَذا مِنْ زوالِ يا لَبَكْرٍ فَأُوْعِدُوا ما أَرَدْتُمْ



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.