

## **The Sirat Bani Hilal Digital Archive**

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The primary purpose of the *Sirat Bani Hilal Digital Archive* (<http://www.siratbanihilal.ucsb.edu>) is to preserve and make accessible online, to both scholars and the general public, materials related to the Arabic oral epic tradition of *Sirat Bani Hilal* (the epic of the Bani Hilal Bedouin tribe). The archive was created with the assistance of a yearlong “Digital Innovation” grant from the American Council of Learned Societies (2008-09) and is now a permanent collection in the holdings of the Davidson Research Library at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The core of the archive is a body of audio recordings, photographs, and field notes from research conducted by Dwight F. Reynolds (Professor, Arabic Language and Literature, UCSB) in Egypt in 1982-83, 1986-87, 1988, 1993, and 1995.<sup>1</sup>

The archive features a historical introduction to the Bani Hilal oral epic tradition, a collection of audio recordings of live performances of the epic, Arabic-language transcriptions of those performances, English translations of the texts, a photo gallery featuring images of both the epic singers and the village of al-Bakatush in Northern Egypt where the recordings were made, a bibliography of printed sources, a listing of online resources relevant to the oral epic, selections from Reynolds’ original field notes, and a special section termed “Virtual Performances.” This last section is devoted to half-hour segments of epic performances where the listener/viewer can listen to the original audio recording while reading onscreen a synchronized Arabic transcription and English translation of the text that appears verse by verse and includes all of the comments and reactions of the audience members. This format allows the listener/viewer to experience an epic performance in real time—thereby getting a feel for the pace of the story as it unfolds line by line—and also allows one to hear and understand the audience’s reactions and the poet’s responses so that the interactive nature of epic performances in this tradition is encountered first-hand.

The archive is designed to be of use to scholars and students of epic poetry and oral tradition, as well as those interested in Egypt and the broader Arab world. Perhaps more significant than providing materials for Westerners, however, is the fact that this site now offers Egyptians and Arabic speakers around the world direct access to recordings and texts from a tradition that is rapidly disappearing but still significant as an element of Egyptian and Arab identity. The poets featured on this site are now deceased, so it is particularly satisfying to think

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that their children, grandchildren, friends, and neighbors are still able to listen to and appreciate the artistry of these remarkable men who spent their childhoods learning the epic from their fathers and grandfathers in the early- to mid-twentieth century.

The audio recordings featured in the archive were originally recorded on chromium (IV) oxide cassette tapes using a Sony Walkman Professional WM-D6C with both unidirectional and stereo microphones. Each recording has been re-edited before being uploaded to the archive in order to eliminate major auditory disturbances, ameliorate sound quality as much as possible, and equalize volume throughout. The use of cassette tapes and batteries (since there was no reliable source of electricity in the village in the 1980s) means that there are breaks every 30 minutes. The audio recordings are still organized and numbered according to their original archive (that is, tape) number, and every break is indicated in the Arabic transcriptions and English translations. Though the poets were often aware of the break and would repeat a verse so that there was no break in the flow of the text, occasionally a verse or two was lost. In such cases, the lacuna has been marked, and in some places footnotes that summarize the lost material have been provided.

All features of the website can be commented on by visitors, and suggestions regarding revisions or corrections of the Arabic and English texts are particularly appreciated. Improvements and changes in both the transcriptions and translations are meant to be an ongoing process so that the resulting texts are at least partially the result of “crowd-sourcing.”

Copies of all primary material that appears in the archive (that is, the digitalized audio recordings, texts, photos, and so forth) are housed in the permanent collection of the Davidson Research Library at UCSB under an agreement that provides a commitment to migrate these materials forward to new technologies as necessary in the future. The current website was originally designed in 2008—already a generation or two ago in technical terms—and was created using Drupal, an open-source content management platform. All materials in the digital archive are available for downloading and use at no charge and are copyrighted under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 2.5 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.5/>). Detailed information about use, copyright, and the proper form of citations and acknowledgements is provided on the site via the “Copyrights & Permissions” link. At this time only a partial Arabic version of the site is available by clicking the block marked “Arabic” in the upper right-hand corner of the main webpage.

### **Historical Background to *Sirat Bani Hilal***

This lengthy narrative tradition has its roots in events that took place in the tenth to twelfth centuries, accounts of which have been preserved in oral tradition in both poetry and prose in many different regions of the Arab world. The Bani Hilal Bedouin tribe originally lived in the Najd region of the Arabian Peninsula, but in the tenth century—for reasons that are not entirely clear today—the tribe embarked on a great “Westward Journey” that led them across Egypt and Libya to the part of North Africa that now encompasses modern Tunisia and Algeria. They conquered this area and ruled it for one century, but were then defeated by armies of the Moroccan Almohad dynasty in the twelfth century in two cataclysmic battles. After these defeats,

the Bani Hilal tribe fragmented and disappeared from history as a coherent social unit. Small numbers of survivors, however, dispersed in various directions across the Sahara, so that even today there are groups claiming descent from the Bani Hilal in various locations in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Chad, and Mauretania.<sup>2</sup>

