

**Sīrat Banī Hilāl:  
Introduction and Notes  
to an Arab Oral Epic Tradition**

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Then he remembers how he used to like to go out of the house at sunset when people were having their evening meal, and used to lean against the maize fence pondering deep in thought, until he was recalled to his surroundings by the voice of a poet who was sitting at some distance to his left, with his audience round him. Then the poet would begin to recite in a wonderfully sweet tone the doings of Abu Zaid, Khalifa and Diyab, and his hearers would remain silent except when ecstasy enlivened them or desire startled them. Then they would demand a repetition and argue and dispute. And so the poet would be silent until they ceased their clamour after a period which might be short or long. Then he would continue his sweet recitation in a monotone. . .

(Hussein 1982:2)

This poetic tradition which Egypt's preeminent literary scholar, Ṭaha Hussein, recalls at the outset of his autobiography is one familiar through much of the Arab world—the *sīra* of the Banī Hilāl Bedouin tribe which chronicles the tribe's massive migration from their homeland on the Arabian peninsula, their sojourn in Egypt, their conquest of North Africa, and their final defeat one hundred years later. The migration, the conquest, and the defeat are historical events which took place between the tenth and twelfth centuries A.D. From this skein of actual events Arabic oral tradition has woven a rich and complex narrative centered on a cluster of heroic characters. Time and again Bedouin warriors and heroines are pitted against the kings and princes of towns and cities. The individual destinies of the main actors are constantly in a fragile balance with the fate of the tribe itself. Finally, with the conquest of North Africa, the Banī Hilāl nomads themselves become rulers of cities, a situation which leads to the internal fragmentation of the tribe and their eventual demise.

Stories of the Banī Hilāl tribe have been recorded from oral tradition since the fourteenth century in regions located across the breadth of the Arab world: from Morocco on the shores of the Atlantic to Oman on the edges of the Indian Ocean, and as far south into Africa as Nigeria, Chad,

and the Sudan. It is quite probably the single most widespread and best documented narrative of Arabic oral literature. We know far more about the historical development, the geographical distribution, and the living oral tradition of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* than, for example, the *1001 Nights*, which owes its fame almost entirely to the enormous amount of attention it received in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe.<sup>1</sup> Though *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is little known in the urban centers of the Arab world, in rural areas it has been recorded in prose, in poetry, and in song. The most famous versions are those sung by epic poets in Egypt who perform for nights at a time their versified narrative while accompanying themselves on the *rabāb* (spike-fiddle), the *tār* (large frame-drum) or western violin (held vertically on the knee).

The folk *sīra* tradition is one familiar to most scholars of Arabic literature, but it has for the most part escaped the notice of epic scholars, folklorists, and anthropologists in the West. This is certainly due primarily to the dearth of translations into European languages and in particular into English. Over the past two decades, however, *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* has sparked new academic interest and even a few translations. This article, then, is intended as an introduction for non-Arabists to the tradition of, and recent scholarship on, *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*.

### *The Question of Genre*

*Sīrat Banī Hilāl* has been referred to by western scholars as epic, saga, romance, tale cycle, legend, and geste. A great deal of the confusion stems from the wide variation in performance modes across the Arab world, though certainly the gist of the problem is that *sīra* is an indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> The collection of tales known in the West as the *Thousand and One Nights* or *Arabian Nights* bears only a tenuous relation to its Arabic originals. Antoine Galland, who completed the first “translation” of the Arabic *Alf Laylah wa-Laylah*, freehandedly expurgated, retold, and rearranged the tales in his Arabic sources. To these original tales his editor added tales from other sources, and Galland himself filled out nearly one-third of the collection with stories he heard orally from a Lebanese Maronite visiting Paris. Later translators padded even this debased collection with ethnographic detail (Edward W. Lane) and Victorian erotica (Richard Burton). The hundreds of versions and editions of the *Nights* published in Europe remain a monument to the West’s fantasies about the Middle East rather than examples of Arabic folk literature. The extreme popularity of the work in Europe eventually motivated Arabic editions which appeared in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Previous to these reintroduced editions, the popularity of the *Nights* in the Middle East had been quite limited. Each of the major European translators (Galland, Lane, Burton, and others) complained of the difficulty in obtaining the few extant manuscripts of the *Nights*, and the evidence for the circulation of these tales in oral tradition previous to the late nineteenth-century printed editions is sparse indeed. For a general if somewhat dated introduction see Littman 1960-. MacDonald 1932 gives a detailed account of how the early editions were compiled.

