



## كُلُّ شَيْءٍ مَصِيرَهُ لِلزَّوَالِ” | “Everything’s destined toward demise”

### 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\_harith\_toward\_demise/

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-Hārith ibn 'Ubād. "Everything's destined toward demise" | "كُلُّ شَيْءٍ مُهْبِرٌ لِلزَّوْالِ". Trans. Sherif Abdelkarim. *Global Medieval Sourcebook*. 2021. sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/al\_harith\_toward\_demise.

Another text featured in the *Global Medieval Sourcebook*, "Can you make out twilight's ruins?," comprises al-Muhalhil's response to al-Hārith'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. Accessed 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.



## "كُلُّ شَيْءٍ مَصِيرَهُ لِلزَّوَالِ" | "Everything's destined toward demise"

Everything's destined toward demise  
Besides my Master,<sup>1</sup> and good works.  
  
You see the people, all looking,  
Unable to cheat their demise.  
  
Tell the highborn's mother,<sup>2</sup> mourning Bujayr,  
A barrier's set between men and their wealth.  
  
I'll mourn Bujayr, by my life,  
As water runs down mountaintops.  
  
My misery, Bujayr, when  
Horses coursed, intractable war day.  
  
The courageous exchanged fatal raids.  
Whites appeared from canopies' bellies,<sup>3</sup>  
While every freewoman raced, calling,  
"Bakr!"<sup>4</sup>—honorable as idols.  
  
O opulent Bujayr,<sup>5</sup> no peace until  
We fill the wasteland with men's heads.  
  
Eyes will smile after crying  
Once blood quenches arrowheads.  
  
Wā'il's children wailed from war,  
The wailing of encumbered camels.  
  
I played no part in this war, Allāh knows;  
I feel its heat today.  
  
I avoided Wā'il, that they might come around,  
But Tagħlib refused my seclusion.<sup>7</sup>  
  
They greyed my forelock with Bujayr,  
Killed him wrongly, without cause.  
  
Killed him in exchange for Kulayb's lace—  
The noble's kill for a string's expensive!<sup>8</sup>  
  
Children of Tagħlib!<sup>9</sup> Take heed:  
We drank pure Death indeed.  
  
Children of Tagħlib! You killed a precious one, now slain,  
We haven't heard the likes of him!  
  
Draw Na'āmah's harness near—<sup>11</sup>  
Wā'il's war bore fruit, after infertility.  
  
Draw Na'āmah's harness near—  
I don't intend words, but deeds.  
  
Draw Na'āmah's harness near—  
The women's wails turned earnest.