These survivors apparently carried with them the tales and poems of their tribe, because the story of the Bani Hilal eventually became known throughout the Arab world. In the fourteenth century, the great social philosopher and historian Ibn Khaldun wrote down selections of these stories and verses that he heard from Bedouin Arabs outside the walls of the city of Tunis. In the eighteenth century, an anonymous North African scribe transcribed several thousand pages of the versified tale of the Bani Hilal from an unknown storyteller-poet; these manuscripts are now part of the collection of the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin. In the nineteenth century numerous western travelers and ethnographers reported witnessing performances in different regions of the Arab world, sometimes writing out summaries or short passages of what they heard. At the same time, cheap “yellow book” (so called in Arabic because of the cheap yellow paper used) or “chapbook” versions of stories from the Bani Hilal epic began to be printed in Cairo; these versions, however, were much shorter than the oral versions of the same tales and were couched in a somewhat stilted form of classical Arabic that was not the linguistic register used by epic singers in their public performances. Finally, with the advent of cassette recordings in the 1970s, versions of the epic began to circulate on inexpensive tapes, and a popular radio show in Egypt began to broadcast recordings of the Bani Hilal epic, bringing what had by then become a primarily rural tradition to new urban audiences.

Although tales of the Bani Hilal are recounted in many regions of the Arab world in prose (at times punctuated with short passages of verse), in the past century or so the only musical versified performance tradition of this oral epic tradition has been found in Egypt. Within Egypt, there are two distinct regional traditions: in Southern Egypt the epic is sung in a multi-rhymed quatrain (*murabba'*) form, while in the North it is sung in a mono-end-rhymed “ode” (*qaṣīda*) form. Most of the recordings featured in the archive were made in the village of al-Bakatush in the Nile Delta of northern Egypt. These singers were all from professional, hereditary families of epic singers in which every male was trained from about age five to fifteen in the art of performing the Bani Hilal epic in verse while accompanying themselves on the Egyptian two-string “spike fiddle” (*rabāb*). The preserved performances are primarily from small evening gatherings in private homes with audiences of between a half dozen to two dozen men sitting in the same room as the poet and an unknown number of women seated in the next room listening through a partially opened door or curtain. With the expansion of the public school system in the 1960s during the presidency of Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir (= Nasser), however, the tradition began a precipitous decline. Boys who were in school learning to read and write could not also be at home undergoing the lengthy and time-consuming process of learning to sing the epic, and the epic, in any case, had lost much of its popularity in face of the spread of radios and television. The poets represented here were almost all proud of the fact that their sons were learning to read and write and would not be carrying on the tradition of singing the epic. This sentiment was in

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account of the history of the Bani Hilal tribe and a comparison with how the epic treats these events, see Reynolds 2010.

part because the occupation of professional epic singing is marked in this region as belonging to “Gypsies” (though not Roma “gypsies” as in Europe) and is not a respected livelihood, whereas the now-literate sons could move into a variety of professions that were of much higher social status. Many of the recordings that form the core of the collection of this digital archive are the only recordings ever made from these particular epic singers, most of whom were already in their sixties and seventies at the time of those performances.

### **Specific Qualities of this Collection of Interest to Researchers**

The *Sirat Bani Hilal Digital Archive* houses materials that will be of obvious interest to scholars of oral epic traditions and to scholars of Egypt and the Arab world. It also constitutes a significant corpus of Egyptian colloquial Arabic materials that should be useful for scholars of linguistics, though, as I have argued elsewhere, the register used in the epic is not that of day-to-day conversation, but rather a form of “artistic colloquial.”<sup>3</sup> Two other aspects of this collection may be of particular interest to scholars of performance studies. First, the initial four hours of performance have been transcribed and translated with all of the audience’s reactions and comments so that one can—from either the written or audio versions—fully understand and analyze the interactive nature of the epic performance. Second, in order to provide a detailed account of the social aspects of each of the 72 performances, selections from Reynolds’ original field notes are posted in a separate section of the archive. By correlating the date of a specific recording or text with that same date in the field notes, scholars will therefore be able to read a description of the performance written almost immediately afterward, as well as initial reactions to various social aspects of the event, including what happened during the tea breaks and pauses, during which (at the request of the poet and audience members) the tape recorder was normally turned off. For the general public, the archive offers English translations of several episodes (eventually translations of all episodes will be posted) from this masterpiece of Arabic oral tradition, a work easily comparable in complexity to the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, the King Arthur cycles, the *Niebelungenlied*, and other works of a similar nature.

The bibliography at the end of this article lists published materials relating directly to the content of this digital archive, but the archive itself includes an extensive bibliography (<http://www.siratbanihilal.ucsb.edu/bibliography-0>) covering the work of other scholars and other regional performance traditions of the Bani Hilal epic. In addition, a guide to online resources (<http://www.siratbanihilal.ucsb.edu/resources>) includes links to other collections, videos, recordings, and related materials.

