

## Arabic Folk Epic and Western *Chanson de Geste*

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In the year 1892, Lady Anne Blunt published her translation of one portion of the Arabic popular romance, the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. She called it *The Celebrated Romance of the Stealing of the Mare*.<sup>1</sup> Lady Blunt, and her husband, Wilfred Scawen Blunt, were Romantics. The latter once wrote, “to cast off the slough of Europe, to have done with ugliness and noise, to bathe one’s sick Western soul in the pure healing of the East. The mere act of passing from one’s graceless London clothes into the white draperies of Arabia is a new birth.”<sup>2</sup>

They were also medievalists. To them, the heroic tales of the Arabs, and those of Abū Zayd al-Hilālī in particular, seemed to evoke memories of what they had read, or heard, of the *chansons de geste* of medieval Christendom, so that Lady Blunt felt moved to write in her Preface (1892:viii-ix):

As a romance, “Abu Zeyd” is of more undoubted interest. It is not only an excellent example of the Mediaeval Epic in its Eastern dress, but is old enough to have been itself, perhaps, a model from which Europe took its romantic inspiration. It is not generally remembered how immense an influence the Arab invasion of Spain in the eighth century had on European thought, political, religious, and literary. From Arabia through Spain the idea of Christian “chivalry” sprang, the romance of the horseman of noble blood armed with the lance as contrasted with the base-born citizen on foot. The knight-errantry of our middle-ages was purely Arabian; the championing of the distressed, especially of women, by wandering adventurers; the magnanimous code of honor in war; even the coats of mail-armour, and the heraldic bearings, which last may perhaps be traced to the “wusms” or family brands used in Arab tribes for the marking of their camels. Again, the feudalism of the middle ages was Arabian; the union of

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<sup>1</sup> The work is dedicated to Charles Doughty. Its Arabic text, *Qiṣṣat faras ‘Uqaylī wa mā jarā lahā ma‘al-Amīr Abū Zayd*, is probably derived from a lithograph copy now in Cambridge University Library (*Moh 208 D.2'*) which was once in the library of Lady Anne Blunt.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Ahmed 1978:102, from The Earl of Lytton’s *Wilfred Scawen Blunt, A Memoir by his Grandson*.

the temporal with the spiritual authority in politics; and in literature, the purely Semitic form of rhymed verse, as distinguished from the classic scansion and the unrhymed sagas of Europe. The romantic cycle of Abu Zeyd may very well have been known to the first singers of the cycle of Charlemagne and King Arthur, and have suggested to them their method.

This opinion was shared by others at that time. Alphonse de Lamartine found the ʿAbsī hero, ʿAntar ibn Shaddād, to be the ideal of nomadic nobility. This assessment accorded well with the view—common among explorers and soldiers of Empire—that the bedouin Arab, as opposed to the peasant, somehow mirrored the image and ideal of western medieval chivalry. Roland and the Cid came readily to mind.

This view did not pass unchallenged. Bernhard Heller, who was one of the first scholars of this century to study the *Sīrat ʿAntar*, undertook an exhaustive analysis of its content. He outlined four principal thematic levels which contributed to the creation of the composition: the pre-Islamic, the Islamic, Persian history and epic literature, and, lastly, the Crusading influence and the influence of Byzantium.<sup>3</sup> Heller was particularly interested in comparative literature. He likened certain passages in the *Sīra* with others in Western *chanson de geste*. Shared motives and adventures included an episode in the *Chanson de Roland* where Roland, dying, breaks his sword. This is matched in the *Sīrat ʿAntar*, where the dying champion, named al-Ḥārith ibn Zālim, likewise tries to shatter his sword. Heller, on the other hand, expressed the view (1931) that it was extremely unlikely that the *Sīrat ʿAntar*—and indeed any other of the popular Arab folk epics—could have had any marked influence on Western *chanson de geste* itself. The similarities were coincidental, or were the stock in trade of the storyteller of the high Middle Ages, be he a westerner or an oriental. The same applied to the *pseudo-Maghāzī* and “early conquest” literature, the exploits of ʿAlī and the Companions of the Prophet. Even the scholarly attempts to find interborrowings between the Byzantine epic of *Digenes Akritas* and the Romance of Dhāt al-Himma (*Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma*) offered little real substance to show for much labor.<sup>4</sup>

The renewed surge of interest by specialists in popular folk epic, in a number of fields, in the examination of the possible parallels, borrowings, and stylistic similarities between the great romances of East and West indicates that the question is still open. It has produced a series of publications in recent years. Among the least known is the study by Luṭfī ʿAbd al-Badīʿ (1964) entitled *La épica árabe y su influencia en la épica*

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<sup>3</sup> This and kindred topics relating to early attempts at studying *Sīra* in relation to *chanson* are discussed at length in an important recent article, Heath 1984.

<sup>4</sup> See Ibrāhīm n.d.:253-54.

*castellana*.<sup>5</sup>

If the avid reader of the stories of King Arthur, his knights, and Merlin—or of the very different story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—were given the opportunity to examine a translation of, even an extended passage from, one of the most famous Arabic *Sīras* or from the *pseudo-Maghāzī* and *pseudo-Futūḥ* books, he might well be struck by some similarity of champion, weaponry, forms of combat, and poetic contest in all these works. Dorothy L. Sayers, in the introduction to her edition of *The Song of Roland* (1975), lists among those essential elements which are to be observed in its content the following: its poetic form, its image of feudalism, vassalage, the tokens, rules of chivalry and of battle, nurture and companionship, horses, swords, other weapons, and armor. All these also figure prominently in Arabic *Sīra* and in *pseudo-Maghāzī*.

The following passage in the popular work *Futūḥ al-Yaman*, commonly called *Rā's al-Ghūl*, attributed to Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (Abū-Ḥasan) al-Bakrī,<sup>6</sup> written in the post-Crusading period—a fantastic story as to how the Prophet and ʿAlī, his son-in-law, rescued the persecuted believers in the Yemen—gives a representative example of an encounter in popular Arabic folk epic, narrated by the folk poet or read by the storyteller. It differs only in its scale from the principal *Sīras*:

When Allāh brought the dawn, the *Imām* ʿAlī, may Allāh be pleased with him, mounted, and he pondered, looking to left and to right. In front of him he found two ways. The *Imām* ʿAlī said, “O ʿAmr, which of these two will bring us to Rā's al-Ghūl?” ʿAmr said to him, “This road terminates in the land of Rā's al-Ghūl, which is located at the opening to the land of the Yemen, but its ways are hard and its terrors are many. Numerous are the mountains and the hills, few are the water points and the pools.” Whilst the *Imām* ʿAlī was engaged in conversation with ʿAmr, lo, the dust was stirred

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<sup>5</sup> Luṭfī ʿAbd al-Badīʿ is extensively quoted in de Fuentes 1978: espec. 26, 29, 32, 101, 103, 131.