Arabic genre with no exact parallel in European literatures. A *sīra* is quite literally “a travelling,” “a journeying”—the noun formed from the verb *sāra*, “to travel, to journey, to move (on).” It is used to designate a history, a biography, and even a mode of behavior or conduct. The term was first applied in Arabic literature to the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad, *sīrat rasūl allāh*, particularly that by Ibn Ishāq in the recension of Ibn Hishām (see Levi Della Vida 1913-34). The evolution of the folk *siyar* (pl. of *sīra*) is cloudy at best. A collection of narratives told in alternating sequences of prose and poetry appear first in manuscripts and then, in the nineteenth century, in yellow-page chapbooks, though they clearly have their roots in oral tradition and are referred to as early as the twelfth century A.D.: *sīrat ʿantar ibn shaddād*<sup>2</sup> (the *sīra* of the black poet-knight, ʿAntar son of Shaddād), *sīrat al-zāhir baybars* (the *sīra* of the Egyptian ruler and folk hero, al-Zāhir Baybars; see MacDonald 1913-34, Wangelin 1936, Paret 1960-), *sīrat ḥamza al-bahlawān*<sup>3</sup> (the *sīra* of Ḥamza, uncle of the Prophet Muḥammad), *sīrat dhāt al-himma* (the *sīra* of the heroine Dhāt al-Himma and the wars against the Byzantines; see Canard 1935, 1960-, 1961), *sīrat al-malik sayf ibn dhī yazan* (the *sīra* of the Ḥimyarite king, Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan, and his wars against the Abyssinians; see Paret 1924, 1913-34), *sīrat al-zīr sālim* (the *sīra* of the Bedouin warrior, al-Zīr Sālim; see Canova in press), and, of course, *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. All but *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, however, have now disappeared from oral tradition, though recitations of other *siyar* were noted as late as the mid-nineteenth century. The language of these prose/verse narratives of battles, adventure and romance wavers between the spoken colloquial and a rather stilted “classicized” vernacular; nowhere do they reach a level recognized as true *fushā* (the classical, literary form of Arabic). So the written texts were, and often still are, shunned by many Arab scholars; the oral tradition, in local colloquial dialects, is even further beyond the pale. The folk *siyar*, then, are distinguished by their lengthy narratives (chapbook editions run up to 40 volumes), in alternating sections of prose and poetry (the latter most often the speeches of the main characters), in colloquial or “pseudo-classical” Arabic, focusing on very similar themes of battle, romance, the deeds of chivalrous knights, often interlaced with encounters with supernatural beings such as ghouls and jinns as well.

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<sup>2</sup> See Hartmann 1913-34, Heath 1984, Heller 1931 and 1960-; for texts see Hamilton 1819 and Norris 1980.

<sup>3</sup> See Lammens 1913-34, Meredith-Owens 1960-, van Ronkel 1895, Virolleaud 1958-59. *Sīrat Ḥamza* has wandered far and wide across the Middle East and South Asia; its origins probably lie in Iran, but versions are found in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Malay, Balinese, and Sudanese. In most of these regions the story has acquired layers of local features and provides a fine example of assimilation into extant systems of folk aesthetics.

*History*

Several of the folk *siyar* have as their central character a hero plucked from the pages of history: ʿAntar ibn Shaddād was a poet of the pre-Islamic era, Ḥamza was indeed uncle of the Prophet Muḥammad, and al-Zāhir Baybars ruled Egypt from about 1260 to 1277 A.D. Most of these figures, however, share little but their name with the corresponding folk heroes. *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, on the other hand, has a more intimate relationship with historical events. The frame of the *sīra* is essentially correct, though the main characters appear to be fictitious.<sup>4</sup> The existence of the Banī Hilāl is documented back to the pre-Islamic period. Through the first centuries after the appearance of Islam in the seventh century A.D., the Banī Hilāl (literally “sons of the crescent moon” or “descendants of Hilāl”) in the Arabian peninsula continued to reside primarily in the Najd in central Arabia. In the tenth century, however, the Banī Hilāl began to leave Arabia in large numbers. No doubt some waves of this migration were voluntary, but substantial numbers of the Banī Hilāl were deported to Upper Egypt by the Fāṭimid Caliph of Cairo, al-ʿAzīz ibn al-Muʿizz, after their participation in the Qarmatian rebellion and the sacking of the city of al-Medina (see Idris 1960-, Yūnus 1968, Berque 1972). To this day there are populations in Upper Egypt and the Sudan that claim descent from the Banī Hilāl, and some of the most significant field recordings of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* have been from this region.

