

# Reacting to Muḥammad: Three Early Islamic Poets in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī*\*

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## Abstract

*This article investigates how the secular Arabic poetic tradition interacted with the new religious rhetoric of emergent Islam. Concretely, it deals with the verses and legacies of three poets contemporary to Muḥammad who converted to Islam, yet protested its pietistic rhetoric. Abū Khirāsh al-Hudhalī, Abū Miḥjan al-Thaqafī, and Suhaym, the slave of the Banū al-Ḥaṣḥās, all lived in the Ḥijāz and witnessed the formation of Muḥammad’s movement up close. The first aim of the article is to listen to their reactions. Because the three poets were not directly involved in the promotion of the new religion, nor were they in an open struggle against it, their testimony is especially valuable for its insight into the reception of the emergent Islamic movement among Arab tribes in the Ḥijāz, beyond Muḥammad’s close community. The second aim is to follow the later reception of the poets and their incorporation into the Arabo-Islamic canon through an examination of the narratives (akhbār) that accompany the verses in Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī’s (d. 356/967) Kitāb al-Aghānī, the underlying assumption being that these akhbār are secondary to the verses. Besides these two main points, an examination of the interplay between the verses and the akhbār also establishes the importance of Mukhaḍram poetry as a historical source and exposes the multilayered nature of the poets’ akhbār.*

“Nothing is like the times of our [old] abode [. . .]! Now, chains have encircled [our] necks / and the youth has become like a middle-aged man, saying only the right things (*laysa bi-qā’il siwā al-ḥaqq*),”<sup>1</sup> noted Abū Khirāsh bitterly in his poem. The poet, commenting on the changes that the Prophet Muḥammad and his community had brought about, hereby

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\* I would like to thank all the scholars who have contributed to this article. It began years ago as a paper I wrote for a graduate seminar with Suzanne P. Stetkevych, who has taught me a great deal about classical Arabic poetry, and it was inspired by the excellent essay of Jaroslav Stetkevych, “A *Qaṣīdah* by Ibn Muqbil: The Deeper Reaches of Lyricism and Experience in a Mukhaḍram Poem; An Essay in Three Steps,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 37, no. 3 (2006): 303–354. Geert Jan van Gelder provided detailed comments on an early draft. I also thank the three anonymous reviewers and Antoine Borrut and Matthew Gordon, the editors of *Al-Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā*, for their detailed and helpful feedback. I am grateful to Abdallah Soufan, who offered insight on many specific points; in return, I dedicate the article to him. All faults, of course, are mine only.

1. Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2008), 21:151–152. I have



condemned the new morality that he perceived as overbearing. His two verses employ a striking comparison, likening the emerging Islamic discourse to chains around one's neck. They also paint a forbidding image of a young man who, because of the new moralizing discourse, has become bereft of the exuberance of youth and sounds like a much older person, saying "only the right things." Abū Khirāsh hailed from the environs of Mecca and witnessed the impact of the emergent Islam on his fellow tribesmen. He belonged to the generation of poets who lived in the time of Muḥammad's prophecy, whom the Arabic tradition called the Mukhaḍramūn, "Straddlers,"<sup>2</sup> because they straddled the periods of Jāhiliyya and Islam. As such, the Mukhaḍramūn provide an invaluable insight into the fascinating transitional period during which Islam, or perhaps more precisely the "Believers' movement," to use Fred M. Donner's term,<sup>3</sup> first appeared and gradually established itself in seventh-century Arabia.

Great transitional periods determine the course of history for centuries to come; they also contain the personal dramas of individuals such as Abū Khirāsh who saw a world familiar to them suddenly rejected as wrong and misguided. The poet's testimony reflects the voice of someone who did not actively participate in the new movement and remained on its margins. In this regard, Abū Khirāsh is similar to the two other Mukhaḍramūn included in this study, Abū Miḥjan al-Thaqafī and Suḥaym, the slave of the Banū al-Ḥashās.<sup>4</sup> The three poets represent different social groups—Abū Khirāsh was a Bedouin, Abū Miḥjan an urbanite, and Suḥaym a black slave—but they share a similar position vis-à-vis Muḥammad's

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translated *laysa bi-qā'il siwā al-ḥaqq* as "saying only the right things" rather than "saying only the truth" to stress that the remark does not refer only to an intellectual position but rather implies a more general attitude. We may understand it as the early Islamic equivalent of "political correctness" in today's parlance. *Al-ḥaqq* should be taken here as the opposite of *bāṭil*, wrongness or impiety. For the entire poem and its translation, see the Appendix, 1.a (The numbers and letters in the Appendix refer to the poets and poem selections, not to pages.) All translations in this article are mine unless otherwise stated.

2. This is the primary use of the term Mukhaḍramūn. It was later also applied to the poets of the second/eighth century who straddled the Umayyad and 'Abbāsīd eras. These later poets were usually called *mukhaḍramū al-dawlatayn*. The term also has a technical sense in *ḥadīth*. See Renate Jacobi, "Mukhaḍram," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.; Stetkevych, "Qaṣīdah by Ibn Muqbil," 304–305.

3. See Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), esp. 56ff.

4. Though the three poets are well-known figures in the Arabic literary tradition, they have received scant attention in modern Western scholarship. There is an *EI2* entry on Abū Khirāsh written by Charles Pellat, and Tzvetan Theophanov uses Abū Khirāsh and his poetry to challenge Suzanne Stetkevych's vision of the poetry of brigands as a failed rite of passage. Tzvetan Theophanov, "The Dīwān al-Hudhaliyyīn and the Rite de Passage Manqué," *Studies in Arabic and Islam: Proceedings of the 19th Congress, Halle 1998*, ed. Stefan Leder, 337–346 (Sterling, VA: Peeters, 2002); cf. Suzanne P. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), part 2. More recently, Nathaniel A. Miller mentions Abū Khirāsh and his poetry on various occasions in his dissertation on the *dīwān* of the Banū Hudhayl. Nathaniel A. Miller, "Tribal Poetics in Early Arabic Culture" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2016). Abū Miḥjan, too, has a short entry in the *EI2*: N. Rhodokanakis and Ch. Pellat, "Abū Miḥjan," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. More scholars have dealt with Abū Miḥjan, especially with respect to his encounter with the caliph 'Umar, who punished him for drinking wine. See, for example, Sean Anthony, "The Domestic Origins of Imprisonment: An Inquiry into an Early Islamic Institution," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129, no. 4 (2009): 592. As for Suḥaym, he is also the subject of a short *EI2* entry, written by A. Arazi.

community. All three poets lived in the Ḥijāz and consequently witnessed the formation of the Believers' movement up close. Though they accepted its authority (and are considered Muslims by the tradition, as evidenced in *Kitāb al-Aghānī*), they repeatedly violated the movement's norms and every so often rebelled against its values through their poetry. Most importantly, they were no ideologues, in the sense that they were neither directly involved in the promotion of Muḥammad's message nor engaged in an open struggle against it. When I call them marginal, I thus refer to their marginal position vis-à-vis the active currents of the new Islamic movement.

One goal of this article is to examine the verses of the three poets in order to explore their reactions to the spread of Muḥammad's message.<sup>5</sup> How did they react to the world changing in front of their eyes? What were the points on which their world views clashed with Muḥammad's? The perspective of these three poets is unique precisely due to their position at the margins of his movement, but not outside of it. As such, their perspective differs from that of poets in the service of the new community, such as Ḥassān b. Thābit, the Prophet's personal poet; from that of the *mushrikūn* poets who challenged Muḥammad; and from that of the narrators of later accounts about this period, who were writing from a temporal distance, at a time when Islam had already prevailed. The Mukhaḍramūn poets' complaints about the impact of the new ideology on their personal lives provide a window into the reception of the emergent Islamic movement among Arab tribes in the Ḥijāz beyond Muḥammad's close community.

A second goal of the article is to study the narratives (*akhbār*) that accompany this poetry to gain insight into the reception of the Mukhaḍramūn's verses. I focus on the *akhbār* in Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī's (d. 356/967) *Kitāb al-Aghānī* ("Book of songs").<sup>6</sup> At first sight, the *akhbār* provide the reader with the context of the verses, but as I show, they are far from mere biographical footnotes. Rather, they have great hermeneutical value because they record the attempts of later Muslims to interpret the verses. Therefore, I am not interested so much in *what happened* (because that is often impossible to ascertain) as in *how it was remembered*.<sup>7</sup> I analyze the various functions of the *akhbār* and call attention to the occasional discrepancies between the *akhbār* and the poetry. I explain the existence of these discrepancies as the result of the interpretative efforts of later narrators and collectors. I assume that some sentiments expressed in the poetry proved a challenge for these men, and they attempted to reconcile these sentiments with their Islamic worldview

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5. The title "Reacting to Muḥammad" should thus be read as "reacting to the changes that Muḥammad brought about" rather than reacting directly to his persona.