<sup>6</sup> See al-Bakrī n.d.:118: “This famous raid was completed at the commencement of Rajab 1282/November-December 1865. The administration of its printing was undertaken at the financial cost of the Kastiliyya Press, the Sikka Jadīda, Cairo.” It is probably this work which is condemned by Ibn Kathīr in his Koran *tafsīr*: “As for what is said by the public about al-Baṭṭāl from the *Sīra* attributed to Dalhama and al-Baṭṭāl and prince ʿAbd al-Waḥḥāb and the *Qāḍī* ʿUqba, it is all false and slanderous. It is cold invention, ignorance, and devilishly harmful. Such is only current among the foolish or the vilely ignorant, just as the *Sīra* of ʿAntar ibn Shaddād the ʿAbsī, falsely fabricated, circulates amongst them. So too the *Sīra of al-Bakrī* and al-Danaf and others. The falsehood perpetrated in the *Sīra of al-Bakrī* is the most sinful and criminal of all, because its writer, by intent, puts false sayings into the mouth of the Prophet—the blessing and peace of God be upon him—so let him take his place in Hell fire” (cited in Fārūq Khūrshīd, *Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, in his preface to volume 1).

up and it rose into the sky and blocked all the countryside round about.<sup>7</sup> The air was clogged with dust, like unto smoke. The *Imām* °Alī said—may Allāh be pleased with him—“Sit you all down in your place until I uncover the cause of this dust.” Then he went his way until he reached that dust, then lo, he was made aware of the cause of it and he saw a tall knight riding on a dark bay charger, high and compact in build. The man was wearing red clothes and around his waist was a girdle which was studded with pearl. He was girded with a sword furbished and burnished and, in his hand, he held a long spear. It had a point from which death glinted at every man who beheld it. He had a black slave who was riding on a thin haired mount. In his hand he held a slaughtered ram, and he was leading a reddish camel upon the back of which was a palenquin, crowned with pearls and jewels. He stopped at a distance from those who were watching.

That knight dismounted from his charger and he began to recite:  
 My steed precedes the gusts of wind which blow,  
 A draught of death is poured from my point.  
 My fame is noised abroad in every land,  
 due to my blows bestowed in twos and threes.  
 I pass through haunts, which, had King Solomon  
 in person passed that way,  
 he would have suffered terrors in that place.  
 Humanity, entire, fears my assault  
 and dreads (the keenness of) my spearhead.

The narrator said: When the knight had concluded his poem, he made his camel kneel, having himself dismounted. He threw the head of the ram on to the ground and made for a high tree. He stretched his hand towards it and he dragged it and uprooted it from the earth and he cast it down upon the ground. He ordered the slave to break it in pieces. The slave said to him, “To hear is to obey.” At that instant he arose and went up to a huge stone, which resembled a ballista. It needed ten men of courage to handle. He clutched the tree with his left hand, and the stone with his right, and he began to smite the tree until it was shattered. All this occurred as the *Imām* °Alī looked and observed. His amazement grew as he watched. Then the slave lit the fire and placed the ram upon it and he proceeded to turn it over and over until it was well roasted on every side. He called to the maiden who was in the palenquin and she came out to him. He made her sit on that stone which he had used as a tool for breaking the tree. He offered food to the knight, and the slave began to cut up the meat and it was thrown to the maiden. The two of them—the knight and the maiden—continued eating until they were satisfied. The narrator said: When the knight had finished eating, the maiden arose and entered the palenquin. Then, when the knight had finished his meal, the slave brought him a wine skin which he had with him, since that was his custom. When he had eaten he drank from that wine skin. The knight grasped it and raised it above his mouth. °Umar said: We heard it and it flowed, sounding like an echo and a roar similar to that of the flood of a river in flow when it pours down from the summits of the mountains, and, as it went down into the belly of the knight it made the sound of a [revolving] water wheel. We [at some distance] heard where we were positioned, and we came, having heard the sound of that roar. We reached (the place of) the *Imām*, and we began to watch them, and see what they were doing. Then, when the knight had finished drinking his wine, he unsheathed his sword which was brightly burnished,

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<sup>7</sup> A phrase common to all *Sīras* where the heat of battle is described.

and he said to the slave, "Take this sword and bring me word of these men [yonder]." The slave said, "To hear is to obey." Then the slave took the sword and he came to where we were. He said, "Who are you, what tribes do you hail from, and where are you making for?" °Amr ibn Umayyah al-Ḍamrī said to him, "We are the stars in the ascendant, the sharp swords and the stubborn lions and the impregnable fortresses and the shining planets. We are the people of faith and the eliminators of the people of oppression. We are the Companions of the pride and glory of the faith, of Muḥammad, the lord of the offspring of °Adnān." The narrator said: Whilst that slave was in conversation with °Amr, lo, dust was stirred up aloft and it choked all districts round about. Then the dust lifted, and was rent asunder, to disclose — so that all could see, and all might be astonished — to reveal the armies of Muḥammad [warriors] with a will to wage war, with the intent of men iron in will, armed with *Mashrafi* swords. In the front of that army was al-Faḍl ibn °Abbās and amongst them there was a confused uproar of voices, like unto speech which is impaired. They called with a great voice "There is no God but Allah," "Allah is most great," and "Blessing and peace be upon the Messenger and the Warner." The narrator said: When the slave beheld those matters and when he heard that tumult and supplication to the Almighty, he returned in all haste and he told his lord (the knight) about those things and about what had come to pass.<sup>8</sup>

In the above, though the scenario is entirely oriental, there is evidence of the conflict and hostility which the Crusades had aroused in the Muslim East. In such works as the *Sīrat °Antar*, *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*, and *pseudo-Maghāzī* works, for example *Futūḥ al-Maghrib*, where the name of King Louis, the Crusader, appears, some known Crusader names, and other anonymous names of Franks, Saxons, Byzantines, and possibly Scandinavians enter the Arabic text. The names are given to allies of the principal hero in the tale, or they are among his chief opponents (Norris 1980:200, 205, 229, 248). In matters of detail, and in the sub-plots of the *Sīras*, few would dispute that the West could have borrowed themes from the East, and that there might be borrowings in the opposite direction.

Heller included a selection to illustrate these in his article on the *Sīrat °Antar* in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam (EI)*. Mention has been made of al-Ḥārith ibn Zālim, and how he shattered his sword before he died. Heller drew attention to artificial birds made of metal, which sang in various tunes by means of bells and organ pipes. These are mentioned in the *Sīrat °Antar* and in French and German epics, though in the former Constantinople is their location. "Very remarkable is the parallel between the duel between Roland and Oliver and that of °Antar and Rabā'a b. Muḥaddam; the sword of the one combatant breaks in two and his magnanimous opponent gets him another; the duellists are reconciled and become brothers-in-law. But such poetical developments have their origin in a similar chivalrous outlook, the relations of the knight to his sword, to his horse, to his overlord and to his opponent" (*ibid.*). Heller also draws

<sup>8</sup> al-Bakrī n.d.:34-35.

attention to the description of tourneys in both East and West. These had features in common: “On the one hand Delecluze saw in °Antar the model of the European knight, in the *Sīrat °Antar*, the source from which Europe had obtained all its ideas of chivalry, while on the other hand Renaud simply found European ideas, customs and institutions imitated in the *Sīra*” (*ibid.*).

We know that the Icelandic sagas owed a significant element of color and fantasy to the East. These Arabic borrowings reached the far North either through returning Crusaders, or else by the trade routes which came into Scandinavia by the westerly sea route or via Russia and the Baltic states. Margaret Schlauch has outlined some features of this eastern influence on Icelandic literature in her *Romance in Iceland* (1934:92-94):

Some of the incidents in the *lygisögur* recall to a modern reader the *Arabian Nights* and other typical Eastern romances. Nichulás Leikari, in the saga named from him, disguises himself as a jewel merchant in order to win the haughty Princess Dorma of Constantinople, who has refused all wooers. The episode of the ring desired by two brothers, Helgi and Hróarr, in the *Hrólfs saga Kraka* (Chapter X), is almost identical with one of the *Arabian Nights*. In the *Gibbons saga ok Gregu*, the hero makes use of a flying cloth or carpet to transport himself from one place to another; there is a flying mantle also in the *Jóns saga Leikara*, in the *Sigrarðs saga Froekna*, and the *Egils saga Einhenda*. We have already spoken of the use of a favorite motive, namely, the love between a prince and princess who have never met, but only beheld each other in dreams—a motive frequently used in the East. It is to be found in *Inclusa* (of *The Seven Sages of Rome*), and also in the *Vergílius saga*. These features of our sagas are, however, too widely used and too banal to be definitely traced.