In the middle of the eleventh century, al-Muʿizz ibn Bādīs, a vassal of the Fāṭimids then governing the province of Ifrīqiya (approximately modern Tunisia and contiguous territories), shifted his allegiance from the Fāṭimid Caliph of Cairo to the ʿAbbāsīd Caliph in Baghdad. The Fāṭimid Caliph, al-Mustansīr, is then supposed to have handed over Ifrīqiya to the rapacious Banī Hilāl nomads both to punish his wayward vassal and simply to rid himself of their ever-uneasy presence in Egypt. Whether at the instigation of the Caliph or in less organized fashion, the Banī Hilāl did traverse Libya and invade Tunisia. In 1051-52 they captured Gabès; on November 1, 1057, they sacked Qayrawān and thus completed their conquest. There they ruled for almost exactly one hundred years; however, during this period the victorious confederation of clans and tribal groups splintered and fragmented. In their divided state an eastern-moving Moroccan dynasty, the Almohads, found the Banī Hilāl easy prey, defeating them in two large battles in 1153 and 1160. Small groups from the Banī Hilāl appear in histories sporadically over the next century in Morocco and even in Andalusian Spain, but they then disappear entirely. In several

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<sup>4</sup> Schleifer (1960-) writes that the character Dhiyāb was an historical, though minor, figure.

regions of North Africa, groups trace their ancestry to this final dispersion of the Banī Hilāl nomadic tribes.

### *The Growth of the Sīra*

Our first evidence of the *sīra* as a poetic tradition turns up two hundred years after the great defeats of the Banī Hilāl. The famous fourteenth-century Arab historiographer, Ibn Khaldūn, toward the end of his *Muqaddima* (*Introduction to History*; 1967:III, 412-40), embarks on a spirited defense of vernacular poetry. His is a unique acceptance in his era of verse not in *fushā* as true poetry. The poems he cites as examples, as proof of the artistic merit of colloquial poetry, are short poems recounting episodes from *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. Several of these fragments are parallels of texts recorded in the field in the twentieth century in Tunisia and Egypt six hundred years later.

Very little is known of the development of the *sīra* between the writings of Ibn Khaldūn and the late eighteenth century. At that point, however, the historical record comes alive. Over a period of 70 years, from 1785 to 1845, a series of manuscripts were penned in colloquial Arabic, virtual transcriptions of what was heard, seemingly taken down directly from oral performances. Several of the manuscripts, now housed in the Berlin Staatsbibliothek, contain colophons which appear to indicate the names of scribe and poet. The collection totals more than 8,000 pages of prose and poetry from *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* and clearly indicates a fertile and vibrant oral tradition. Smaller collections are found in several other European libraries (see Ayoub 1978, Galley 1981, Pantůček 1970:10-12).

Toward the end of this same period, in 1836, the British Arabist Edward W. Lane published his ethnographic description of Egypt, *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. Chapters 21-23 are devoted to the "Public Recitations of Romances." The first, concerning *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, includes a six-page summary of one of the opening episodes of the *sīra*, the birth of the hero Abū Zayd. Lane attests to the great popularity of the folk *siyar* among the Cairenes, and estimates that fifty professional poets existed in Cairo dedicated exclusively to the performance of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, thirty more performed *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*, and six performed *Sīrat ʿAntar*. Only *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* was a musical tradition, sung to the accompaniment of the *rabāb* (spike-fiddle), but performers of both it and *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars* performed without books—reciters of *Sīrat ʿAntar* read from manuscripts. Lane further notes that the *siyar* of Dhāt al-Himma and of Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan had been in oral tradition until not long before his sojourn in Egypt.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, accounts of the

*Sīrat Banī Hilāl* tradition have been written by travelers, historians, ethnographers, and even journalists. Most are but brief mentions of performances; a few contain valuable details on performance styles and extracts from oral or written texts.<sup>55</sup>

### *Modes of Performance*

The composite portrait of the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* which grows out of these many scattered accounts is a surprising one, for while the key elements of the story line, not without significant variation, remain constant, the modes of performance and the choice of poetic forms are quite diverse. The briefest overview reveals performances in prose, in various types of poetry, in alternating sequences of prose and poetry, in sung versified renditions, and in renditions which move quickly to and from spoken prose, rhymed prose (*sajʿ*), and sung poetry. *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* can perhaps be most clearly conceptualized as an enormous narrative, truly epic in length, a set of key plot elements and characters known by performers who render it in widely diverse genres of oral literature. In Egypt, for example, storytellers narrate the *sīra* in prose as a cycle of tales; some public reciters perform from written copies, and the epic poets, for whom Egypt is famous, versify the narrative in sung improvised poetry in a manner quite similar to the epic traditions of Yugoslavia studied by Milman Parry and Albert Lord (see, e.g., Lord 1960). This epic tradition of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is currently unique to Egypt, though it may have been more widespread in the past. Even within the epic singing tradition of Egypt, almost mirroring the diversity of verbal forms, the musical styles display an intriguing amount of variety. A large number of melodies are pressed into service as vehicles for epic singing, even songs from the popular urban milieu. Some epic poets perform as soloists while others are accompanied by ensembles of up to eight and ten musicians on *rabābs* and/or violins, reed flutes, and a variety of percussion instruments. Some poets perform only in rhymed poetry, and others shift register frequently from prose to rhymed prose to poetry. Some poets pace their singing with extensive choral refrains sung by the other musicians and some use no refrains at all. *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is, in short, an oral tradition which thrives on variation in style while maintaining a clear unifying bond in the story itself. All of these many “sounds” have their own appreciative audiences, or they simply would not continue to exist.