6. On *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, its overall composition, and its value as a literary work, see Hilary Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs: Compilation and the Author's Craft in Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī's "Kitāb al-Aghānī"* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Kilpatrick also provides an overview of modern research on the work (pp. 1–14). On al-Iṣfahānī's profiles of the poets, see Kilpatrick, "Abū l-Faraġ's Profiles of Poets: A 4th/10th Century Essay at the History and Sociology of Arabic Literature," *Arabica* 44 (1997): 94–128. On the sources of *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, see note 27 below.

7. I am inspired in this regard by the work of Antoine Borrut and by his bringing of scholarship on memory into the field of Islamic studies. See, most importantly, his *Entre mémoire et pouvoir: L'espace syrien sous les derniers Omeyyades et les premiers Abbassides* (v. 72–193/692–809) (Leiden: Brill, 2011), esp. 168–204.

by means of the *akhbār*. The *akhbār*, then, served to modify the original meaning of the poetry that they frame and to mitigate its subversive effects. In this way *akhbār* reveal how later audiences reinterpreted the memories of the coming of Islam that this early poetry captures.

This article thus seeks, first, to shed light on the reception of Muḥammad's revelation among certain segments of society marginal to the new Believers' movement, as embodied in the work of three recalcitrant poets from the Ḥijāz, and, second, to make plain the processes through which these early sentiments and figures were readjusted to fit later Islamic sensibilities through literary *akhbār*. Besides these two main points, an examination of the interplay between the Mukhaḍramūn's poetry and *akhbār* in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* also establishes the importance of such poetry as a historical source, provides an argument in support of its authenticity—insofar as we can speak of “authenticity” in the oral(-cum-written) context of early Islamic poetry—and exposes the multilayered nature of the poets' legacy. I elaborate on these side arguments in the concluding remarks. The next section introduces the world, poetry, and *akhbār* of the Mukhaḍramūn.

### 1. The Mukhaḍramūn: Their World, Poetry, and *Akbār*

The Mukhaḍramūn, the poetic “Straddlers,” lived a precarious existence.<sup>8</sup> Born and raised in one world, they witnessed its fading and the gradual establishment of a new one. Muḥammad's religious message and political victory had far-reaching consequences not only for the political landscape of the region but also for the private lives of individuals. The submission to God and the piety (*taqwā*) that he called for became the requirements of the new society that was quickly taking shape. The world that these poets and the generations of poets before them had extolled in their poetry was suddenly rejected as the *Jāhiliyya*, usually but not adequately translated as “the age of ignorance” and infused with connotations of falsehood and unbelief (Q 3:154; 5:50; 33:33; 48:26).<sup>9</sup> Jaroslav Stetkevych has stressed the liminality of this period, underlined by the various meanings of the root *kh-ḍ-r-m* as “to cut in halves,” “to cut a camel's ear,” and “to mix,” and eloquently explained that the grasping of the world of the Mukhaḍramūn requires

a movement adrift, away from even the most totemically understood “split ear” of the archaic camel, away from a very “old beginning,” before that beginning was called

8. For a discussion of Mukhaḍram poetry, see J. Stetkevych's “*Qaṣīdah* by Ibn Muqbil” and his “Sacrifice and Redemption in Early Islamic Poetry: Al-Ḥuṭay'ah's ‘Wretched Hunter,’” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 31, no. 2 (2000): 89–120; revised version published as “Sacrifice and Redemption: The Transformation of an Archaic Theme in al-Ḥuṭay'ah” (ch. 5) in his *The Hunt in Arabic Poetry: From Heroic to Lyric to Metapoetic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 57–87. See also Suzanne P. Stetkevych, “Pre-Islamic Panegyric and the Poetics of Redemption,” in *Reorientations: Arabic and Persian Poetry*, ed. Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, 1–57 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); James E. Montgomery, *The Vagaries of the Qaṣīdah: The Tradition and Practice of Early Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge: E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1997), 209–258. For further bibliography, see Montgomery, *Vagaries of the Qaṣīdah*, 210, n. 285.

9. The classical article on the concept of *Jāhiliyya* is Ignaz Goldziher, “Was ist unter ‘Al-Ġāhiliyya’ zu verstehen?,” in Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1889), 1:219–228. See also note 158 below.

al-Jāhiliyyah, now pronounced with sudden declarative force to be a very “old past” and, therefore, of being “invalid”—while yet being “everything.”<sup>10</sup>

To a large extent, the poetry of the Mukhaḍramūn represents a continuation of Jāhili poetics, which at times clashed with the rhetoric of the new religious movement.<sup>11</sup> The poetry of Abū Khirāsh, Abū Mihjan, and Suḥaym, too, is close to pagan pre-Islamic poetry, the main difference being the comments of the three men on the world changing around them.<sup>12</sup> It should be noted, however, that their poetry offers little insight into their religious beliefs. Their complaints relate to a general change in moral codes and a break with past customs rather than any particular doctrine or the inability to engage in concrete religious practices. The lives and verses of the three men demonstrate that in their time, divisions between pagans or “associators” (*mushrikūn*), on the one hand, and Muslims or “Believers” (*mu’minūn*), on the other, reflected more a sociopolitical reality (i.e., allegiance to the Believers’ movement or lack thereof) than an essential difference in worldviews. Take the case of Abū Khirāsh, for instance. Before his tribe, the Hudhayl, converted collectively to the new religion in the aftermath of the conquest of Mecca in 8/629, he is said to have fought against the Prophet. In his poetry, Abū Khirāsh—nominally a Believer—bemoans the supremacy of the Prophet’s tribe, the Quraysh, because it prevents him from carrying out an act of vengeance, which he sees as his ancient right.

What do I mean by Jāhili poetics? For the purposes of this article, I will use the term “poetic Jāhiliyya” to refer to the dominant discourse of pre-Islamic poetry and the heroic value system that permeates most of its famous odes. I want to state explicitly that, by the poetic Jāhiliyya, I do not mean the overall reality of pre-Islamic Arabia, as it is hard to say what part of the population adhered to these values. The following six lines from the famous *mu’allaqa* of Ṭarafa, one of the Seven “Suspended Odes” as translated by J. A. Arberry, capture perfectly the defiant spirit of this discourse:<sup>13</sup>

If you can’t avert from me the fate that surely awaits me  
then pray leave me to hasten it on with what money I’ve got.  
But for three things, that are the joy of a young fellow  
I assure you I wouldn’t care when my deathbed visitors arrive—  
first, to forestall my charming critics with a good swig of crimson wine  
that foams when the water is mingled in;  
second, to wheel at the call of the beleaguered a curved-shanked steed  
streaking like the wolf of the thicket you’ve startled lapping the water;

10. J. Stetkevych, “*Qaṣīdah* by Ibn Muqbil,” 308.

11. Renate Jacobi (quoted in Montgomery, *Vagaries of the Qaṣīdah*, 210) points out that Mukhaḍram poetry deviates from the early tradition in a number of formal and conceptual elements. In this article, however, I focus only on the poetry’s contents, not on its stylistics.

12. As Jaroslav Stetkevych has shown in his study of Ibn Muqbil, the Mukhaḍram poet can also display a profound nostalgia for the “good old days” of the Jāhiliyya. Stetkevych, “*Qaṣīdah* by Ibn Muqbil.”

13. Ṭarafa was a pre-Islamic, sixth-century poet from the tribe of Bakr and the region of Baḥrayn, one of those who recited their poetry at the court of ‘Amr b. Hind (d. ca. 9/568) in Ḥira.

and third, to curtail the day of showers, such an admirable season  
dallying with a ripe wench under the pole-propped tent,  
her anklets and her bracelets seemingly hung on the boughs  
of a pliant, unripen gum-tree or a castor-shrub.<sup>14</sup>

Ṭarafa celebrates the enjoyment of wine, amorous adventures, and fighting—themes that are repeated across heroic pre-Islamic poetry. These themes, however, should not be considered values in themselves. Rather, as the first line of this excerpt hints, they convey the poet’s expression of his heroic refusal to bow to the power of the unpredictable fate. The celebration of wine, amorous adventures, and fighting should be understood as a proclamation of defiance in the face of death. He is aware that fate can strike at any time and so dares it to hasten with his unrestrained life. This uninhibited spirit spills over to interpersonal relationships, and so, for instance, extreme generosity is praised in Jāhili poetry even if it endangers one’s life. The implicit logic is that we will die in any case; all that can survive is our name and the memory of our honorable deeds perpetuated in poetry. Admittedly, the rich body of pre-Islamic poetry is heterogeneous. It displays a range of themes as various scholars have noted. So, for example, Nathaniel A. Miller has demonstrated that pre-Islamic poetry shows regional differences.<sup>15</sup> Suzanne Stetkevych has pointed to what she terms “proto-Islamic” themes in the verses of Zuhayr b. Abī Salmā and Labīd.<sup>16</sup> And James E. Montgomery has suggested two or three types of the relationship between early Arabic poetry and Islam: the submission of the Jāhili ode to Islam, the synthesis of the two, and the coexistence of the two.<sup>17</sup> Yet the defiant spirit pervades most pre-Islamic odes, whether they display some proto-Islamic elements or not. On the whole, the “poetic Jāhiliyya” was ruled by the chaotic, arbitrary, and amoral fate (*dahr, manāyā*) that strikes purposelessly, erasing both individuals and entire civilizations; the pre-Islamic poet becomes the hero confronting fate with an impassive face and fighting for earthly fame and virtue either for himself or for his tribe.