But Schlauch also makes an important observation about the quality and the character of this eastern material. Firstly, there is the vulgarity and banality of so much of the subject matter in such borrowings; secondly, it is the subsidiary nature of it all, its colorful, as opposed to its structurally thematic, character. Little, if any, of it can be seen to be embedded in the very foundation of the narrative itself and, where it occurs, it is a poor example of the ideals of the Orient. All this seems far removed from the chivalrous sentiments to which Heller refers, nor does it respond to the heroic exploits of °Antar, or of the Caliph °Alī in the Aljamiado versions of popular Arabic epic stories. For those who might too readily conclude that the *chansons* owe something to the *Sītras*, the remarks of Margaret Schlauch come as a sober reminder that local color is superficial and is of scant value in assessing any significant influence of one heroic tradition on another—that is, if there is no religious or cultural empathy between them.

If one examines the whole repertoire of the principal Arabic *Sītras*, whether recited or read in the Arabic-speaking world, whose origins can be traced back to the twelfth century or earlier, there are reasons for

believing that not one of these did, or even *could*, substantially influence the cycles of *chansons* or North European heroic literature which date from that period or later. While certain details may show points of resemblance, the goals of the heroes are often as remote from one another as “the earth is from the Pleiades.” Not only is this, to a considerable degree, due to the bitter hostility between Crusader and Saracen, religious zealotry and distortion, differing taste and alien cultural and artistic values, but there are purely literary and genetic reasons for showing it to have been all but impossible.

### *The Evolved Form of the Arabic Sīra*

All of the principal Arabic *Sīras* display an evolution in their form. While the “primitive” *Sīra* usually has few characters, is frequently of a plot which centers upon the activities and vicissitudes of a tribe and its chiefs, and is geographically circumscribed, the later versions of these *Sīras* stretch the narrative beyond the point of structural cohesion. The subject matter is embellished with fantasy, much of it derived from literary sources, some historical and some geographical, borrowings from the *Romance of Alexander* and manuals of weaponry. These later mutations of the *Sīra* pervade the whole work. While the earliest story is still discernible, though only just, later additions are so woven into the fabric as to make it difficult, at times, to identify an original story and its variations, and especially to conceive of its oral character.

If a romance were to have been “borrowed,” it is reasonable to expect that some elements of the original “tribal story” would have survived. But this is not so. We are presented with literary parallels, borrowings from sources common to both East and West, possible borrowings of ideas which are “embellishments” to the story, no more. Much of this is of magical and fantastic elements which bear all the hallmarks of storytelling in Mamlūk Egypt, some considerably later, as late as the fifteenth if not the sixteenth century. By such a date the romances of the heroes in the western *chansons* had long been shaped in their definitive form. Leaving on one side the certain rejection of a Saracen hero, other than the converted, on religious grounds, there was little place for any conceivable theme from a *Sīra* which could have been borrowed to fashion the “medieval epic” and the “knight errantry” to which Lady Anne Blunt makes reference in her book. All the borrowings—if, indeed, such ever occurred from any of the Arabic *Sīra*—could only have been from the “stage properties” and “the *décor*.” The “original tribal adventure”—whether the hero be of ʿAbs, or a hero of the Banī Hilāl, or a hero of the Yemen—would have meant nothing, and would have been almost

incomprehensible to weavers of romances in the Christian West (Ranelagh 1979:85-89, 148-59).

The recent research which has taken place on the subject of popular *Sīra* has not revealed anything which might modify this overall assessment of its evolution. Danuta Madeyska, in an unpublished paper presented to a conference on popular folk epic among the Arabs held at Cairo University in January 1985, reaffirmed conclusions provisionally reached regarding the historical evolution of the *Sīras*:

The old bedouin tales formed the nucleus of the early sirats, and mediaeval urban realities were later superimposed on these. These sirats betray a better acquaintance with the earlier epochs, the bedouin knightly spirit is clearer in them, and there is also at the same time a more literal observation of the precepts of Islam in the behaviour of their heroes. These works are marked by a considerable realism, mythical elements appear relatively rarely, and the heroes emerge unscathed from their trials mainly due to their own courage, and at the most their faith in God reinforces their strength. The main hero is always the leader of the tribe which is extolled in the sirat.

In the sirats which were produced in the Mameluke period or later, the world of fairy tales begins to predominate, with all the accompaniments and themes that are well-known from the "Arabian Nights" (*Alf layla wa layla*). The hero is often a mediaeval ruler or a cunning cutpurse. The scale of values also changes: the characteristics most admired now are intelligence and astuteness, instead of the courage and physical strength that had previously been praised. The spirit of religious intolerance is also characteristic of these works. Those of other faiths are painted in the blackest colours, and concomitantly all means leading to the spreading of Islam are permissible, even if these involve breaking its own laws.

Of course, it is possible in both groups of sirats to uncover older and newer layers: the difference consists mainly in the proportions represented.

An independent Arab view, yet one which arrives at a similar conclusion, is expressed in a book published in 1984 in Cairo by Dr. Maḥmūd Dhīhnī, entitled *Sīrat ʿAntara* (espec. 248-70). This is probably the most recent study of the exploits of ʿAntar to appear in an Arab country. The author draws a distinct line between the early legendary tale built around the love of ʿAntar for ʿAbla and the fighting between ʿAbs and the sister tribes of the Arabian peninsula (*al-marḥala al-ustriyya*, 248-57), and the late medieval "epic" (*al-marḥala al-malḥamiyya*, 258-71) which in turn led to the final evolution of the *Sīra*, principally the exploits of his daughter, ʿUnaytara, the Amazon.

Dr. Dhīhnī shows how some of the serpentine expansion relates to Arabia itself, other parts to Byzantium and its Emperor (Qayṣar), and one in particular to a northerner—a Frank, a German, or a Scandinavian—called King Līlamān or al-Laylamān or Līmān (l'Allemand?), who sends

a fleet of ships to capture Byzantium. Other adventures, with King Šāfāt, entail the exorcising of enchanted water. An encounter between °Antar and a magic horse would seem to owe some of its material to *Pseudo-Callisthenes*; about this something more will be said. In all the fighting around Byzantium and the description of naval battles, °Antar forsakes his horse, al-Abjar, and takes to the sea.<sup>9</sup> The color is laid on thickly by the storyteller. The exploits appear increasingly similar to those of Ḥasan of Basra in the *The Thousand and One Nights*. The expedition of °Antar to Black Africa owes much to travellers' tales. I have suggested elsewhere that the medieval city of Great Zimbabwe is described in some detail.<sup>10</sup> Other parts of the *Sīra* which are concerned with battles in Egypt and Nubia draw on geographical data, and one battle in particular is taken in part from, or shares common sources with, a noted *pseudo-Maghāzī* or *Futūḥ* work, *Futūḥ al-Bahnasā*, which is attributed to Abū °Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Maqqarī, possibly al-Muqurrī, who may have been of Nubian origin, but who certainly had access to Coptic legends which form a good deal of the substance in the early pages of his work (Norris 1980:200-5). Similar color and exoticism are featured in the battles between °Antar, his allies, and relatives, in the parts of Arabia around Oman (*ibid.*:32, 60, 61, 76) and it is only the sequence of "the death of °Antar" which stands apart as something special, something really heroic, and which warrants study and assessment. The *Sīra* of *Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, one of the latest, is woven together almost *in toto* from the fabulous, the magical, and the erotic. Fascinating, in many respects, here the hero is hardly a heroic bedouin figure.