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<sup>5</sup> An excellent summary of many of these references is found in Breteau et al. 1978. This article, however, restricts itself to North Africa and does not give sources from the Arabian peninsula or the Levant. An evocative description of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* performance in Upper Egypt can be found in Critchfield 1978:48-57.

*The Story*

Within the essentially historical framework of the migrations and conquests of the Banī Hilāl tribe, the *sīra* has evolved into a series of intricate tales built on tensions among a constellation of central characters. In this it may be differentiated from the other Arabic folk *siyar* which all deal primarily with a single heroic character. *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* may be compared more easily, say, to the Arthur cycles or the *Iliad*, while the other, now defunct, *siyar* more closely resemble, in this aspect, *Beowulf*, the *Chanson de Roland*, or *El Cid*. The cast of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* consists basically of several key male roles playing opposite a single female lead role:

Abū Zayd, often thought of as “the” hero of the *sīra*, is the primary hero of the Banī Hilāl; however, he is not their greatest warrior. Crafty and cunning, he often prefers to avoid battle through ruses and trickery. It is this aspect of his character which leads to varying interpretations from poet to poet and region to region. His deceptions frequently skirt the borderline between honorable and dishonorable behavior. Furthermore, he is black, due to the extraordinary circumstances of his birth,<sup>6</sup> and is often mistaken by outsiders for a mere slave, which allows him at many points to travel disguised as an epic poet into enemy territory. In Egypt it is not uncommon to see an Egyptian audience sitting and listening to an epic poet sing about Abū Zayd disguised as an epic poet singing to an Egyptian audience sitting round him.

Dhiyāb, leader of the Zughba clan, is the most powerful warrior of the Banī Hilāl confederation, and it is by his hand that the tribe’s ultimate foe, al-Zanātī Khalīfa, is fated to die. However, he is hot-blooded, easily slighted, and very touchy on points of honor, which often sets him in conflict with Abū Zayd. Time after time, after some perceived slight by other members of the tribal council, Dhiyāb leads his clan out of the confederation, only to return in the final desperate hour of battle to save the Banī Hilāl from destruction. Though he is rash and often a source of conflict, the tribe must endure his behavior for only he can slay al-Zanātī.

Sulṭān Ḥasan is the dignified arbitrator, the mediator of tribal tensions among the Banī Hilāl and the moderating force who often holds the

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<sup>6</sup> Abū Zayd’s mother, Khaḍrā al-Sharīfa, visited a well with her women. There they watched a number of birds come and go until a large black bird swooped out of the sky and chased all the others away. Khaḍrā wished aloud for a son as strong and noble as this bird even if he be just as black. Her wish was granted. Her son’s color, however, causes the two of them to be ostracized from the tribe under the suspicion of adultery. They are taken in by another tribe where Abū Zayd grows up; they are reconciled to the Banī Hilāl only after Abū Zayd unknowingly falls just short of slaying his father in battle.

clans together despite the rivalries and conflicts of their leaders. More devout than the younger heroes, Abū Zayd and Dhiyāb, he is also the statesman of the tribe in dealings with outsiders.

Al-Zanātī Khalīfa, leader of the Berbers of North Africa, is the foe the Banī Hilāl must defeat in order to rule Ifrīqiya. Just how evil he is varies from poet to poet. In Egypt, an episode is often sung early in the story of the *sīra* in which al-Zanātī murders seventy descendants of the Prophet in a mosque in Mecca while they are at prayer, clearly marking him as a villain beyond redemption. Other poets transpose him into a nearly tragic figure struggling against his predestined demise at the hand of Dhiyāb.

Against these four versions of manhood stands one idealized vision of womanhood, al-Jāzya, who is, quite simply, the most beautiful and wisest woman in the world. She sits with the sheikhs in the tribal council and has authority in their decisions; she at times rides into battle, and not a few times carries the fate of the entire tribe in her hands when she is married off to an opponent (inevitably smitten with her beauty) to gain pasturage and safe passage for the tribe in difficult terrain, while remaining solely responsible for finding some means of escape or an honorable deception by which to break off the marriage so that she may rejoin the tribe on their westward journey.