### **A Brief Case Study**

One of the most interesting aspects of the *Sirat Bani Hilal* tradition is the role played by audience responses and the resulting interaction between listeners and the performing poet. An

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the linguistic register of the epic, see Reynolds 1995a.

evening performance typically consists primarily of epic singing, but there are several smaller genres that are performed as well. A *madīh*, or praise poem to the Prophet Muhammad, usually opens the evening's event; this poem immediately involves the audience members directly in the performance, for there are traditional religious phrases that are said by all present at, for example, the mention of the Prophet: *ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam* ("May God bless and preserve him!"). A number of other religious phrases ("God is Great! God is One! May God be pleased with him! There is no god but God!") are also intoned in response to mentions of the names of other prophets and in response to specific cues in the performances, such as "Assert the Oneness of God!" Very often, at the conclusion of the praise poem, the singer will insert a short *mawwāl*, a lyric poem that typically deals with the vicissitudes of Fate and is marked by puns and word-play at the end of each verse. The entire tenor of the event suddenly shifts during the singing of these brief poems because the audience withholds all response until the end so that they can pay careful attention to the embedded word-play. In addition, if the singer has a nice voice or is able to add ornate melismatic musical phrases, this is his opportunity to do so. Only at the conclusion of the *mawwāl* will audience members voice their approval with phrases such as "Allah! Allah!" or "Yā 'aynī!" ("Oh my eye!" = "that was beautiful").

A third type of interaction and response from the audience is found during the singing of the epic itself. Here there is typically a steady rhythm of occasional phrases called out to indicate that the audience is still paying attention and is engaged with the story. These responses include exclamations of surprise, phrases cheering on the heroes, remarks expressing disapproval of certain actions by characters within the story, requests that God preserve those present from the horrors described in the tale, and even a certain amount of foreshadowing when audience members anticipate what is about to happen and shout out who is about to arrive or who a particular character is just as their disguise is being removed, and so forth. When audiences fall completely silent during performances of the epic, it is usually an indication that a particular scene is going on too long (a battle scene, for example); this silence can therefore motivate a poet to summarize this section of the story quickly and move on to the next scene or, at times, to continue with the scene but change the tone by inserting humorous lines or even remarks aimed at specific members of the audience, weaving the present into the past.

A sample of this interactive element of epic performance can be had by watching the archive's "Virtual Performance" segments and/or by reading the English translation of the first four hours of the epic as sung by Shaykh Taha Abu Zayd, in which nearly all of the audience's comments have been included. Even from the written text it is easy to sense the growing anticipation of certain climactic moments because the pace of the audience's interjections picks up until the poet is scarcely able to sing more than a few words at a time without someone calling out a remark. In the space of the five verses from verse 100 to verse 104 in the "Birth of Abu Zayd—Part One," for example, there are eight comments shouted out by audience members, the poet responds to one of those comments with a comment of his own, and one member takes out several cigarettes and places them before the poet (an action also noted in the text). In this very well-known scene, the appearance of a large, fierce, black bird presages the birth of the hero Abu Zayd, who is born black because his mother wishes for a son on this bird-omen, and who later grows up to be the greatest hero of the Bani Hilal tribe. The audience knows the story and understands that this is a critical moment in the epic tale: Abu Zayd will be born black and his

mother, Khadra, will therefore be accused of adultery and expelled from the tribe, setting in motion one of the main story lines of the epic.

This type of audience-performance interaction is found in nearly all performances of *Sirat Bani Hilal* as sung by the poets of al-Bakatush. This particular passage is found in Shaykh Taha Abu Zayd's rendition of "Episode One: The Birth of Abu Zayd (Part 1)," beginning on page 11 (<http://www.siratbanihilal.ucsb.edu/episode-one-birth-abu-zayd-part-1>).

Suddenly a dark bird from the distance came to them,

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[Laughter—Voice: This is Abu Zayd!]

A dark bird . . .

[Voice: Yes!]

. . . frightful to behold!

[Voice: Heavens!]

He beat his wings at the other birds,

And each one he struck did not [live to] smell his supper!

Said Khadra, . . .

[Voice: Yes!]

. . . "O how beautiful you are, O bird, and how beautiful your darkness!

[Voice: Allah!]

Like the palm-date when it ripens to perfection.

O Lord, O All-Merciful, O One, O Everlasting,

[Voice: May God be generous to you!]

[Shaykh Taha: May God reward you!]

Glory be to God, Veiled in His Heaven!

[Audience member places cigarettes in front of the Poet]

[Shaykh Taha: May you always have plenty! May you always have plenty, we wish you!]

Grant unto me a son, like unto this bird,

And may each one he strikes with his sword not [live to] smell his supper!"

[Voice: My heavens!]

[Voice shouting: That's Abu Zayd!]

## Future Plans

The main work at the moment is to continue the editing and uploading of the Arabic texts and English translations. This is a painstaking task that involves comparing the newly typed texts with the hand-written original drafts with the audio-recordings. Although every effort is being made to standardize the translation of the recurring words and phrases so that the formulaic nature of the epic language is clear even from the translations, this has not always been possible. As described above, the Arabic and English texts are constantly being revised in light of comments and suggestions made by readers and scholars. Eventually, the entire website platform will need to be reevaluated in terms of new advances in technology, but that, we hope, is still a number of years in the future.

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