#### *The Chronology of the Chansons and the Oral Versions of the Sīrat Banī Hilāl*

The *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is included by Madeyska among the earlier *Sīras*. It also happens to be the one selected by Lady Blunt to illustrate the hypothetical debt of the *chansons* to the Arabs. However, even more clearly than the *Sīrat °Antar*, it illustrates how this cannot possibly be so. Its heroes, Abū Zayd, Dhiyāb, Khalīfah al-Zanātī, and others from the *Ayyām al-°Arab*, who are introduced in the Yemenite prologues to the *Sīra*, are essentially folk heroes, told by the bedouin in the Empty Quarter and in the inner parts of Northern Africa. Their adventures center about tribal movements in pre-Islamic Arabia or during the eleventh century in

<sup>9</sup> Dhīhnī 1984:263-64. I hope to undertake a special study of this part in the near future.

<sup>10</sup> Forthcoming in a commemorative volume for Professor T.M. Johnstone.

parts of Tunisia and Libya. At that time the West was challenged by the Almoravids, the Almohads, and their successors in Spain. Like °Antar, Abū Zayd is a “crow,” dark in color and mixed in race. Where such a person appears in the *chansons*, he bears little resemblance to °Antar and even less to Abū Zayd.<sup>11</sup>

The close relationship between the form, manner of recitation, and life of the Egyptian folk-poet suggests neither common ground nor a plausible circumstance whereby poets and storytellers in medieval Europe could have conceivably heard of the Hilālī exploits, and if they had done so, could have made any sense of their content. The *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* lies at the opposite pole from the *Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*. At its best the former is free from the gaudiness and thematic dross which mar the later *Sīras*. Professor G. Canova, in the notes which he has written to accompany his recordings on disc of Egyptian bards and their performance of the *Sīra*, has stressed the inseparability of the content of the *Sīra* itself from the performance of the *shāʿir*, the text sung, the instruments which play with the singer, or which he himself plays, and the participation and the response of the audience.

*Towered Camelot and Paynim Sarras of the San Graal: The World of Late Medieval Chivalry (muruwva) in the East and West*

If some direct borrowing by the Christian West of stories and heroic adventures from Arabic *Sīra* cannot be substantiated,<sup>12</sup> there remains the

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<sup>11</sup> Compare the praise of the “Sons of Hām” in Norris 1980:189-90 with the following grotesque description from the *Sowdone of Babylone* (lines 2191-98):

This geaunte hade a body longe  
And hede, like an libarde.  
Ther-to he was devely stronge,  
His skynne was blake and harde.  
Of Ethiopie he was bore,  
Of the kinde of Ascopartes.  
He hade tuskes, like a bore,  
An hede, like a liberde.

<sup>12</sup> According to Scudder (1921:87-88):

The pilgrims made their way to the City of Sarras,—whither as Malory’s readers know, Galahad is one day to return. In this Paynim city and its rulers centers the first part of the romance. It is the home land of all Saracens and we are carefully informed that the name is derived from the city and not from Sarah, the wife of Abraham. Here, where Mahomet, sent to save his people, has betrayed his trust and taught them the false worship of the Sun and Moon, the mysteries of God are to be made manifest. Joseph [of Arimathea] enters the great Temple of the Sun at the moment when King Evalach and his wise men are consulting how to repel the Egyptian invader Tholomes; he brings the promise of victory contingent on faith in the Most High. This is the signal for long conversion scenes, dull enough, yet full of quaint mediaeval reasoning and legendary lore,

decorative detail, color, and environment which pervade the later versions of the *Siras*, more especially in their printed texts—the *marḥala al-malḥamiyya*, to adopt Dhihnī's term.

*Chanson de geste*, Arthurian romance, *Sīra*, and *Maghāzī* share a certain geographical unity. Where an Arab or a Muslim hero engages in battle with the infidel (Crusader or Negus), the later the *Sīra* the more the scene is set in the Levant or deep within Africa and remoter Asia.

In the *Sīrat ʿAntar*, one of the hero's later foes is called Janṭāyīl, who is king of Spain and the Maghrib, and who is mounted on an elephant. Yet his father's empire stretched from Palestine to Tunisia, Sicily, and Upper Egypt. It bordered on two giant trees (in Kānim?) and beneath his sway were the Hamitic Beja and the Zaghāwa. The Copts and the Byzantines also figure prominently. Heller writes (1931): "As the romance of ʿAntar knows nothing of Europe, but a good deal about Europeans, the author must have become acquainted with them outside of Europe."

Dorothee Metlitzki has also pointed out that towards the end of the Middle Ages the Western romances display a common interest in a Levant and Africa-centered milieu for the exploits of the heroes involved (1977:130-31):

When Beues, disguised as a palmer, is questioned by his rival, King Yuor of Mombraunt, the Middle English version presents a significant shift and expansion of the range of countries which Beues has visited in the French tale. In the earlier versions, most of these countries are clearly imagined as lying in the traditional territory of Alexander the Great and in the western realm of Saracen power in Africa:

"Sire," ceo dist Boeves, "jeo ai esté a Nubie  
e en Cartage e en Esclavie  
e a l'Arbre Sek e en Barbarie  
e a Macedoyne, par tut en Paenie,  
mes a chastel de Abilent, la ne fu ge mie."

---

to say nothing of true feeling. Vision, dream, and miracle come to the aid of the pilgrim, now comfortably settled in what is to be known as the *Palais Espirituel*. The earnest prayers of Joseph for *cette biele cité désconseillie* are answered, when Evalach, taken prisoner by the Egyptians, gazes in his moment of need at the red Cross which Joseph has traced on his shield, and seeing the Image of the Crucified, cries on Him for help:

"O verray God that Sittest in Maieste,  
As it is told,—On God and personis thre,—  
Of which I bear the Sign of His passioun!  
So, Goode Lord, take me to salvacioun—  
So save me Goode Lord, in this grete schowre  
From Angwich deth and alle dolor."

A seemly knight at once appears, on a horse white as the lily flower, bearing a white shield with the red cross. There is some good fighting, well set in narrow mountain defiles picturesquely described. By help of the White Knight, the day is retrieved and the victory won, as surely as in the classic battle wherein the Great Twin brethren took part. Thus are converted Evalach, christened Mordrains, and his brother Seraphe, henceforth Nasciens.

["Sir," said Boeue, "I was in Nubia and in Carthage and in the land of the Slavs and at the Dry Tree and in Barbary and in Macedonia, throughout all the lands of the Paynim but at the castle of Abilent, there I was never at all."]

In the Middle English romance, about 1300, there is a distinct shift to the territory of the Crusades, the Saracen East, as the scene of romantic action.

In 1485, when Sir Thomas Malory's romances first appeared in print, this latter geographical heartland had maintained itself; witness the following passage from *The Noble Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius* (Vinaver 1967, I:193):

Than the Emperour sente furth his messyngers of wyse olde knyghtes unto a contrey callyd Ambage, and Arrage, and unto Alysundir, to Ynde, to Ermony that the rever of Euftrate renny by, and to Assy, Aufryke, and Europe the large, and to Ertayne, and Elamyne, to the Oute Yles, to Arrabé, to Egypte, to Damaske, and to Damyake, and to noble deukis and erlys. Also the kyng of Capydos, and the kyng of Tars, and of Turké, and of Pounce, and of Pampoyle, and oute of Preter Johanes londe, also the sowdon of Surre. And frome Nero unto Nazareth, and frome Garese to Galely, there come Sarysyns and becom sudgettis unto Rome. So they come glyding in galyes.