The *sīra* is often divided into three parts.<sup>7</sup> The first recounts the history of the tribe, the birth of the central heroes, and their adventures as youths. Then a severe drought strikes the Najd and the council decides new pasturage must be found if the tribe is to survive. A scouting party is formed consisting of Abū Zayd and his three nephews. The second section of the *sīra*, the “Reconnaissance” (*al-riyāda*), tells the adventures of these four young heroes as they travel to Tunisia seeking a new homeland for the tribe. Disaster, however, strikes three times and the first nephew, Yūnus, is held captive by the princess °Azīza after she has fallen madly in love with him. With Yūnus her prisoner, she attempts to seduce him (a favorite episode in more than one quarter) while he, à la Galahad, stoically resists her charms. Another nephew is killed in battle, and the third dies from a snake bite; Abū Zayd returns to the tribe alone, to the great anger of many,

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<sup>7</sup> al-Abnoudy (1978:22-28) prefers to divide the *sīra* into four parts: 1) the birth and youth of the heroes, 2) the reconnaissance, 3) the westward journey, and 4) the seven kingdoms (i.e., of the divided Banī Hilāl clans once they have conquered Tunisia). Yūnus (1973:185) has suggested a tripartite division by generation: 1) the generation of the fathers, Rizq, Sarḥān, and Ghānim; 2) the generation of the central heroes, Abū Zayd, Dhiyāb, and Ḥasan; 3) the generation of their sons who fight the final fratricidal battles. The chapbooks of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries commonly label the “reconnaissance” and the “westward journey” in the same manner, but have varying titles for the first and final sections of the *sīra*. In oral tradition, since the episodes are rarely recited “in order,” the divisions play little role.

and Dhiyāb in particular. Drought, however, forces cooperation. The Banī Hilāl depart westward toward Tunisia the Verdant in search of grazing lands, to rescue Yūnus, and to avenge the murder of the seventy descendants of the Prophet killed by al-Zanātī.

The third section of the *sīra* is the “Westward Journey” (*al-taghrība*), an elaborate series of battle cycles and romances which takes the tribe on a not-very-direct route through Iraq, Syria, Jerusalem, Gaza, Egypt, and Libya on the way to Tunisia. There the final battles are fought against the Berbers led by al-Zanātī Khalīfa and the unavoidable fate of the tribe is played out. The Banī Hilāl who in unity were victorious are divided in the ensuing peace. The rivalries between Dhiyāb and Abū Zayd burst the bonds that held together the clans and the warring factions eventually destroy themselves.

*Texts in Translation: English*

Very few texts of any length from *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* have been translated into English, and translations previous to the last twenty years have all been flawed as examples of the tradition. The brief summary which appears in Lane’s work mentioned above (1895:391-92) contains one short passage of verse translation which constitutes the very first translation from the *sīra* of any kind into English. The translation and summary are taken from a written text in Lane’s possession; he does, however, include a transcribed melody from a live performance which bears some resemblance to melodies used by poets even today.

An entire episode from the *sīra* was translated by Lady Anne and Wilfred Scawen Blunt from manuscript at the end of the nineteenth century with the title, “The Stealing of the Mare” (1892/1914). It was on the merits of this lone example that Bowra included Arabic epic poetry in his comparative study (1952) of heroic poetry. The translation is quite good and suffers only from the fact that the episode in question is entirely marginal to the overall movement of the epic. In it, the hero Abū Zayd helps a lady in distress by stealing the mare of al-Agheyli Jaber so her son might marry his true love. Such narrative detours, tales of adventure, deeds of chivalry, and so forth abound in the repertoires of many performers, and the translation stands as a fine example of these episodic asides.

The Patterson translation (1930) of four Banī Hilāl tales from Shuwa Arabic (Nigeria) is a rather curious document. It was originally transcribed from oral tradition by a Shuwa Arab *mallam*: “much of his transcription of them [the tales] was simply a phonetic rendering in Arabic characters of the spoken words and it has been revised to produce the

present version” (*ibid.*:18). Many of us would be much more satisfied with that original transcription, for the “present version” is a reader for government officers studying Shuwa Arabic and for use in schools and contains Arabic texts and English translations. Though the language has been altered to a great degree, the tales, told in prose and verse, are presumably somewhat intact and provide evidence of the *sīra* tradition from the very edges of its known geographical distribution.