I show below that the verses of Abū Khirāsh, Abū Miḥjan, and Suḥaym embrace the same heroic and defiant perspective as does Ṭarafa’s *mu‘allaqa*, a perspective that clashed with Muḥammad’s teachings. The sentiment of individual rebellion against the arbitrariness of

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14. See A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes: The First Chapter in Arabic Literature* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957), 86. For the Arabic original, see the Appendix, 4.

15. Miller has drawn attention to the differences between the Ḥijāzī and Najdī corpora of pre-Islamic poetry and criticized scholars for treating Najdī examples as representative of pre-Islamic poetry as a whole. He points out that the salient characteristics of Najdī poetry—praise, poetry, tripartite *qaṣīdas*, and equestrian boasting—have been turned into characteristic features of pre-Islamic poetry in general even though they are missing from the *Dīwān*, a typical representative of Ḥijāzī poetry. Miller, “Tribal Poetics,” 6.

16. See Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals Speak*, 42–45, 50–54, 284–285; Suzanne Stetkevych, *The Mantle Odes: Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muḥammad* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 28–30.

17. See James E. Montgomery, “Sundry Observations on the Fate of Poetry in the Early Islamic Period,” in *Tradition and Modernity in Arabic Language and Literature*, ed. J. R. Smart, 49–60 (London: Routledge, 1996), 54–57. For an extended version of this article see Montgomery, *The Vagaries of the Qaṣīdah*, 209–257.

fate has a parallel in the biblical statement, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die,”<sup>18</sup> which is frowned upon in Christianity. The ideology introduced by Muḥammad had little room for the individual heroically confronting fate (understood as the Jāhili amoral force). Islam, like Judaism and Christianity before it, rejected this worldview and replaced the arbitrary fate with a wise and all-knowing Creator. Instead of promoting earthly honor and fame, the new religion commanded its followers to direct their lives to the afterlife and substituted the hope of salvation for the heroic defiance of death itself. Salvation and status were now to be attained through righteous behavior and piety,<sup>19</sup> exemplified by the figure of the young man who, much to Abū Khirāsh’s distaste, says only “the right things.” All fighting was to be collective, undertaken in the name of God and for a higher good. The Jāhili worldview was rejected and so were its main bearers, the poets, as the famous Qur’ānic verse *Sūrat al-Shu‘arā’* indicates.<sup>20</sup> Geert Jan van Gelder has described the coming of Islam as a transition between two kinds of ethos: that of Islam, based on guilt, and that of pre-Islamic times, based on honor and shame.<sup>21</sup> Guilt is related to the morality deplored by Abū Khirāsh. This morality—focused on the individual’s accountability to God—implies remorse, though as Van Gelder explains, to new converts it may have meant only liability to punishment.<sup>22</sup> Admittedly, these models do not exist in societies in their pure forms, nor did Islam at that time—in the form we know it from later sources. But the verses of Abū Khirāsh, Abū Miḥjan, and Suḥaym reveal that the poets perceived some elements of the new morality as oppressive.

To be clear, I am not making the claim that Islamic society sprang into existence fully fledged. Quite the opposite: I show the frictions that accompanied the gradual process of

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18. The saying appears in four variants in the Bible (Ecclesiastes 8:15; Luke 12:19; Isaiah 22:13; Corinthians 15:32), and in most of these its sentiment is reprimanded. The first version of the saying appears in Ecclesiastes, which seems to endorse it, but the statement comes from the mouth of Qoheleth, who does not recognize any life beyond the present one, and as such it must be rejected.

19. Fred Donner has emphasized and evidenced the centrality of piety in Islam in his writings; see, for example, his *Muhammad and the Believers*, 61–68.

20. The Qur’ānic condemnation in *Sūrat al-Shu‘arā’* ends as follows: “And the Poets—it is those straying in Evil, who follow them / Seest thou not that they wander distracted in every valley? / And that they say what they practice not? / Except those who believe, work righteousness, engage much in the remembrance of God, and defend themselves after they are unjustly attacked. And soon will the unjust assailants know what vicissitudes their affairs will take!” (Q 26: 224–27). All Qur’ānic translations are based on Yusuf Ali’s translation, but I substitute “God” for his “Allah.” For a detailed discussion of these verses and the controversies that surround them see Montgomery, *Vagaries of the Qaṣīdah*, 210–216. For references to scholarship dealing with them see Montgomery, *Vagaries of the Qaṣīdah*, 210, n. 286, and Alan Jones, “Poetry and the Poets,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*.

21. For a discussion of the two types of societies within the Islamic, see Geert Jan van Gelder, *The Bad and the Ugly: Attitudes Towards Invective Poetry (Hijā’) in Classical Arabic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 13ff. Van Gelder draws on George Fenwick Jones, *Honor in German Literature*. The terms “guilt culture” and “shame culture” were popularized in Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946), but a full bibliography on the topic would be too long to include here. Cf. Timothy Winter, “Honor,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*.

22. Van Gelder, *Bad and Ugly*, 13.

transformation. A clash between the two worldviews is clearly expressed in the Qurʾān itself:

While the Unbelievers got up in their hearts heat and cant—the heat and cant of [the pagan Age of] Ignorance (*ḥammiyyat Jāhiliyya*)—God sent down His tranquility to His Messenger and to the Believers, and made them stick close to the command of self-restraint. (Q 48:26)

The “heat and cant” of the Jāhiliyya stands precisely for the defiant spirit found in pre-Islamic poetry, the same spirit to which the three Mukhaḍramūn also ascribed, although they were no unbelievers but newly converted members of the Believers’ movement.

The second type of material discussed in this article consists of *akhbār* of the three poets in the fourth/tenth-century *Kitāb al-Aghānī*. The *akhbār* ostensibly provide a biographical and historical context for excerpts of poetry, clarifying the situations in which the verses were recited. Scholars have shown, however, that literary *akhbār* cannot be taken at face value as impartial historical material.<sup>23</sup> Suzanne Stetkevych, for one, has emphasized throughout her work the interpretative value of *akhbār*. She has analyzed the role of *akhbār* in constructing poets’ mythic and folkloric personalities, which reveal how these figures were remembered centuries after their deaths.<sup>24</sup> She also points out that the *akhbār* provide an evaluation of the poetry and its performance. Thus the poems and the *akhbār* combined provide a basis for understanding the process through which pre-Islamic poetry was “transmitted, preserved, selected, and molded by Muslim hands into a literary corpus and a cultural construct that served to advance the interests of an Arabo-Islamic political, religious, and literary-cultural hegemony.”<sup>25</sup> This is how I use the *akhbār* here—to reflect on the later transmission and reception process of, in this case, the poetry of the three Mukhaḍramūn.

More specifically, my focus is on the occasional discrepancies between the poetry and the *akhbār*. As much as the verses of Abū Khirāsh, Abū Miḥjan, and Suḥaym breathe the spirit of the poetic Jāhiliyya, their *akhbār*, on many occasions, show an unmistakably Islamic character. The reason for this, I argue, is that later audiences equipped the Mukhaḍram poetry with narratives that were meant to make sense of this poetry within their Islamic framework. In this regard, it is important that the three poets were seen as Muslims. The

23. Beyond the genre of *akhbār* accompanying poetry, Letizia Osti has discussed how different compilers mixed and edited *akhbār* to evaluate the scholar al-Ṣūlī (d. 335/947); see Letizia Osti, “Tailors of Stories: Biographers and the Lives of the *Khabar*,” *Synergies Monde Arabe* 6 (2009): 283–291. Fedwa Malti-Douglas has traced the functions of a group of *akhbār* in different genres in “Texts and Tortures: The Reign of al-Muʿtadid and the Construction of Historical Meaning,” *Arabica* 46 (1999): 313–336. On *khabar* in general, see Stefan Leder, “The Literary Use of *Khabar*: A Basic Form of Historical Writing,” in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, vol. 1, *Problems in the Literary Source Material*, ed. Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad, 277–315 (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1999).

24. See especially Suzanne P. Stetkevych, “Archetype and Attribution in Early Arabic Poetry: Al-Shanfarā and the Lāmiyyat al-ʿArab,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18, no. 3 (1986): 361–390.