"Prester John's kingdom" matches "the realms of the Negus" in the later Arabic *Sīras*. However, in the latter, there are also adventures in the remoter, spice-laden islands of the Indian Ocean and beyond, for example the island of Camphor (*Kāfūr*), which is mentioned in the *Sīrat ʿAntar* and in the *One Thousand and One Nights*. A landscape not wholly dissimilar is sometimes introduced into those western romances which make the Grand San Graal the central quest of the story. Certain *Sīras* introduce kings whose lands are identified by a specific color, the Green King in *Sīrat ʿAntar*, the Red City in *Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan (al-madīna al-ḥamrāʾ)*. A Red City is to be found in the *Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones*. In the Arab story it is built in the Yemen or Africa, whereas in the Arthurian Romance it is somewhere out to sea beyond the Humber ruled by King Harmaunce and at a short distance from the Delectable Ile. Shared lore, eastern and western, appears in these images. Vida D. Scudder remarks (1921:87-88, 92):

Through long stretches, humanity and human interest in the ordinary sense disappear. Severe symbolic disciplines accompany the many conversions that form the staple of the tale. In terror the natural world passes away. Quakings and fearsome sounds shake the *Palais Esprituel*. Burning brands appear, a wondrous darkness falls, and a Voice is heard crying, "Here is the beginning of Dread!" We are in full romantic air, but romance is subdued to purposes of edification. For this is the beginning of that training of the great Kings, Mordrains and Nasciens, which shall fit them to take part in the conversion of England. They are transported to

“unsuspected isles in far-off seas,” where miracle-ships, holy men borne over the water on the wings of birds, strange storms and healing calms, form the setting. These waves wash no mortal shore. These are the waters over which St. Brandan sailed; perhaps they flow around the fields of Paradise; surely Dante’s bark propelled by angels’ wings and laden with blessed singing souls, sailed over them; and one surmises that the terraces of the Purgatorial Mount rise not remote from the bleak rocks on which Mordrains and Nasciens, beset with spiritual ordeals, observe their fast and vigil.

Delightful stories about these rocks remind one of the *Arabian Nights*; stories of Forcairs the Pirate, of Pompey the Great, of Hippocras and others. Oriental elements mingle with ecclesiastical legend, to produce a treasure-house of mediaeval lore.

Weaponry, particularly common ideas about the sword of the hero and its frequently magical power, are shared by *Sīra* and western romances of chivalry. *Dāmī*, the sword of ʿAntar, and the circumstances whereby it came into his possession, are recounted in an extended passage in that *Sīra*. The following translation by Hamilton concludes the story of its origin as a thunderbolt, its forging by a smith, its encasement in gold, and its concealment among treasure. He describes ʿAntar’s discovery of the sword in the sand (Ranelagh 1979:100):

But Antar fixed his spear in the ground, and dismounted from Abjer, and sat down to rest himself; and as he was moving the sand with his fingers, he touched a stone; on removing what was about it, behold! the sword the youth had been seeking! He still cleared away, and drew it forth, and seized hold of it, and it was a sword two cubits in length, and two spans wide, of the metal of Almalec, like a thunderbolt. And Antar was convinced of his good fortune, and that everything began and ended in the most high God.

It is interesting to compare this story with King Arthur’s drawing of Excalibur from a stone, and even more so with those passages in Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* where Sir Galahad enters a ship and claims his sword. For in the following passage not only is this sword associated with a converted Saracen named Hurlaine, but the description of the sword itself has some oriental inspiration. Its power to cleave rider and horse may be matched by innumerable combats in the *Sīra* ʿAntar, more so in this *Sīra* than in any of the others (Vinaver 1967, II:985-86):

And the swerde was of dyverse fassions; and the pomell was of stoone, and there was in hym all maner of coloures that ony man myght fynde, and every of the coloures had dyverse vertues. And the scalis of the hauffte were of two rybbis of two dyverse bestis; that one was a serpente whych ys coversaunte in Calydone and ys calle there the serpente of the fynde, and the boone of hym ys of such vertu that there ys no hande that handelith hym shall never be wery nother hurte; and the other bone ys of a fyssh whych ys nat ryght grete, and hauntith the floode of Eufrate, and that

fyssh ys called Ertanax. And the bonys be of such maner of kynde that who that handelyth hym shall have so muche wyll that he shall never be wery, and he shall nat thinke on joy nother sorow that he hath had, but only that thyng that he beholdith before hym.

There are also passages in the *Sīrat °Antar* where weaponry is catalogued in the greatest detail. In the western romances, swords and other weapons, both Christian and Saracen, are given names. The list of Dorothy L. Sayers in her introduction to her translation of *The Song of Roland* furnishes some typical examples (1975:38).

In the *Sīrat °Antar* such names, even armorer's technical terms, are introduced on a scale unparalleled in the western romances. In one part of the *Sīra*, °Antar the warrior-poet is examined by the fellow poet, Imru'l-Qays. This episode is wholly imaginary and °Antar is asked to cite the names and epithets of topics which occur frequently in Arabic verse. First is the sword. There are references to several well-known makes of straight sword: *al-Ṣamṣām*, *al-Yamānī*, *al-Hindawānī*, *al-Hindī*, and *al-Mashrafi*. This is followed by the spear, again with noted makes, like *al-Rudaynī* and *al-Samharī*. Names for horses, she-camels, wine, and serpents are also extensively listed. One section is about the hauberk (*al-dir*). The passage reads:

Imru'l-Qays said to him, "What a courageous knight you are. How elegant your speech is! But, knight of °Adnān, I want you to enlighten us. Clarify for us the names which are used to describe hauberks, and the titles they bear." °Antar replied, "Rejoice, oh, Imru'l-Qays, here are the principal names of the hauberk—*al-dir*, *al-marāniya* [the name of a tree like jasmine?], *al-zaradiyya* [mail-coat from *zarad*]; *al-'amsad* [the strongly and solidly woven]; *al-tamma* [the catastrophe or last judgement]; *al-dilāṣ* [the shiny]; *al-māni* [the impenetrable]; *al-sāfi* [the shining], *al-baṣṣāṣ*, *al-baṣṣāṣ* [the shiny and glowing?]; *al-khāṣṣ* [the renowned or superfine]; *al-mansūj* [the woven]; *al-sābiḡha* [the long and flowing]; *al-hāfiṣ* [the preserver]; *al-mubirr* [the surpasser or overcomer]; *al-mashhūr* [the renowned]; *al-muwarrad* [the saffron-dyed]; *al-mubarrad* [the cooled or refreshed]; *al-munaddad* [the layered]; *al-ṣaldam* [*ṣildim*?, the hard]; *al-jalmad* [the rock-like]; *al-khuld* [eternity]; *al-ḥadīd* [iron]; *al-ṣuffa* [the stone-bench], [or *al-ṣifa*, quality?]; *al-labūs* [the breast-plate]; *al-muḥṣin* [the fortifier]; *al-ba's* [the strength]; *al-shadīd* [the tough]; *al-naṣīḡh* [the sincere advisor]; *al-ikhjīr*? [a toponym?; *khajja* means to split wood, the spear-cleaver?]; *al-nasīj* [the weave]; *al-bahīj* [the fine]; *al-nasīm* [the breeze]; *al-qarīn* [the comrade]; *al-āthār* [the marks]; and *dhāt al-mawāshī* [the possessor of adornments]." °Antar concluded, "This is the sum total of the names of the hauberk." "Truly you have spoken," Imru'l-Qays replied.

### *The Taming of the Magic Horse by the Hero in East and West*

A common link between *Sīra* and *chanson* is to be found in the

Alexander Romance, *Pseudo-Callisthenes*. Many of its episodes and fantastic exploits were borrowed and retold in order to add a prestige and majesty to the hero in question. The Story of "Alisaunder" contains Alexander's taming of Bucephalus, the horse branded with a mark like a bull's head. It is described in the Old High German poem, written in the twelfth century, by a priest named Lamprecht. The Rev. Walter W. Skeat translates it as follows (1867:248):

His nostrils were wide opened,  
 his ears were to him long,  
 his head meagre and lank,  
 his eyes were to him of-all-colours  
 like (those of a) flying eagle.  
 His neck was to him covered-with-locks,  
 I ween he was of a lion's kind.  
 On his shanks had he heifer's hair,  
 on his sides leopards' spots:  
 like Saracen, so-also Christian man  
 never a better horse won.