By far the best, and the lengthiest, texts in English translation are to be found in two recent dissertations: Cathryn Anita Baker, “The Hilali Saga in the Tunisian South” (1978), and Susan E. Slyomovics, “The Merchant of Art: An Egyptian Hilali Oral Epic Poet in Performance” (1985). These have the added advantage of representing the two “heartlands” of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* oral tradition. Baker’s work is drawn from extensive fieldwork in southern Tunisia, 1971-73, where she recorded sixty-six different reciters (sixty men and six women). Two sections of the dissertation are of particular note here. In the first (Chapter Two), Baker collates and summarizes the plot of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* as recited in the Tunisian South from thirty-three episodes representing seventy hours of recordings. In the following section (Chapter Three), a major work in itself, Baker presents a two-hundred-page English translation of one reciter’s version of the *sīra* accompanied by the complete Arabic text and explanatory notes. The narrative is prose with a few interspersed rhymed couplets and some longer poetic sequences. The translation remains close to the Arabic and yet quite readable. The dissertation also includes an historical introduction, an analysis of the reciter’s view of history, and an examination of the characters and stereotypes within the *sīra*.

In Upper Egypt, where Slyomovics conducted her research, the predominant mode of performance is musical and versified—epic singing at its most artistic level. This dissertation is unique in the field of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* studies on several counts: first, it provides the first detailed analysis of a single poet and his craft; second, it provides a performance-based approach to a lengthy text; third, it discloses layer after layer of social and contextual analysis with which to examine the processes of composition, the performer-audience interaction, the interaction between the researcher and the event, and, of course, the text itself.

Slyomovics’ text is more than a translation—it is the transcription of a performance. In it we read not only the intricately punned words of the poet, but the comments of the audience members, the conversations during tea and cigarette breaks, and a dispute among the listeners over a pun in the text interpreted as a personal insult by one listener. From this incident the power of the poet, a social outcast in many respects, to praise or ridicule in public performance with a large degree of impunity, is clearly demonstrated. The text presented particular difficulties in translation, for

the epic poet structures his performance around a large number of puns by which he indicates central themes and his own interpretation of the traditional texts. These are admirably dealt with in a layout which highlights the punned words in the English translation.

Two much shorter published texts are worthy of note: Sayyid Hurreiz, in *Ja'aliyyin Folktales: an Interplay of African, Arabian and Islamic Elements* (1977), includes a sparse version of the *sīra* from northern Sudan in English translation and transliterated Arabic. Here the *sīra* is narrated as a prose tale and the over arching plot of the epic is told in just seven pages. Stone and Lunde have provided perhaps the most easily read introduction to *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. Their short article (1983), is a pastiche of historical background, translated texts, and commentary. Unfortunately, the authors did not see fit to acknowledge the origin of their texts.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Texts in Translation: French*

The oldest scholarly translation into French is that of Alfred Bel (1902-3).<sup>9</sup> Though published in three installments, the text is a singular poem concerning the heroine of the *sīra*, al-Jāz̄ya. It is 79 verses long, each verse carrying a double rhyme (at the end of each hemistich). The first thirty-seven verses are rhymed ABAB; verses thirty-eight through seventy-eight are rhymed CDCD, and the final line returns to rhyme A. Bel has provided a lengthy introduction, the Arabic text with ample footnotes, as well as the translation and explanatory notes. Though short, the extended double rhyme makes this a fascinating text in Arabic.

More recently, several lengthy texts and collections of texts have appeared in French in popular and scholarly editions. Two of the Arab world's most prominent scholars of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* have published books in French from their research. Tahar Guiga has published, in both Arabic (1968a) and French (1968b), a collection of texts inherited from his father, °Abd al-Raḥmān Guiga. The edition is a popularized one aimed at bringing these texts, originally in local Bedouin dialect, to a larger audience. The Arabic text is an intriguing compromise which unites written forms understandable to all educated Arabs while retaining some idioms and

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<sup>8</sup> Also under general introductions can be mentioned a retold version for young readers (Davis and Ashabrenner 1960); reading level approximately fifth to eighth grade.

<sup>9</sup> René Basset presented an earlier article (1885) concerning a tale of al-Jāz̄ya à propos a recent translation by L. Guin of the legend of Rouba (Oran, 1884); Basset summarizes a chapbook of the *sīra* and its major divisions, translating short passages relevant to the story published by Guin. He also refers to a version published by M. Largeau (1879) which I have been unable to examine.

vocabulary items to give a sense of the texts' colloquial heritage. The French text is preceded by a comprehensive introduction to the *sīra* as a pan-Arab tradition and in the local Tunisian context of these tales told mostly in prose, but with some poetic sequences.

Abd al-Rahmān al-Abnoudy, himself a poet of distinction in Egypt, has gathered together a series of extracts of oral performances he has recorded from epic poets in Egypt (1978). The introduction provides a précis of the plot of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* and the texts are then presented as a sampler from the entire epic. Unfortunately, the French translation is at times rather rough, and due to the nature of the work itself, the transitions from one section to the next are not always smooth. It is, however, a valuable representative of the Egyptian poetic tradition of the *sīra*; in fact, it remains the only example of the epic poetry performance style in French translation. The two introductions from Guiga's and Abnoudy's works form an interesting contrast in which these two well-qualified researchers summarize a single tradition from slightly different geographical and cultural standpoints.