25. Suzanne P. Stetkevych, *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender, and Ceremony in the Classical Arabic Ode* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

generation of Muslims that overlapped with the Prophet and the first caliphs has a special place in Islamic memory and a continuing relevance for Muslims' conceptions of their origins. However, there is a temporal and epistemic gap between the poets and their later audiences. We have to remember that the poetry and the *akhbār* have been preserved in much later sources. Abū Khirāsh, Abū Miḥjan, and Suḥaym lived in the first/seventh century, but Abū al-Faraj, our main source, wrote his *Kitāb al-Aghānī* in the fourth/tenth century, although he depended on earlier written sources. His work thus represents the culmination of a process three centuries long during which different people were narrating the verses, imagining their circumstances, and embroidering them with stories.<sup>26</sup> Abū al-Faraj recorded many chains of transmissions (*isnāds*) for his reports, and various scholars have discussed his use of sources.<sup>27</sup> My emphasis is not on the individual transmitters or their methods of transmission (oral vs. written) but rather on the transformed world in which these narrators lived and that conditioned them to reinterpret old poetry according to new sensibilities.

I contend that the disharmony between the *akhbār* and the poetry to which I draw attention is indicative of the multilayered chronology of the preserved material. (I will attempt to sort out the possible layers in my concluding remarks; for now, let us treat the *akhbār* as one body of material to make clear the contrast between them and the poetry.) Although poetry may have been subject to later editing, the variants of early poems suggest that such editing was minor and that the poetry remained largely stable. The differences indicate reliable oral transmission: they consist mainly of variances in the order of lines or of individual words, as the meter and rhyme helped the stability of the verse. Admittedly, this observation pertains chiefly to long poems; many two- or four-line verses could have easily been created later on to embellish narratives.<sup>28</sup> Speaking generally on the issue of the

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26. Abū Khirāsh's poetry was also preserved in an earlier *dīwān* known as *Sharḥ ash-ʿar al-Hudhaliyyīn* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Urūba, 1965) by the third/ninth-century scholar Abū Saʿīd al-Sukkārī. Tribal *dīwāns* like this one focus mainly on poetry and contain only a few *akhbār*. Abū Miḥjan also has a medieval *dīwān* compiled by the fourth/tenth-century scholar Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī. Suḥaym's *dīwān* was edited from different version likewise compiled in the fourth/tenth century. See Abū Miḥjan, *Dīwān Abī Miḥjan wa-sharḥuh*, ed. Abū Hilāl [al-ʿAskarī] (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Azhār, n.d.); Suḥaym ʿAbd Banī al-Hashās, *Dīwān Suḥaym ʿAbd Banī al-Hashās*, ed. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Maymanī (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1950).

27. The first to raise the issue of the sources of *Kitāb al-Aghānī* was Régis Blachère, who believed that Abū al-Faraj drew mainly on written sources. After him, Leon Zolondek argued that we need to focus on the "collector sources" who first collected the reports about a given poet. Manfred Fleischhammer conducted the most detailed study of *Kitāb al-Aghānī*'s sources and identified all of its 150 informants in his *Die Quellen des "Kitāb al-Aghānī"* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2004). Kilpatrick has also dealt with the sources of *Kitāb al-Aghānī* in her monograph. See Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 1–14; Régis Blachère, *Histoire de la littérature arabe* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1952), 135; Leon Zolondek, "The Sources of the Kitāb al-Aghānī," *Arabica* 8, no. 3 (1961): 294–308.

28. In this context it is also relevant to mention the distinction that Wolfhart Heinrichs has drawn between action poems and commentary poems. Wolfhart Heinrichs, "Prosimitical Genres in Classical Arabic Literature," in *Prosimitrum: Crosscultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse*, ed. Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl, 249–76 (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1997). Action poems, defined as poems that form the core of narrative units, would seem to be primary in meaning and chronology, whereas commentary poems, serving as embellishment of the narratives they accompany, would be secondary.

authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry, James Monroe concluded:

Pre-Islamic poetry should on the whole be viewed as authentic as long as it is clearly understood that what has been preserved of it is probably not an exact recording of what a great poet once said, but a fairly close picture of it, distorted by the vicissitudes of an oral transmission in which both memorization and “de-paganization” were operative and further complicated by a tradition of scribal correction.<sup>29</sup>

Memorization, as I have already noted, could be a reliable means of transmission, and “de-paganization” seems to have been operative mainly on the surface (e.g., through altering the names of deities). So in cases of discrepancy between poetry and *akhbār*, I take the poetry to be the earlier source. The *akhbār*, which in my understanding reflect the attempts of later audiences to interpret the old poetry, offer an insight into the multiple layers of collecting, writing, and organizing the past. Their examination reveals, broadly speaking, two ways in which later generations integrated the unruly poets within an Islamic framework: they transformed them into either Islamic heroes or deterring cases. Abū Khirāsh, discussed in the next section, falls into the first category.

## 2. Abū Khirāsh al-Hudhalī: From Brigand to Martyr

Abū Khirāsh, or Khuwaylid b. Murra, was a Mukhaḍram master poet (lit. “stallion,” *faḥl*)<sup>30</sup> from the Hudhayl tribe. The Hudhayl lived in the environs of Mecca and al-Ṭāʾif, and during the war between the Prophet Muḥammad and the Quraysh they sided with the Quraysh and converted to Islam only after the latter were defeated in 8/629–30. Both the poetry and the *akhbār* of Abū Khirāsh indicate that he actively fought against the Prophet, which may also explain his lasting aversion to Muḥammad’s message, expressed most poignantly in the verses quoted at the beginning of this article.

Aside from being a poet, Abū Khirāsh was also a brigand. In both respects he was an exemplary member of his tribe. The Hudhayl were famous for their poetry; the ‘*ayniyya*’ elegy of Abū Dhuʾayb for his five sons became immortal.<sup>31</sup> They were equally famous for their brigandry (*ṣaʿlaka*). The term *ṣaʿlūk* is most famously used for pre-Islamic heroic poets such as al-Shanfarāʾ, who abandoned his tribe, attacked his own kinsmen, and composed verses about his bravery vis-à-vis both desert animals and men. So it may seem surprising that the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* would call the Mukhaḍram Abū Khirāsh, a loyal member of his tribe, a *ṣaʿlūk*. It should be noted, however, that *ṣaʿālīk* are found in history until the end

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29. James T. Monroe, “Oral Composition in Pre-Islamic Poetry,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 3 (1972): 41.

30. Al-Ṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:147. Ibn Sallām does not mention him among *fuḥūl*.

31. For the Arabic text of Abū Dhuʾayb’s *ʿayniyya*, see al-Sukkarī, *Sharḥ ashʿār al-Hudhaliyyīn*, 4–41. The poem is also found in al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī, *al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, with the commentary of al-Anbārī, ed. Charles James Lyall (Beirut: Matbaʿat al-Ābāʾ al-Yasūʿiyyīn, 1930), 849–92. On the Hudhayl, see G. Rentz, “Hudhayl,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.; Kirill Dmitriev, “Hudhayl, Banū,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed. The *dīwān* of their poetry is the only one preserved among the old tribal *dīwāns*. That the pride of the Hudhalīs remains strong today is indicated by the forum “Majālīs qabīlat Hudhayl,” where the contemporary members of the tribe share their tribal poetry and legends: <http://www.hothle.com>.

of the Umayyad period<sup>32</sup> and that even some famous pre-Islamic *ṣaʿālīk* such as Taʿabbaṭa Sharran and ʿUrwa b. Ward remained integrated within their tribes.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, as Albert Arazi has noted, one category of people identified as *ṣaʿālīk* consisted of groups of individuals who had opted for brigandry as a means of survival, such as the Hudhayl.<sup>34</sup> A characteristic feature of *ṣaʿālīk* was their prowess as runners, which they needed during their raids. Al-Shanfarāʾs ability to run fast even became proverbial.<sup>35</sup> Referring to the brigand lifestyle, al-Aṣmaʿī commented about the Hudhayl: “If a Hudhalī is not a poet, nor can run fast, nor can shoot arrows, he is worthless.”<sup>36</sup> And it may not be a coincidence that the root *h-dh-l* has to do with running swiftly.<sup>37</sup>

Abū Khirāsh’s fleet-footedness is a theme that runs through his poetry and *akhbār* and thus functions to reinforce his image as a brigand. Abū Khirāsh is said to have run faster than the horses during his tribe’s raids and wars.<sup>38</sup> A *khbar* narrates, for instance, that when Abū Khirāsh came to Mecca, he dared the rich Qurashī leader al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra (d. 1/622 or 623) to give Abū Khirāsh his race horses if the poet proved able to run faster than they did. According to the story, Abū Khirāsh won both the race and the horses.<sup>39</sup> So although he was an integral member of his tribe, Abū Khirāsh is a famous example of early Islamic *ṣaʿālīk*.