The chained and fettered animal is described in *Alisaunder* thus (*ibid.*:214):

Hee was byglich ybownde • on bothe twoo halues,  
 Bothe *his* chaul & *his* chynne • *with* chaynes of yren;  
 Many lockes wer laft • *his* legges aboute,  
 That hee nas loose in no lime • ludes to greeue,  
 To byte, ne to braundise • ne o break no woves,  
 For hee so myghty was made • in all manner thynges,  
 Of such a body as hee bore • þe blonke so sterne,  
 Was neuer steede in no stede • þat stynt upon erth.

The horse fed on men, it was always kept chained, and Philip had a cave built for it. Whoever tamed the horse would be king of Macedon. Alexander befriends the horse which licks his hands. He unfastens its bonds and he goes forth upon it. In the medieval romance he rides to Byzantium. Some details of this seem to have been borrowed for insertion in the story of King Ebroun's horse, in *William of Palerne*, the romance of "William and the Werwolf," translated from the French at the command of Sir Humphrey deBohun, about 1350. It should be noted that the knight rides the horse after he has given it its liberty (*ibid.*:107):

u as sone as þe knigt kud ° kome to þe stabul,  
 þat þe stede him of-saw ° sone he vp-leped,  
 u faire wiþ his fore fet ° kneled down to grounde,  
 u made him þe most ioye ° þat [man] miht deuse,  
 u alle frekes þat him folwed ° gret ferli hade.  
 þe stede stod ful stille ° þouzh he sterne were,  
 while þe knigt him sadeled ° & clanli him greiþed;

u wan vp wiztli him-self ° when he was zare,  
 u schuft his scheld on is schulder ° a scharp spere on honde,  
 u gerd him wijþ a god swerd ° for any man in erþe.

The ninety-seventh part of the *Sīrat ʿAntar* introduces a number of borrowings from the *Alexander Romance*. ʿAntar’s mulatto son, al-Jufrān, visits a palace in Alexandria. Several details here seem to be derived from the story of the visit of the “two-horned king” to the shrine of Ammon in the oasis of Siwa. Also, several parts of the *Sīra* at this juncture are particularly associated with characters who have Crusading, or at least Frankish, names. But in the ninety-third part it is ʿAntar himself who assumes the role of Alexander. To a greater degree than in *William of Palerne*, the author of the *Sīra* bases his story on Alexander’s taming and release of Bucephalus, to which is added all the rich fantasy of oriental, and, in particular Egyptian, tales (Norris 1980: pt. 93).

The narrator said: Then it was that Shaybūb called ʿAntar, his brother “Woe to thee, O maternal brother, come to us and save us from these severities.” So he advanced to take the keys. The people beheld them. All of them rose up to him and delivered themselves into his hand without his laying hold upon them. They [the people] were greatly amazed. ʿAntar was exceedingly joyful. His heart and chest were relaxed and he was happy. He approached the locks. They were opened by the permission of the Merciful and Exalted. He gazed hard at that house and he saw a black horse, like the darkest night. It was attached by an iron chain and upon its feet were four shackles. There were names written upon these and there were inscribed talismans. The horse’s eyes were as glowing torches. In front of him there was a feeding trough of crystal, full of husked sesame. Antar said, “Woe to you, O Shaybūb, verily this steed is one of the Bahrī horses.<sup>13</sup> I want to ride it for it is fit to go to the wars. I shall let al-Abjar rest from these concerns for it has grown old and is tired on account of the dangers it has encountered.” When ʿAntar had finished speaking, the horse said to him, “O father of knights, I am a steed which is not suitable for riding in the battlefield. I am one of the kings of the *jinn* and am named Salhab ibn Ghayhab. I was taken captive by the pious master al-Khaḍir Abū’l-ʿAbbās during the day of our battle with Alexander Dhū’l-Qarnayn. He had met me at the fortress of Dhāt al-ʿAlam, after we had experienced from him something which would dismay those who were beholders and we were nigh unto drinking the cup of perdition. Al-Khaḍir came to me and said to me, “Remain here imprisoned in this place until ʿAntar ibn Shaddād the knight of Banū ʿAbs and ʿAdnān appears. He will conquer this island and sit upon this throne and will open these locks and he will loosen these shackles and manacles from you and he will march you to the king and to the deserted encampments.” So all this has been fulfilled due to the concern of the Creator of existence the Adored King. All this

<sup>13</sup> [On these fabulous horses of remarkable speed see Lane 1963: ch. 20, n.10 where al-Qazwīnī is quoted, and, more especially, Saada 1985:247-48. This latter work is probably the best introduction to the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* to have been published in recent years.]

period I have been suffering hurt and pains. Know that only you can end my captivity, O hero of battles. Set me free O son of noble lords, for I am not one upon whom a good deed is wasted. You cannot do without me at these times.” °Antar said to him, full of wonder and perplexity, “By Him who causes the planets to revolve, if you are of the *jinn* then you are from among my greatest foes. I must needs torment you in a manner more grievous than any other which you have yet suffered. I shall indeed increase one affliction upon you with another.” The *jinnī* said, “What have I done with you, O son of Shaddād, and in what way have I done an evil to you so that you seek to destroy me. I, having been in this imprisonment from the time of Alexander Dhū’l-Qarnayn. Before that no injury did I do you, I killed not your mother nor your father, I, who have been waiting for you to come in order to save me.” °Antar said, “You killed my knightly and rash son, al-Ghaḍbān.” Salhab said, “God forbid that you be hostile, O mighty hero. God forbid that your good qualities should be changed, the sound for the sick. Know that those who killed your son, al-Ghaḍbān, were *jinn* from the Wādī Ṣārikh. They are the worst of all my enemies whom I wish to destroy utterly. I swear to you by the One, the Bestower of good, the Creator of men and *jinn*, if you release me from my captivity and send me forth from this place I shall help you to obtain your revenge for the death of your son. I shall slay the one who slew him so your heart will be assuaged of its sorrow.” Then °Antar was tender towards him and he made him agree to his covenants and said to him, “O brother of the *jinn* how can I find a way to open these shackles and set you free from this place?” Salhab said, “O guardian of °Abs, the keys are beneath this feeding trough which stands before me.” So °Antar looked to the spot to which he indicated and he saw a slab in which there was a ring. He raised it and the keys appeared from beneath it. He opened the shackles and said to Salhab, “Journey forth in the way you wish to go and remember me on account of this act.” The *jinn* said to °Antar, “Above all else I desire to have in mind the taking of revenge for the death of your son, al-Ghaḍbān, and also that I may fulfill the promise and assurance made betwixt us upon the top of the fortress of the column which is known as Dhāt al-°Alam.”<sup>14</sup>

### *The Quest for the Head*

A theme shared by both *Sīra* and *chanson* is that of the decapitation of a giant, or a foe, or a marvelous creature. This is one of the quests of the hero; in the case of *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* the head of Sa°dūn al-Zanjī is what is demanded of Waḥsh al-Falā/Sayf in order to gain the hand of Queen Shāma, his beloved.