The most scholarly of the French texts is that published by Galley and Ayoub, *Histoire des Bani Hilal et de ce qui leur advint dans leur marche vers l'ouest* (1983). After a short historical introduction three texts are presented in Arabic with facing French translations. The first is from a manuscript and consists of a single 249-line poem. The rhyme scheme is laid out in transliteration for those who do not read Arabic script. The second and third texts are oral performances recorded in 1967 and 1975 in the south and northwest of Tunisia respectively. Both are in prose with short sections of verse. The texts have been closely transcribed into Arabic script from the recordings utilizing vocalizations and diacritics to faithfully render the reciters' pronunciation. The French translations follow the Arabic fairly closely, though with a fair amount of paraphrases; particularly troublesome vocabulary items have been retained in Arabic with explanatory notes. The translations read very well and the translators have done an admirable job of following, as much as is possible, the rhythm of the Arabic original. For scholars interested in close linguistic or ethnopoetic analysis, these are without doubt the best of the French texts and translations.

The most recent and lengthiest addition to this series of French translations has been the work of Lucienne Saada, *La Geste Hilalienne; version de Bou Thadi* (1985). Saada has set her sights on a literary translation which will communicate the aesthetic appeal of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. She has succeeded, at least, in producing a text of such length that some degree of the scope and richness of the tradition clearly comes through. The text is entirely from a single reciter, Mohammed Hsini, recorded over a period of six years, totaling approximately twenty hours of performance.

Scholars will find it frustrating that although the text is divided into many small sequences and episodes, no account is given of how these were ordered and arranged, whether any sections represent collations of more than one performance, and which texts were recorded within the same performance session. The text has some interesting idiosyncrasies that will interest other researchers (Abū Zayd, for instance, kills his father in Hsini's version, a variant I, at least, am not familiar with from other texts), and it will certainly attract much attention as the longest text yet translated into a European language from the *sīra*.

### *Notes on Recent Scholarship*

Any discussion of *Strat Banī Hilāl* scholarship must begin by noting that most of it is in Arabic, and the majority of that remains unpublished. Three international symposia have been held in recent years in the Middle East on the Arabic folk *siyar*: Hammamat, Tunisia (June 26-28, 1980); Cairo, Egypt (January 2-7, 1985); and Gabès, Tunisia (July 12-20, 1985).<sup>10</sup> The papers from these conferences, mostly in Arabic, have circulated widely in unpublished form among researchers, and it is hoped that they will appear in print in the near future. This brief review of recent scholarship touches on a number of themes in current research, but focuses primarily on studies currently available in published form.

The location and description of *Strat Banī Hilāl* manuscripts has remained an on-going concern among researchers: S. Pantůček published a preliminary listing of known manuscripts in 1970 which has been supplemented by A. Ayoub's thorough investigation of the Berlin manuscript collection (1978) and M. Galley's description of manuscripts in British libraries (1981). A very useful account of manuscripts and various descriptions which have appeared in print of the *sīra* in oral tradition in North Africa from Ibn Khaldūn to the present has been given by C. Breteau, M. Galley, and A. Roth (1978). The fourteenth-century Ibn Khaldūn texts have received attention from A. Baker (1983), who has suggested some corrections to the Franz Rosenthal translation of the *Muqaddima*, and from A. Ayoub (1982), who has explored new approaches to these problematic texts.

The most interesting studies for folklorists and scholars of oral literature will be those focusing on narrative techniques. S. Slyomovics in her dissertation (mentioned above under "texts in translation") has written extensively about one poet's use of paronomasia as a structuring and interpretive device. In a further article (1987) she has compared an oral and a written version of the death-poem of a character in the *sīra*. The oral version is marked by frequent puns, the written version by none. She

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<sup>10</sup> An account of the first symposium can be found in Galley and Roth (1980).

concludes with an analysis of the discrepancy and explores the concept of epic characters themselves functioning as puns in the organization of oral epic texts.

Bridget Connelly's Ph.D. dissertation, "The Oral-Formulaic Tradition of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*" (1974/1986) applies the Parry-Lord theories of oral-formulaic composition to sample texts from the Egyptian epic singing tradition. In her structural analysis of the Patterson translations from Shuwa Arabic she reveals: "a pattern of repeating and variation of character and episode configuration, of recurring antithetical images and word play. . . [which] provides the tales with a kind of counter logical balance and structural coherence" (1973:24) in opposition to the translator's own judgment on the tales as "garbled" history.