The brigand’s life was filled with endless tribal feuds, which inevitably lead to the loss of his beloved ones and demands for blood vengeance. Abū Khirāsh composed many elegies for his friends and brothers. His *akhbār* tell us that he had ten brothers, all of whom died before him, and narrate the violent deaths of some of them. The following poem is Abū Khirāsh’s elegy for his brother ʿUrwa. In it, the poet rejects the reproaches of ʿUrwa’s wife Umayma that he has forgotten the deceased, declaring the depth of his sorrow:

By my life, my appearance has made Umayma worried;  
 she doesn’t see much of me.  
 She says: “I see him [Abū Khirāsh] having a good time after the death of ʿUrwa.”  
 If only you [Umayma] knew how great an affliction this is [to me.]  
 Do not believe that I forgot the loss, Umayma;  
 yet my patience is a virtue.  
 Don’t you know that before us  
 the pure brothers Mālīk and ʿAqīl were separated?

32. A. Arazi, “Al-Shanfarāʾ,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.; Arazi, “Ṣuʿlūk,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.

33. A. Arazi, “Taʿabbaṭa Sharran,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.

34. Arazi, “Ṣuʿlūk.”

35. Arazi, “Al-Shanfarāʾ.” Other *ṣaʿālīk*, such as Taʿabbaṭa Sharran and ʿAmr b. Barrāq, were also known to be able to run fast. Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals Speak*, 102.

36. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:149.

37. See *Lisān al-ʿArab*, s.v. “h-dh-l.”

38. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:147.

39. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:149.

The view of our now-emptied home and resting place  
 still disturbs me and robs me of my patience.  
 And so does the fact that I embrace every morning light  
 with a deep, heavy sigh . . .<sup>40</sup>

To illustrate the kind of relationship he had with his brother, the poet draws on Arabian mythology. Two brothers, Mālik and ʿAqīl, legendary boon companions of a pre-Islamic king of al-Ḥīra, Jadhīmat al-Abrash, became proverbial for their lasting and deep friendship.<sup>41</sup> Abū Khirāsh further instructs Umayma to have patience, which, he assures her, is painful for him, too. Every morning he opens his eyes with a heart heavy over the emptiness of his house after ʿUrwa's departure. This and other elegies composed by Abū Khirāsh for his brothers and companions as well as narratives about his death from a snakebite add up to an image of a poetic figure no less heroic and tragic than Abū Dhuʿayb. They portray Abū Khirāsh as a true heir to the world of the poetic Jāhiliyya, with a life full of tribal feuds and death.

Abū Khirāsh's close relationship to the Jāhili world is even more explicit in his elegy for the custodian of the shrine of the female divinity al-ʿUzzā. Here, the poet fondly recalls the hospitality that the custodian, called Dubayya, once showed him.<sup>42</sup> For the study of this transitional moment in history, it is significant that Dubayya was killed and the shrine of al-ʿUzzā was destroyed, allegedly by Khālīd b. al-Walīd acting on Muḥammad's direct orders. Ibn al-Kalbī places this event in the year in which the Prophet conquered Mecca (8/629–30),<sup>43</sup> the same year in which the Hudhayl submitted to his rule. Abū Khirāsh's loyalties could not be more divided, as his tribe has just pledged obedience to Muḥammad, their former enemy. In the following verses Abū Khirāsh mourns Dubayya through the image of a wine gathering from which Dubayya is missing:

What is wrong with Dubayya? For days, I have not seen him  
 Amid the wine-bibbers; he drew not nigh, he did not appear.  
 If he were living he would have come with a cup  
 Of the banū Ḥaṭif make, filled with Bacchus oil.  
 Generous and noble is he; no sooner his wine cups  
 Are filled than they become empty, like an old tank full of holes  
 in the midst of winter.  
 Suqam has become desolate, deserted by all of its friends,  
 Except the wild beasts and the wind which blows through  
 the evergreen trees.<sup>44</sup>

40. See al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:159; see also al-Sukkarī, *Sharḥ ash-ʿār al-Hudhaliyyīn*, 1189–95 (twenty-four lines rather than six). For the Arabic, see the Appendix, 1.c.

41. Al-Ṭabarī, for example, narrates a story about Mālik and ʿAqīl and mentions their occurrence in this verse as well as in that by Mutammim b. Nuwayra, another Mukhadram poet who was famous for his elegies for his brother Mālik. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1879–90), 1:755.

42. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:150.

43. Ibn al-Kalbī, *Book of Idols*, trans. Nabih Amin Faris (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), 21.

44. This is the translation of Nabih Amin Faris in Ibn al-Kalbī's *Book of Idols*, 22. See also al-Iṣfahānī,

When Abū Khirāsh realizes that Dubayya is missing among the wine-drinkers, he immediately knows that something bad has happened to the custodian. The poet recalls Dubayya's generosity (describing him as *kābī al-ramād*, "the one who spreads ashes," implying that he frequently cooks and shares meals with others) and his vigor in drinking. Dubayya would, according to Abū Khirāsh, generously offer wine to his guests even in the winter, when no one has much food or drink to spare, and his cups seem bottomless, "like an old tank full of holes." But now that Dubayya is dead, the poet replaces the image of generosity and drinking with a scene of the desolate dwelling of the deceased, haunted by wild beasts and the howling wind. The themes of a drinking party, extreme generosity, and especially a pagan shrine root the verse in the poetic Jāhiliyya; yet the historical circumstances place it in the Islamic era. Another elegy by Abū Khirāsh, which I quoted at the beginning of this article and which I now discuss in greater detail, addresses this liminality directly.

"Jamīl b. Maʿmar grieved my guests . . ."

In his elegy for his close friend Zuhayr b. al-ʿAjwa, as in the previous poem, Abū Khirāsh celebrates a man killed by one of Muḥammad's companions. Zuhayr had been taken captive during the Battle of Ḥunayn (8/630) and had then been killed by a companion of the Prophet called Jamīl b. Maʿmar.<sup>45</sup> These details place the poem and the poet in the midst of the events surrounding the rise of Muḥammad's community. The accompanying story ascribes the killing not to a clash between a Believer and his opponent but to an older "hatred between them from the time of Jāhiliyya."<sup>46</sup> The elegy appears in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* in the following form:

Jamīl b. Maʿmar grieved my guests with the slaughter  
of a munificent man with whom widows sought refuge;  
whose sword-belt was long, who was not corpulent,  
and whose sword-straps moved about on his body [as he was  
slender] when he stood up;  
in whose house a stranger would take shelter in wintertime,  
even a destitute man dressed in worn-out rags, in need to feed his family,  
who—suffering from cold, chased by the evening wind  
that made him call out for help—went to him [Zuhayr];  
whose hands almost lose his cloak  
when the north winds blow in his face.  
So what is the matter with the people of his tribe that they did not collapse  
when such a wise and noble man departed?  
And I swear, had you not found him tied up,  
thirsty hyenas would have come to drink your blood where the *wādī* bends.

*al-Aghānī*, 21:150–151.

45. This Jamīl b. Maʿmar is not to be confused with the poet Jamīl b. Maʿmar, also known as Jamīl Buthayna.

46. Al-ʿIṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:210; al-Sukkarī, *Sharḥ ashʿār al-Hudhaliyyīn*, 1221.

Then Jamīl would have been the one among his people slain most ignominiously.  
 But a man's concern is his opponent's back [i.e., Zuhayr was slain unfairly].  
 Nothing is like the times of our [old] abode, Umm Mālik!  
 Now, chains have encircled [our] necks,  
 and the youth has become like a middle-aged man,  
 saying only the right things; the railing women are relieved.  
 But I have not forgotten our days and nights together at Ḥalya  
 when we met with the ones that we desired.  
 (And our sincere friends now seem as if  
 someone were pouring [sand] on them by a graveyard  
 [i.e. burying them alive].)<sup>47</sup>

At the beginning of the elegy, Abū Khirāsh identifies Jamīl b. Maʿmar as the culprit behind Zuhayr's death. To show the greatness of this loss, the poet glorifies Zuhayr's generosity and majestic appearance. He mentions that Zuhayr used to offer shelter to the most fragile members of society: widows, strangers, and beggars. He also emphasizes Zuhayr's height by pointing to the length of his sword-belt (tall men wear long sword-belts) and describing him as "not corpulent," reinforcing his words with the image of his sword-straps "moving about on his body when he stood up." Zuhayr's noble presence contrasts with the destitution of a beggar who, dressed only in old rags, walks in the freezing and windy night crying out for Zuhayr's help.

The poem then juxtaposes another Jāhilī heroic feature of Zuhayr, bravery, with the cowardice of his killers from Muḥammad's community. Abū Khirāsh claims that the latter were able to slay Zuhayr only because they found him with his hands bound. Had they encountered him unfettered, Zuhayr would have slaughtered them, leaving their blood as if a drink for thirsty hyenas. Abū Khirāsh further stresses the unfairness of Zuhayr's slaying in captivity by quoting what seems like tribal wisdom about human insidiousness: "A man's concern is his opponent's back."