The head of the Green Knight must, I think, be totally excluded from this discussion, but there are other lesser known examples. The beheaded

<sup>14</sup> Dhāt al-°Alam may refer to the *Ṣanam* erected on the round island of Masfāhan in the Canaries by Dhū’l-Qarnayan As°ad Abū Karib al-Ḥimyarī. These landmarks were at the borders of the world and were a guide to mariners. They occur in Yemenite epic stories; see Dozy and De Goeje 1866:28, 54. For comparative material see Ross 1978:302-3.

foe is prominent in the popular, fourteenth-century *Romance of Guy of Warwick*. According to Laura Hibbard (1960:136-37):

The Eastern elements in the story are commonplace. Guy goes to the relief of Constantinople when it is besieged by a cruel Sultan; inevitably Guy defeats the heathen hordes; the Sultan rails upon his gods and breaks his idols; Guy is sent on a message of death to the Sultan but beheads him as he sits in his splendid pavilion. Guy's last eastern fight is at Alexandria where he serves as champion of King Triamour whose son has killed the son of another Sultan at a game of chess. In all this the setting and the abuse of the Saracens are characteristic of the Crusading spirit in romance, but the episodes have nothing of Eastern character.

Even so, the presentation of the Sultan's head to the Emperor followed by Guy's marriage to his daughter, and especially the encasing of the head in brass, suggest an oriental source (Zupitza 1966:235):

Thoo Guye and heraude and their meyne  
 Thanked god fast of their fair iourne.  
 The hede on a spere they haue doo,  
 And ryde faste to the Citee thoo.  
 Whan they of the Citee wiste of his comynge  
 For ioye they ganne all the belles rynges.  
 Whan Guy to the Emperour come is  
 The hede he presented with ioye and blis.  
 The Emperour with ioye of Guy is hent,  
 And thanked him gretly of that present.  
 In the Citee he lete make anone  
 A piler of grey marbelstone:  
 The hede therupon sette was,  
 And in eche side an hede of bras.

Among the most unusual ways in which such a subject is handled in Arabic literature is the encounter of Waḥsh al-Falā/Sayf and Saʿdūn in *Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*. Sayf is told by King Afrāḥ, at the behest of his evil counsellor, Saqardiyyūn, that to secure the hand of Shāma, his daughter, he must bring the head of the African warrior giant, Saʿdūn. This will be the bride price. Sayf sets out and after adventures in Saʿdūn's castle, during which he is helped by Shāma, now an Amazon warrior, he encounters Saʿdūn in a final hand-to-hand engagement. To cite the summary of the *Sīra*, at this point, by Fārūq Khūrshīd:

Hardly had the two of them gone forth to the outer court when each of them attacked the other. Saʿdūn hurried to catch hold of Waḥsh al-Falā by his flanks, raising him from the ground and then casting him with all his power. Waḥsh al-Falā fell though standing upright on both feet. He attacked Saʿdūn and wrapped his hand about his neck. He tightened his fingers upon his ears and exerted pressure with all his strength. Saʿdūn fell to the ground, motionless. Quickly, Waḥsh al-Falā knelt on his shoulders,

drew his dagger and sought to sever his head. Sa<sup>c</sup>dūn said, “Raise your hand lest you regret it... this is one (round), two are left.”

The battle resumes. In the end, tired, Waḥsh al-Falā/Sayf seeks to finish off his opponent. He fells him and again draws his dagger. Sa<sup>c</sup>dūn says, “O heroic knight do you wish to slaughter me like an ox?” The giant bows his head, with his hands behind his back, to enable Sayf to easily decapitate him. He asks for a blow speedy and sharp. The Yemenite hero repents. He casts aside his sword and kisses the head of Sa<sup>c</sup>dūn: “One like you does not die in this manner, O knight of valor.”<sup>15</sup>

*The African Giant and the Chained Toll Bridge of Mantrabile*

Though two of the greatest heroes in *Sīra*, °Antar and Abū Zayd al-Hilālī, claimed half-African birth—among the warrior “crows,” the black heroes of Islam—neither the romances of the Arab East nor the *chansons* of the West viewed the Ethiopian with favor. More commonly he, and she, were described as giants with hideous features. Both in the East and in the West these Africans were equipped with chains which were used either to shackle or to unseat their mounted opponents, or else to bar the way to a town or a territory which they were entrusted to guard.

Saracen giants appear in the fourteenth-century *Rouland and Vernagu*, Ascopart in *Beues of Hamtoun*, and Estragot, the giantess Barrok, and Alagolofer in the *Sowdone of Babylone*. Such giants are said to come from Ethiopia, Egypt, or India. Mantrabile bridge is barred by twenty-four chains. Alagolofer in the *Sowdone* and Gulfagor in *Sir Ferumbras* are Saracen bridge wardens armed with axes or clubs.

Emil Hausknecht, in his summary of the plot of the *Sowdone of Babylone* (1881:lxv-lxvii), indicates the role played by the African giants in the plot:

Charles, vowing vengeance on Genelyn, turned and marched to Agremore. Richard informed him of the giant who kept the bridge, and how he passed the river by a miracle. He proposed a plan that twelve knights, disguised as merchants, with their arms hidden under their clothes, should pay the toll, and the bridge being let down, they should blow a horn as a signal for the others to approach. They start and arrive at Mantrible. Alagolofer asks whither they are going. Richard says they are merchants on their way to the Soudan, and they are willing to pay the toll. Alagolofer refuses to let them pass, and tells them about the ten knights, who had passed there and done so much mischief to the Soudan; therefore he will arrest them all. Sir

<sup>15</sup> Khūrshīd 1982:54-56. For its place in the full-length text of the *Sīra* see °Abd al-Farrāh n.d.:62-63. Decapitation is the climax of the story about how Basat killed Goggle Eye in the Turkish epic of Dede Korkut (see Lewis 1974:147-50 and Sumer et al. 1972:132-33).

Focard draws his sword and smites at him, Richard blows his horn, and Charles advances. Alagolofer fights them with a great oak club. Richard seizes the bar of brass and knocks him down. Four men get hold of him and throw him into the river. They loosened the chains; but the Saracens assembling on the walls of the city, many Christians were slain. Alagolofer's wife, Barrock the giantess, comes on with her scythe and mows down all whom she meets. Charles dashes out her brains, and with fifteen knights enters the outer gate of the town, thinking his army would follow him. But the gate was instantly closed upon him, and his men came too late. Charles was in great danger; but Genelyn, seeing him shut in, exclaimed that the king and the twelve peers were dead, and proposed to retire, as he wished to be king himself. They were going to return, but Ferumbras calls him a traitor; he rallies the French, and with his axe bursts open the gate. He chased the Saracens and rescued the king. Mantrible is taken with all its engines and treasures.

The *Sīrat ʿAntar*, in sections 93 and 94, those most like the *chansons*, has its negro giants armed with chains, who fight the ʿAbsī hero and who have strayed onto its pages from descriptions of the Zanj of East Africa and from the story of the capture of the Upper Egyptian city of al-Bahnasā.<sup>16</sup> The latter reads:

The elephant men numbered 2000 Sūdānese. They hailed from the desert upland (*al-barr al-aʿlā*) overlooking Sawākin. They were called the *Quwwād*. Each one had his upper lip pierced. In it was a copper ring. When the hour of battle came those *Quwwād* would not advance into the fray save when the battle was fierce. Then, forth they went, and they were black in hue and tall, up to ten cubits. When they sought to do battle, they (the Berber army) would fix a chain in that ring of each of them. It was pierced in two parts. Each part would be clutched by a man (?). When they advanced, the *Quwwād* would go ahead and would display the chains and press them (the enemy?) with the iron [cudgels?] and they would smite and slay the rider and his mount. There were others who rode on the backs of the elephants and who fought on top of them. When both parties engaged, those *Quwwād* were brought forth, clad in the skins of panthers which were tied over their shoulders and also around their waists. Otherwise, they were naked from head to toe, and in their hands they held clubs. The men from the Nubians and the Beja and from others would take those chains. Amidst the army they were observant to see when they would be given the order to attack. When the Muslims beheld this, some were firm in their hearts, whilst others were filled with anxiety.