Another structural approach, derived mainly from Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, has been applied by A. Ayoub in an unpublished paper to a corpus of written episodes and has led him to propose a sequence of functions (Departure-Opposition-Ruse-Dream foretelling of the future-Pact-War-Victory) as a fundamental description of tales from the written tradition. A further foray into the structural description of the written texts has been published by D. Onaeva (1975).

The dream function present in Ayoub's study is an extremely common element in both written and oral versions; the outcome of the episode is foreshadowed in the beginning or middle of the narrative in a revelatory dream. This had led to much speculation about the sequencing of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* performances, in which the audience is often led into an initial conflict, then through a dream that echoes the end of the tale, and finally back into the story through to its foretold conclusion. A. Hawwās (1980) has dealt with the most famous of these dream sequences, where Su'ada, daughter of al-Zanātī Khalīfa, foresees the arrival of the Banī Hilāl and her father's death, while G. Canova (1984) has given a more general treatment of this motif.

Several recent studies have explored individual characters within the *sīra*: Ayoub and Galley (1977) have examined a Tunisian *sous-verre* painting of al-Jāzya and have coupled their analysis of the visual representation with an analysis of al-Jāzya's role in the *sīra*. Galley (1984) has also studied the contrasting female roles of many characters in a comparative analysis of mother-son, sister-brother, and wife-husband relationships from oral and written sources. N. Chellig has examined the figure of al-Jāzya as an "archétype de l'inconscient collectif" in Algeria in an unpublished paper. And two texts concerning the hero Dhiyāb have been compared by Breteau and Galley (1973).

An article focusing on the role of the poet-performer within the Egyptian tradition has been published by Canova (1983), and A. al-Abnoudy (in press) has attempted to delineate the roles of the *shā'ir* (poet) and the *rāwī* (reciter) in modern tradition; this supposed division of labor between the "creating poet" and the "memorizing/performing reciter" has been a point of discussion in Arabic literary studies in reference to periods

stretching back to the pre-Islamic era.

Linguistic analyses of written texts have been offered by A. Roth in her studies of verb forms and of pronominal forms in Banī Hilāl manuscripts (1980, 1981). At the 1985 Cairo conference on the Arabic folk *siyar*, D. Madeyska presented a paper on the “Language and Structure of the Sira,” and a paper at this same conference, by M. Yāqūt, examined grammatical structures in the *sīra* of Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan.

Perhaps the single most important contribution in recent scholarship has been the release of several recordings from the epic singing tradition of Egypt, which allows scholars not directly involved in fieldwork to acquire some idea of the musical factors active in this performance mode, an area which has been for the most part ignored. G. Canova has released a disc, *Egitto I: Epica* (1980), devoted entirely to epic singing. The English and Italian notes are quite extensive and include musicological notes by H. Touma, as well as the full texts in transliterated Arabic, an Italian translation, bibliography, photos, and discography. The selections are long enough to give a rough idea of the pacing of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* performance and varied enough to give some notion of the musical diversity which exists in the Egyptian tradition. Single examples of epic singing on anthology discs can be found on Tiberiu Alexandru’s *The Folk Music of Egypt* (1967), and Alain Weber’s *Music of the Nile Valley* (1981). The latter offers a lengthy selection from the *sīra*, but no text or translation is included.

### *Conclusion*

There is not space here to mention all of the recent work on *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, particularly given the large number of unpublished papers being circulated. Though the notes above are extremely sparse, they represent, I hope, most of the most often recurring topics of *sīra* research in the last few years. There is perhaps room, however, to note some of the areas that have not yet been adequately explored. *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* has been dealt with predominantly as history and as “text.” Manuscripts even now are the fodder for more published papers than is the oral tradition. Nevertheless, interests have shifted over the last two decades to include a number of studies focusing on the poets and reciters, the processes of composition, and narrative technique in live performance. This, of course, parallels the recent, and not so recent, shifts in folklore in general. I began this article by pointing out that *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is probably the most widespread and best-documented narrative of Arabic oral literature. That does not mean that we have anything close to a full ethnographic portrait of the tradition; rather, it means that most of Arabic oral literature has been grossly ignored by anthropologists and literary scholars alike. Bits and pieces of evidence which have drifted in from nearly twenty Arab countries over the past two centuries indicate that this narrative, in all its various forms, is a

“powerful text,” one which remains meaningful to a significant audience in many regions of the Middle East. The new interest in the role of the poet, in performance, and in contextualized studies will bring a great many new ideas and interpretations. Let us hope that the scope will widen even more, to include audience interpretations of the *sīra* and conceptualizations of the tradition. That road may eventually lead us even closer to an understanding of the enduring role *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* has played in Arab culture for the past six hundred years.

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