The verses that opened this article appear toward the end of the elegy. With their references to chains encircling the poet's neck and the premature sapping of youthful exuberance, they directly reject the moralistic spirit of Muḥammad's message. Although the poet's nostalgic appeal to the "days of [his old] abode" could be a standard motif found in the *nasīb* (amatory prelude) of the traditional *qaṣīda*, the image of chains and the new theme of correctness (*al-ḥaqq*) read like a direct comment on the rise of the new religious community and a complaint about its moralizing tone—a subtext strengthened by the tradition's identification of Jamīl, the murderer mentioned in the poem, as a Companion of the Prophet. Given the agreement between the verses and the *akhbār*, we can consider the poem an eyewitness testimony of the impact of Muḥammad's mission on the lives of his contemporaries.

47. Al-İṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī* 21:151–152; cf. Al-Sukkarī, *Sharḥ ashʿār al-Hudhaliyyīn*, 1221–1223. For the whole poem in the Arabic original as recorded in the *Aghānī*, see the Appendix, 1.a. The last line appears only in al-Sukkarī's *Sharḥ*, so I include it here in parentheses.

It is not difficult to guess what Abū Khirāsh would prefer the young men of his tribe to talk about instead of “the right things”: bravery and comradeship in fighting, wine-drinking, generosity, and other tribal values of the past. The phrase “the railing women are relieved” is a reference to Jāhilī poetry’s traditional theme of railing women (*‘awādhil*) who reproach and blame the poet for his extensive drinking and extreme generosity. In Jaroslav Stetkevych’s description, the railing woman “is the reckless warrior’s and fame-seeker’s sobering, reminding, and warning voice ‘of reason,’ mostly social and domestic. She is, therefore, the counter-heroic, interest-oriented element in the earliest Arabic poetry.”<sup>48</sup> Now, as Abū Khirāsh sourly notes, the *‘awādhil* can be content. The new era has suppressed the heroism and exuberance of the past.

These lines force a reconsideration of the entire poem. Even the seemingly pure Jāhilī part is to be understood from the perspective of a Mukhaḍram, living at the threshold between the familiar past and the unknown future. In this light, Zuhayr functions not only as a traditional hero but also as a symbol of the bygone era of Jāhiliyya. Two further lines support this reading. In one, the poet, having extolled the hero’s generosity and bravery, asks a rhetorical question: “So what is the matter with the people of his tribe that they did not collapse when such a wise and noble man departed?” In other words, he questions how Zuhayr’s tribesmen can go on living in a world from which Zuhayr and his like are absent. This sentiment is presented even more clearly in the last line of the poem, a line that—most interestingly—does not appear in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* but is included only in al-Sukkarī’s version of the poem: “And our sincere friends (*ikhwān al-ṣafā’*) now seem as if someone were pouring [sand] on them by a graveyard.”<sup>49</sup> The line movingly evokes a bygone past, a world that has vanished. The mention of *ikhwān al-ṣafā’* is, of course, not a reference to the mysterious, much later authors of a philosophical compendium of sciences, the Brethren of Purity, but a memory of the poet’s comrades or, perhaps, honorable ancestors who lived by the values of the world that is now fading. Like Zuhayr, these “sincere friends” symbolize the pre-Islamic hero and the ancestral customs. And like him, they are dead. More importantly, their memory, too, is slowly falling into oblivion. The poet expresses this process of forgetting through the image of these friends being buried in sand, in a place hidden from the eyes of the community—by a graveyard. Closely examined, the poem is not only an elegy for Abū Khirāsh’s dead friend but also a swan song of the Jāhiliyya.

### *Blood Vengeance (Tha’r) in Abū Khirāsh’s World*

In a world in which Abū Khirāsh’s close associates were dying one after another, retribution was crucial. The theme of blood vengeance permeates Abū Khirāsh’s poetry and *akhbār*, as he repeatedly swears to avenge the deaths of his friends and brothers and boasts about his successes in doing so. In the case of Zuhayr, however, this order of things is interrupted. For, as another elegy for Zuhayr attests, the victory of Muḥammad’s

48. Stetkevych, “*Qaṣīdah* by Ibn Muqbil,” 324. For a bibliography on the *‘adhila* motif (and some controversy around it), see *ibid.*, n. 40, and further Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 244, n. 48.

49. Al-Sukkarī, *Sharḥ ash‘ār al-Hudhaliyyīn*, 1223.

community made the appropriate blood vengeance impossible. In the first line of this excerpt, Abū Khirāsh reports having had a premonition of Zuhayr's death; in the second line, he expresses his frustration at his current inability to take revenge:

Would I be saying every single night:  
 “May he not depart, the one killed by Jamīl?”  
 I never used to doubt that if the Quraysh killed one of us  
 we would take vengeance [lit. they would be killed for our killed].  
 And so I remain with a burning thirst, as long as you rule and prosper,  
 until you are killed.<sup>50</sup>

Whereas in the past the poet would always have been able to avenge a loved one even if he or she had been killed by the powerful Quraysh, now that Abū Khirāsh's tribe has pledged its allegiance to Muḥammad, this option to exercise an old right has been taken away from him. Like many others, Abū Khirāsh belonged nominally to the community of Believers but was steeped in the honor system in which blood vengeance played a central role. In his circles, the failure to avenge one's kin, as when blood money (*diyya*) is accepted, constitutes grounds for mockery. So when Abū Khirāsh's brother al-Abaḥḥ—also a poet—swears to take revenge on Sārī b. Zunaym for the killing of another brother of theirs but then accepts *diyya* instead, Sārī derides al-Abaḥḥ: “You took his blood money and you put aside his matter with the Banū Tamīm for a couple of starved camels.”<sup>51</sup> Returning to the verses above, the poet's way of referring to Muḥammad's community as “the Quraysh” is interesting because it suggests that he did not consider it a new religious movement but simply a victorious tribe.

Abū Khirāsh's description of his exasperation at his inability to exercise *tha'r* as a “burning thirst” is another noteworthy element of the poem. It indicates that vengeance goes beyond an honorable duty and rather constitutes—like thirst—a physical necessity. Similarly, al-Abaḥḥ describes *tha'r* as “calming” (*munīm*),<sup>52</sup> suggesting that only when revenge has been taken can one regain peace. Elsewhere, Abū Khirāsh expresses his thirst for blood thus:

My thirsty lips,  
 this is no sheep's milk.  
 Instead, it is a gathering of young men,  
 each with a refined spearhead, heated up [and yearning for blood].<sup>53</sup>

The poet warns his lips that they will quench their thirst not with milk but with blood. His enemies' spearheads are similarly bloodthirsty. Suzanne Stetkevych has connected the same imagery of drinking lances in a poem by Ta'abbata Sharran to the ritual of sacrifice, explaining that, like sacrifice, “the killing of the enemy in blood vengeance is perceived as

50. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:152; see also al-Sukkarī, *Sharḥ ash'ār al-Hudhaliyyīn*, 1229. For the Arabic original, see the Appendix, 1.b.

51. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:158, and al-Sukkarī, *Sharḥ ash'ār al-Hudhaliyyīn*, 668.

52. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:158.

53. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:156; Appendix, 1.d.

revitalizing the kin.”<sup>54</sup> More broadly, building on the work of the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep and the sociologists Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert, Stetkevych argues that blood vengeance in Jāhili poetry “performs the function of a rite of passage or of sacrifice” in that it represents the transition of the avenger from one ritual state to another.<sup>55</sup>

*Thaʿr* had an important social function in pre-Islamic Arabia. Robert Hoyland has noted that the threat of destructive retaliation in fact made the Arabs hesitate before they killed someone, and in this way it contributed to keeping order.<sup>56</sup> It is natural that in a society that lacks a more universal state authority, the family and the tribe must protect a person’s life. The role of blood vengeance in maintaining order in society and preventing its disintegration has been observed in other times and societies as well. Plato, for instance, contends in his *Laws* that a potential murderer “in dread of such vengeance from Heaven [. . .] should refrain himself.”<sup>57</sup> In certain aboriginal cultures in Australia, a ritualized version of the blood feud had a conciliating effect. When a killing took place, the two kin groups would hurl spears at each other, and once blood had been spilled and the blood vengeance satisfied, they would return to peaceful coexistence.<sup>58</sup> In the European context, the long tradition of dueling, fueled partially by ideas of chivalry born in the Frankish lands of northwestern Europe, serves as another parallel.<sup>59</sup> Like *thaʿr*, dueling was connected to notions of the honor of the individual and the class that he represented, and, as V. G. Kiernan points out, it reduced feuds “to symbolic proportions, confined them to individuals, and required only a limited number of victims.”<sup>60</sup> Even in modern-day Upper Egypt, a region still connected to the practice of *thaʿr*,<sup>61</sup> substitutive rites are carried out that elucidate the institution’s sacrificial nature and importance in maintaining social order. In some cases, the shroud of the deceased is spread on the floor and a sheep is sacrificed as an alternative. From this larger perspective, Abū Khirāsh’s celebration of the virtue of *thaʿr* is not merely an empty boast but rather a proclamation of allegiance, perhaps unconscious, to an ancient cultural model that transcends temporal and geographical boundaries. In both ancient

54. Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals Speak*, 65.