<p>غير ربي وصالح الأعمال</p> <p>ليس فيهم لذاك بعض احتيال</p> <p>حيل بين الرجال والأموال</p> <p>ما أتى الماء من رؤوس الجبال</p> <p>جالت الخيل يوم حرب عضال</p> <p>وبدا البيض من قباب الحجاج</p> <p>يا لبکر غراء كالتمثال</p> <p>نملا البيد من رؤوس الرجال</p> <p>حين تسقي الدّمّا صدور العوالي</p> <p>ب عجيج الجمال بالأثقال</p> <p>وإني لحرّها اليوم صال</p> <p>فأبّت تغلب على اعتزالي</p> <p>قتلوا ظلّماً بغير قتال</p> <p>إن قتّل الكريّم بالشّسخ غال</p> <p>قد شربنا بكأس موتٍ زلال</p> <p>ما سمعنا بمثله في الخوالي</p> <p>لـقـحـتـ حـرـبـ وـائـلـ عنـ حـيـالـ</p> <p>ليـسـ قـولـيـ يـرـادـ لـكـنـ فـعـالـ</p> <p>جـدـ نـوـخـ النـسـاءـ بـالـأـعـوـالـ</p>	<p>كل شيءٍ مصيره للزوال</p> <p>وترى الناس ينظرون جميـعاـ</p> <p>قل لأم الأغرّ تبكي بـجـيـراـ</p> <p>ولعمرـي لأـبـكـيـنـ بـجـيـراـ</p> <p>لهـفـ نـفـسيـ عـلـىـ بـجـيـرـ إـذـاـ ماـ</p> <p>وتساقـ الـكـمـاـةـ سـمـاـ نـقـيـعاـ</p> <p>وـسـعـتـ كـلـ حـرـةـ الـوـجـهـ تـدـعـوـ</p> <p>يـاـ بـجـيـرـ الـخـيـرـاتـ لـاصـلـحـ حـتـىـ</p> <p>وـتـقـرـ العـيـونـ بـعـدـ بـكـاـهـاـ</p> <p>اصـبـحـتـ وـائـلـ تـعـجـ منـ الحرـ</p> <p>لـمـ أـكـنـ مـنـ جـنـاتـهـ عـلـمـ اللهـ</p> <p>قـدـ تـجـبـتـ وـائـلـ كـيـ يـفـيـقـواـ</p> <p>وـأـشـابـواـ ذـوـآبـيـ بـبـجـيـرـ</p> <p>قتـلـوهـ بـشـسـخـ نـعـلـ كـلـيـبـ</p> <p>يـاـ بـنـيـ تـغـلـبـ خـذـواـ الـحـذـرـ إـنـاـ</p> <p>يـاـ بـنـيـ تـغـلـبـ قـتـلـمـ قـتـلـاـ</p> <p>قـرـبـاـ مـرـبـطـ النـعـامـةـ مـيـ</p> <p>قـرـبـاـ مـرـبـطـ النـعـامـةـ مـيـ</p> <p>قـرـبـاـ مـرـبـطـ النـعـامـةـ مـيـ</p>
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Draw Na'āmah's harness near— My head greyed; haters knew me not.		شاب رأسي وأنكرتني القوالى	قرّباً مربطَ النَّعامة مَنِي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— For riding: nighttime, morning, afternoon.		للسُّرى والغُدوُّ والآصال	قرّباً مربطَ النَّعامة مَنِي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— My night's surpassed the longest nights.	40	طال لَيْلِي عَلَى الْلَّيَالِي الطُّوَالِ	قرّباً مربطَ النَّعامة مَنِي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— For close embrace: Champions 'gainst Champions.		لاعتناق الأبطال بالأبطال	قرّباً مربطَ النَّعامة مَنِي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— Discard the words of the heedless. <sup>12</sup>	45	واعدِلا عن مقالةِ الجَهَالِ	قرّباً مربطَ النَّعامة مَنِي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— My heart will not forgo warring.		ليس قلبي عن القتال بِسَالِ	قرّباً مربطَ النَّعامة مَنِي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— Even as Boreas' tailwind roared. <sup>13</sup>		كُلُّمَا هَبَّ رِيحُ ذَيلِ الشَّمَالِ	قرّباً مربطَ النَّعامة مَنِي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— For Bujayr, Breaker of Chains.	50	لِبَجِيرٍ مُفْكَكُ الأَغْلَالِ	قرّباً مربطَ النَّعامة مَنِي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— For a noble, Beauty-crowned.		لِكَرِيمٍ مُنَوِّجٍ بِالْجَمَالِ	قرّباً مربطَ النَّعامة مَنِي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— We don't sell men for shoes. <sup>14</sup>	55	لَا نَبِيعُ الرِّجَالَ بِيَعْ النَّعالِ	قرّباً مربطَ النَّعامة مَنِي
Draw Na'āmah's harness near— For Bujayr, may my uncles be ransomed.		لِبَجِيرٍ فَدَاهُ عَمَّيْ وَخَالِي	قرّباً مربطَ النَّعامة مَنِي
Bring it <sup>15</sup> — to haughty Taghib, For the warriors' embrace the day of battle.		لاعتناق الْكُمَاءِ يَوْمَ الْقَتَالِ	قرّباهَا لِحَيٍّ تَغْلِبَ شُوسَاً
Bring it— and bring my breastplate, A sleek cuirass blunts arrows' edge.	60	عَا دِلَاصًا تَرَدُّ حَدَّ النَّبَالِ	قرّباهَا وَقَرْبَا لَامَنِي دِرْ
Bring it— with slashing swords, For the clash of champions on battle day.		لِقِرَاعِ الْأَبْطَالِ يَوْمَ النَّزَالِ	قرّباهَا بِمُزْهَفَاتٍ حَدَادِ
Often I faced an army, <sup>16</sup> hurling Death from lightly-armored chargers.	65	تَ عَلَى هِينَكِلٍ خَفِيفِ الْجَلَالِ	رُبَّ جَيْشٍ لَقِيَتُهُ يَمْطُرُ الْمَوْ
Ask noble Kinda, inquire into Bakr, Interrogate Madhhij and Hilāl. <sup>17</sup>		وَاسْأَلُوا مَذْحِجاً وَحِيًّا هَلَالِ	سَائِلُوا كِنْدَةَ الْكِرَامَ وَبَكْرًا
When they reached us with a massive troop, Ready to attack, severe in their seizure;		مُكْفَهِّرٌ الْأَذَى شَدِيدُ الْمَصَالِ	إِذْ أَتَوْنَا بِعَسْكَرٍ ذِي زُهْهَاءِ
When they craved congress we met them, Welcomed every keen sword's edge.	70	كُلُّ ماضِي الدُّبَابِ عَضِ الْصَّقَالِ	فَقَرَيْنَاهِ 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-Tahāluq*), 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 Tagħlib'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 Tagħlib 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 Tagħlib tribe, named after Tagħlib, 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 laqītuhu" ("perhaps I faced an army"), signals not uncertainty or infrequency but their opposites. See Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, s.v. رُبْ بَعْضُ.
- 17 Kinda, Bakr, Madħħijj, Hilāl: notable Arabian tribes.