### *The Saracen Amazon*

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<sup>16</sup>I have discussed parts of this text at length in the paper submitted to the Cairo Conference, January 1985, on Arabic Folk Epic. The full title of the work is *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Bahnasā wamā waqaʿa lil-Ṣaḥāba maʿaʿal-Baṭlūs* (*The Book of the Conquest of Bahnasā and What Befell the Companions of the Prophet with the Patrician, Baṭlūs*). See also Norris 1980:200-5 and Friedman 1981:64-66.

Several of the principal *Sīras* introduce Amazon warriors and queens into the heart of their narrative. Foremost among them are Jaydā in *Sīrat ʿAntar*, Queen Shāma in *Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, Princess Ibrīza in *ʿUmar al-Nuʿmān* (in the *One Thousand and One Nights*) and, most important of all, Dhāt al-Himma in the *Sīra* of that name. Other heroines in other *Sīras* share many of the qualities of these warrior women.

The latter are by no means unmentioned in medieval *chanson de geste*, and Beatrice White draws attention to them (1969:184-85):

Romance writers show the most perverse ignorance of Muslim life. They seem almost totally unaware of the careful seclusion of Muslim women. Saracen maidens in the romances, beautiful, susceptible, and in respect of birth and beauty eligible mates for Christian heroes, are curiously forthright and likely to share the most bloodthirsty characteristics of their men. While conforming to an established convention of physical allurements they impose upon it another pattern—resolution and independence—thus creating a new one. Floripas (“Pasque Flower,” a most inappropriate name for so dangerous a character), the Saracen heroine of both *Sir Firumbras* and *The Sowdone of Babylone*, must be one of the most redoubtable figures in fiction. If she has a prototype it is not Potiphar’s wife, a Celtic fée, nor any of the more forceful ladies of Islam so admirably alluded to by Ousāma, but Medea.

She adds:

It was the conversion and baptism of beauteous Saracen girls enamoured of Christian heroes which provided the romancers with scope for purely aesthetic effects. These accounts of strip-tease acts revealing female charms were, as might be expected, considerably truncated in English versions of French poems, and in *The Sowdone of Babylone* the interesting and exotic ceremony is tersely dismissed in a couple of lines:

Dame Floryp was Baptysed than  
And her maydens alle.

(ll. 3191-92)

But in *Sir Firumbras* the scene is more theatrical:  
She kest of her Clothys, all folke a-forne,  
And stode ther naked as sche was borne.  
The good byschope that was of grete pryse  
Crystenede the mayde & dude the seruise.

(ll. 1735-38)

However, none of the above conveys the eroticism and sensuality of certain parts of *Sayf al-Tījān* or in *Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, for example, where Sayf is all but seduced by his mother, Qamariyya, when she challenges him to wrestle naked with her in single combat.<sup>17</sup> The concession of princesses

<sup>17</sup> Countess of Cromartie 1910:92-93:

Between the kiosks was a dwelling with thirty marble columns, with doors of ivory and ebony, and blinds of silk woven with gold. The hangings and furniture coverings were of silken tissue.

The Prince entered the dwelling, sword in hand. He reached a room with a bed in

who become co-wives of Sayf is also a feature of this *Sīra*. The implicit, if not explicit, sexuality in the later *Sīras* is a pointer to the literature of the Renaissance, rather than to that of the Middle Ages.

### *Conclusion*

Examples of parallelism and borrowing of detail from the East could be discussed indefinitely. Both *Sīra* and *chanson* have substance in common. There are also differences: the barrier of religious hates and prejudices, the bedouin background of a number of the *Sīras*, and the close connection between the content of the *Sīra* and the reciters of Upper Egypt and North Africa. Only in the *Sīrat ʿAntar* and the sister *Sīras* of the Crusading era do influences from Europe of a more substantial kind make themselves apparent. In the West the borrowed content relates to detail and to fantasy rather than to the appropriation of the frame of a story or the plot of a heroic narrative. As the end of the medieval era drew nigh so, it would seem, Arab folk epics and *chansons* manifested a far greater similitude. The later parts of the *Sīrat ʿAntar* and much of *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* illustrate this convergence. By 1500 the mutual relationship

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it, but he found nobody. He went on to another room, then a third, and found no living soul.

“My God!” murmured the Prince, “this is extraordinary. Where does the warrior sleep who fought so well with me?” He was going out when he found a door; he opened it and found himself in front of a stairway. He went up and reached a dome of glass supported by columns of splendid marble. In the middle of the dome of glass a bed of the finest gold was raised.

“It seems to me,” said the Prince to himself, “my warrior must be here.” He opened the curtain with the point of his sword, and saw at the head of the bed a little lamp of pure gold; another lamp shone at the foot of the bed. The prince came nearer and saw someone asleep, apparently of the blackest colour. “A black slave!” muttered Sword-of-the-Crowns. “A black slave, who has kept me in the lists for ten whole days!”

The sleeper turned and the Prince saw something white appear. He stretched his hand out gently towards the sleeper’s head and touched tresses of long black hair, from which escaped the perfume of musk and amber. Sword-of-the-Crowns looked closer and beheld a lovely young maiden, beautiful as the moon. She had had made for her a skin of black leather, with which she covered herself when she slept, as a precaution against any who might attempt to carry her off in the night.

“A maiden,” thought Sword-of-the-Crowns, “and she has held me in check for ten days!” And a fire that the seven seas of the world could not extinguish swept into his heart as he gazed.

The beautiful unknown opened her eyes and awoke with a great cry. Seizing a handle that was by her side she turned it, and before the Prince had time to notice anything, he found himself in a dark gallery where no one could distinguish day from night. Suddenly the head of the beautiful lady appeared above him.

“What do you think of your position now, Sword-of-the-Crowns?” she asked.

Armand Abel (1970) has discussed this theme.

may more easily be demonstrated. In Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*<sup>18</sup> one is aware of these similarities as never before. By the middle of the sixteenth century the literary impact of the Crusades, which marked the *Sīras* at an earlier date, had become so pervasive that it shaped numerous details, much of it oriental fantasy, in Western "epic" literature.

Assessing the impact of Torquato Tasso on English literature, C. P. Brand remarks (1965:87):

A good deal of historical research therefore went into the *Liberata*. Tasso made use of William of Tyre, Paolo Emilio, Roberto Monaco, indeed any historical information that came his way, without distinguishing the more reliable sources from the derivative. The crusade of 1096-99 organized by Urban II is then an historical fact, and from the chronicles Tasso draws many of his characters: Goffredo and his brothers Eustazio and Baldovino, Tancredi, Pietro the hermit, Dudone, Odoardo, Ottone Visconti, Guglielmo Embriaco and others; and many details and episodes are also taken from historical sources: the expulsion of the Christians from Jerusalem, the geographical descriptions of the city, the underground tunnel, the death of Svenno, the Arab attack, the drought, and many details of the battles—the dove-messenger intercepted by the Christians, the use of siege-towers, of deception, smoke, even the weather of the day of the final battle. More often hints in the chronicles are the basis for Tasso's own inventions. Clorinda, an invented character, is justified by a statement in an anonymous chronicle that the Saracen women fought against the Crusaders. Ottone's duel with the invented Argante is based on a duel between Ottone and a pagan mentioned by William of Tyre.

The genuinely oriental influence, that of the Muslim storyteller, on Tasso has yet to be assessed.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Lea and Gang 1981: espec. books 12, 17.

<sup>19</sup> This will be the subject of a projected study.

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