55. The rite of passage has been theorized by van Gennep as (1) a “rite of separation” of the initiate from society, (2) a marginal state in which the initiate is temporarily outside society, and (3) a “rite of aggregation” in which he/she is brought back into society and a new social role. See Edmund Leach, “Against Genres: Are Parables Lights Set in Candlesticks or Put under a Bushel?,” in *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*, ed. Edmund Leach and D. Alan Aycock, 89–112 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 99, quoted in Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals Speak*, 56.

56. Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2001), 113–114.

57. Plato, *Laws*, 9:872e, 873a.

58. Jack David Eller, *Introducing Anthropology of Religion: Culture to the Ultimate* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 114.

59. V. G. Kiernan, *The Duel in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1.

60. Kiernan, *Duel in European History*, 12.

61. It should be noted that the image of Upper Egypt as a traditional, backward society in which *thaʿr* is still practiced is partially created and perpetuated by modern Egyptian television shows, such as *Aunt Ṣafīyya and the Monastery* (based on Bahāʾ Ṭāhir’s novel) and *Revenge*. See Lila Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 180–181.

and modern societies that rely on the law of blood vengeance, the failure to avenge blood may be perceived as a path to social dissolution. The ritual and sacrificial significance of blood vengeance and its social function are key to understanding the profound break with the past that Muḥammad's banishment of the practice of *tha'r* represented and that Abū Khirāsh lamented in his poem.

However, vengeance could also spiral out of control and lead to excessive bloodshed. *Tha'r* as could erase entire families and tribes, as a *khobar* involving Abū Khirāsh's family illustrates. According to the story, the Banū Liḥyān killed a protégé (*jār*) of one of Abū Khirāsh's brothers, Abū Jundub, "whom his people called ill-omened."<sup>62</sup> Abū Jundub went to Mecca, performed the rituals of the pilgrimage, gathered all the reprobates (*khula'a*) present, and "killed many of their [Banū Liḥyān's] men and took captive many of their women and children."<sup>63</sup> The most famous example of the destructive power of *tha'r* remains the legendary al-Basūs War between the tribes Bakr and Taghlib, which supposedly started over a killed camel and continued for forty years. Muḥammad's community was aware of this danger; Muḥammad feared *tha'r* as antiestablishment force and as an expression of tribal *aṣabiyya* and ruled strongly against it. The famous "farewell oration" (*khutbat al-widā'*) ascribed to Muḥammad contains an explicit prohibition of *tha'r*: "The blood [revenge] of the Jāhiliyya is void" (*wa-inna dimā' al-jāhiliyya mawḍū'a*).<sup>64</sup> Notwithstanding the possible later origin of this speech,<sup>65</sup> it shows that the early Islamic community saw *tha'r* as an important and dangerous matter. The Qur'ān, a contemporary source, admonishes against taking revenge on anyone beyond the perpetrator of a crime. This condoned substitute practice is called *qīṣāṣ*:<sup>66</sup>

[Do not] take life which God has made sacred—except for just cause. And if anyone is slain wrongfully, We have given his heir authority [to demand *qīṣāṣ* or to forgive]: *but let him not exceed bounds in the matter of taking life.* (Q 17:33; my emphasis)

But even in the case of this limited "just" punishment, the Qur'ān encourages forgiveness. In a similarly phrased verse, it adds that "if anyone saved a life it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people" (Q 5:32). The new community rejected the ancient law as barbaric.

Furthermore, *tha'r* must be understood as a part of a broader view of warfare and of the individual's role therein, which was to be irreversibly changed. Although it represented a deadly threat to society, *tha'r* also emphasized the value of individual life because it provided a strong incentive not to kill. The death of just one person could result in the

62. Al-Ṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:161.

63. Al-Ṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:161; or so the narrators of the *Aghānī* imagine the incident that Abū Jundub mentions in his *fakhr* verses.

64. Al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1998), 2:31.

65. Generally, on the debates concerning the authenticity of classical Arabic oratory, see Pamela Klasova, "Empire through Language: Al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf al-Thaqafī and the Power of Oratory in Umayyad Iraq" (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2018). The conclusions of this dissertation, however, concern only Umayyad oratory, and I make no claims about the authenticity of speeches ascribed to Muḥammad.

66. J. Schacht, "Qīṣāṣ," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.

annihilation of a whole tribe. This appreciation of individual life also comes through in Jāhilī poetry in the rhetorical device of *inṣāf*, which highlights the qualities of the enemy. To praise one's enemy—since a weak enemy is not worth fighting—is a form of praising oneself, and as Suzanne Stetkevych points out, this device was often associated with blood vengeance.<sup>67</sup> In a parallel to the idea of equal enemies in *inṣāf*, according to the law of blood vengeance it was not enough to kill the killer: the subject of the retribution had to be the victim's equal. If the killer was not such a person, additional people belonging to the killer's kin would be killed. *Inṣāf*—widely used in the poetics of war in general—aptly illustrates the Jāhilī conception of warfare, in which the enemy is seen as an equal. Perhaps the most famous image of two warriors confronting each other in battle is captured in an elegy by Abū Khirāsh's fellow Hudhalī Abū Dhu'ayb.<sup>68</sup>

In the Jāhilī poetic imagination, wars, however cruel, also provided a space to demonstrate one's courage and achieve glory. The poetic Jāhiliyya, with its strong shame/honor element, presented tribal wars in terms of a competition for honor and glory. Johan Huizinga, in his *Homo Ludens*, exposed the affinity between war and play, explaining that especially in archaic societies, both were conceived of as a contest for glory. Huizinga sees the playful quality of war as transformative: it turns bloody violence into a cultural phenomenon that provides strong incentives for a civilization, informing it with ideas of chivalry and honor.<sup>69</sup> Fittingly, Montgomery Watt has noted that “raiding is the ‘national sport’ of the Arabs.”<sup>70</sup> Jāhilī poetry conveys precisely this image of war, in which people fight not only out of necessity and for material gain but also for the noble strife itself. War equals excitement. We saw this excitement for war already in Abū Khirāsh's first elegy for Zuhayr. Elsewhere, Abū Khirāsh says, “So we incite those who rise up against them, for we say that the soul heals only at igniting war.”<sup>71</sup> The frenzy of battle that possesses the soul can be healed only by taking up arms.

This perception of war as play was to change substantially with Muḥammad's ascendancy and the fast-paced building of the early Islamic state. The scale of wars grew beyond what many of the inhabitants of Arabia could imagine, and their very conception was transformed. As a means to achieving a higher good, war became an ideological enterprise. The existence of a higher good and the dichotomy of right and wrong (lamented by Abū Khirāsh, as seen earlier) automatically turned the enemy into a villain. Islamic wars were waged in the name of Islam, and as a consequence their opponents were dehumanized as infidels and no longer seen as equals. The play quality of war, as Huizinga explains, can be retained only as long as war takes place within a sphere whose members regard each other as equals, and with Islam's recasting of warfare in moral terms, this quality was lost. In the course of the Islamic conquests, men fought and died in great numbers and the value of

67. Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals Speak*, 63. For a collection of *munṣifāt*, see ‘Abd al-Mu‘in al-Mulūhī, *al-Munṣifāt* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1967).

68. Al-Sukkarī, *Sharḥ ash‘ār al-Hudhaliyyīn*, 4–41; al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī, *al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, 849–892.

69. See “Play and War” in Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (New York: J. and J. Harper, 1970), 110–126.

70. William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (1953; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 17.

71. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:153; al-Sukkarī, *Sharḥ ash‘ār al-Hudhaliyyīn*, 1204.

individual life diminished. Various anecdotes testify to the shock experienced by the first generation of Muslims who saw great numbers of people die on the battlefield. To give one example, al-Ṭabarī narrates that a group of Arab Muslims who had converted to Islam from Christianity were so appalled by the merciless bloodshed and general low morals they witnessed during the Battle of Ṣiffīn that they decided to return to Christianity.<sup>72</sup>

To what extent Abū Khirāsh was aware of these crucial ideological changes is hard to tell. Though he was probably not able to put his finger on their exact nature, his annoyance is palpable. The following poem illustrates how the conquests impacted his life and what he thought of the *muhājirūn*, a term that in this context refers to Muslim soldiers:<sup>73</sup>

[A thirsty man, i.e., the poet] calls him [his son Khirāsh]  
to give him his evening drink, but he doesn't come;  
the boy has truly become foolish.  
And he [the poet] receives his cup back, empty,  
as if the tears of his eyes were pearls.  
In the morning, in the evening, between him and his cup-bearer [son]  
are the black mountains of Syria, as though burnt with fire.  
Know, Khirāsh, that only meager good  
awaits the *muhājir* after his *hijra*.  
I saw you wishing for goodness (*birr*) without me,  
like a dog daubed with blood to make it seem that he has hunted,  
although he has not.<sup>74</sup>

In these lines, the poet bewails his abandonment in his old age. His son is campaigning with the Muslim army far from Mecca, further than the mountains of Syria, and there is no one to hand him his drink. His complaint sheds light on a larger social issue of the time: the demands of the established Muslim state and army disrupted traditional bonds within families. Hitherto, sons had been expected to take care of their aging parents, but now young men like Khirāsh had become *muhājirūn*, Muslim soldiers. Putting aside his loneliness and sense of abandonment, Abū Khirāsh clearly disapproves of his son's career choice. His words "only meager good awaits the *muhājir* after his *hijra*" (*khayr al-muhājir ba'd hijratihī zahīd*) offer a contemporary critique of the nascent Muslim army.

It is vital to understand the significance of the notion of *birr* that appears in the last verse, for it is presented in the poem as the main value of the Muslim soldiers. *Birr*, a

72. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 5:125.

73. The term *muhājir* has two meanings. On the one hand, it refers to an individual who joined Muḥammad during his emigration (*hijra*) from Mecca to Medina; on the other, it denotes someone who, at the time of the conquests, abandoned his home, registered in the *dīwān* to receive a regular stipend, and joined the army in a garrison city. For a discussion of this term, see Patricia Crone, "The First-Century Concept of 'Hijra,'" *Arabica* 41 (1994): 352-87; Khalil Athamina, "A'rāb and Muhājirūn in the Environment of Amṣār," *Studia Islamica* 66 (1987): 5-25.

74. Al-İṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:162; Appendix, 1.e. Geert Jan van Gelder noted in private communication that *maḥṣūr* in this edition may be a misreading of *makhḍūb*. Al-Sukkarī, *Sharḥ ash'ār al-Hudhaliyyīn*, 1243, has this line with a different text: *ka-makhḍūbi l-labbāni wa-lā yaṣīdū*.

Qurʾānic concept usually translated as piety or godliness, has three different connotations relevant to the present context. Edward Lane, in his *Lexicon*, gives as the first meaning of *birr* general goodness: *barra* means to be pious, kind, or good. The second connotation is related to material goods as recompense. So *barrat bī silʿatuh* means “his article was easy of sale to me,” that is, it recompensed me by its high price for my care of it. In this regard, it may also be pertinent that *burr* is “wheat.” The third connotation of *birr* is most intriguing given its use in Abū Khirāsh’s text: the phrase *birr al-wālidayn* refers to filial piety and to obedience to one’s parents. In consideration of the full meaning of *birr*, the poet’s words “I saw you wishing for *birr* without me” should be read as a subversion of the concept in whose name the Muslim soldiers fought. To Abū Khirāsh, *birr* stands not for godliness or piety toward God but primarily for obedience to one’s father, expressed by lavishing him with goods as an honorable son does. We can understand Abū Khirāsh’s argument to be that all the material gain that his son may attain in the Muslim army is useless, because he will not use it to fulfill his duty to his father.

The second hemistich of the last verse, in which Abū Khirāsh compares his son to “a dog daubed with blood to make it seem that he has hunted, although he has not,” reveals the poet’s contempt for his son’s dubious claims as warrior and, by extension, the claims of the Muslim army he represents. The comparison to a hunting dog is a variation on a proverb about a dog whose throat and chest have been daubed with blood to make it look as if he has hunted successfully. In other words, the dog is held to be something that it is not. Abū Khirāsh uses the proverb in relation to Khirāsh and the other *muhājirūn* to say that despite all appearances, they are no warriors. As a brigand who has sung of battles and heroic fights, the poet has his own conception of the heroic warrior. The new state, however, has turned the heroic warrior of the poetic Jāhiliyya into a soldier of God and replaced individual glory with piety. Abū Khirāsh’s poetry shows that its author is acutely aware of these shifts and does not hesitate to criticize them. The lines thus convey not only the poet’s complaint about his son’s absence but also his criticism of the son’s chosen lifestyle and social circles.

#### *Abū Khirāsh in the Akhbār*

This section turns to the *akhbār* about Abū Khirāsh in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* as a way to understand how later generations dealt with the Jāhili ethos and the occasionally anti-Islamic tone of the poet’s verses. It is here that the interplay between poetry and *akhbār* comes to the fore, elucidating how the persona of Abū Khirāsh was transformed in Islamic memory from an unruly brigand to an Islamic martyr. But first, a few words on the provenance of these *akhbār* are in order.

A glance at the chains of narrators (*isnāds*) of the *akhbār* reveals that Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī took most of his material from al-Sukkarī. Abū Saʿīd al-Ḥasan b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sukkarī (d. 275/888) was a famous philologist who assembled the only extant *dīwān* of tribal poetry that has come down to us—the *dīwān* of the Hudhalīs, the tribe of Abū Khirāsh. It is noteworthy that the *isnāds* of these *akhbār* do not go all the way to the poets but end with early ʿAbbāsīd philologists such as Ibn al-Aʿrābī (d. 231/845), Abū ʿUbayda (d. 209/824–25), and Abū ʿAmr al-Shaybānī (d. 206/821). Another important early ʿAbbāsīd philologist

often mentioned as the last narrator (not through al-Sukkarī's *isnāds*) is al-Aṣma'ī (d. 213/828). All these men were philologists and grammarians in Basra and Kufa who narrated much poetry and *akhbār* of the past, claiming that they had visited the tribes and had thus received much of their material directly from the Bedouins.<sup>75</sup>

The absence of longer *isnāds* may indicate different things. The *akhbār* are literary material, not *ḥadīth*, and as such they possess less of the authority required for, for example, the grounding of legal opinions, for which uninterrupted *isnāds* to the original sources would be necessary. The fact that the *isnāds* end with early 'Abbāsīd philologists may mean either that these men collected the stories orally from the Bedouins, as they claimed, or that they recorded them from earlier written sources.<sup>76</sup> Although the transmission process of the *akhbār* cannot be traced with certainty, I will suggest its probable stages in my concluding remarks.

The mechanisms through which the *akhbār* deal with the poetry of the unruly Mukhaḍram poet can be enumerated as follows.

1. Narrativization and dramatization: The most common technique of the *akhbār* is to develop the themes brought up in the poems into narratives. They fill in the gaps. At the beginning of Abū Khirāsh's entry in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, for example, a long narrative introduces Abū Khirāsh's boast in verse about his escape from his enemies. The *khbar* details his escape, adds suspense, and celebrates Abū Khirāsh's heroic ability to run faster than anyone else.<sup>77</sup> As we will see below, the *akhbār* on occasion introduce new narrative elements not present in the verses.

The *akhbār* also dramatize Abū Khirāsh's poetry by connecting his persona to salient figures of his age. We have already encountered him with al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra, the father of the great Muslim army commander Khālīd b. al-Walīd, chief of the Qurashī clan of Banū Makhzūm and thus one of the most powerful men in Mecca. A second instance has Abū Khirāsh meet the caliph 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. He pleads with the caliph to let his son Khirāsh return from the army. When 'Umar hears Abū Khirāsh's poetic lament about his loneliness and the distance that divides his son from him, he orders Khirāsh to go home and rules that any soldier with an elderly father can enter the army only with his father's permission.<sup>78</sup> Neither of these encounters is mentioned in Abū Khirāsh's poetry, and we can thus only speculate about their historicity. But whether or not the encounters happened, it is worth considering why they were narrated. In the case of the story involving 'Umar, the intent may be symbolic. The narrative may be the result of a later act of memory that linked a

75. Abū 'Amr b. al-'Alā', the teacher of Abū 'Ubayda, and al-Aṣma'ī are said to have developed the method of collecting material directly from the Bedouins as the pure carriers of the Arab tradition. Whether or not this was the main method, the speech of the Bedouins had cultural authority. For example, Ibn al-A'rābī reportedly claimed—as part of the Kufan vs. Basran rivalry among the grammarians—that he had heard a thousand Bedouins pronounce a particular word differently compared to al-Aṣma'ī. Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1985), 10:687.

76. For a discussion of the sources of the *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, see note 27 above.

77. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:147–149.

78. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:162.

concrete policy of protecting families to the verses of a brigand bemoaning the loss of his son for military service.

2. Exculpation: The *akhbār*, which usually comment on the salient motifs in poems, are conspicuously silent with regard to the most problematic verses. Take, for example, the two elegies for Zuhayr discussed above. The poet's grievances with the moralizing youth and his frustration with the impossibility of seeking vengeance on the Quraysh are ignored, a silence I consider deliberate.

An even more important strategy of exculpation is the manipulation of Abū Khirāsh's conversion chronology. This is where the organization of the *akhbār* in Abū Khirāsh's entry comes into play. The entry begins with a long narrative about the poet's heroic escape and almost mythical fleet-footedness, then moves to the stories that connect him with the custodian of the pagan shrine of al-ʿUzzā and continues with narratives about tribal feuds—his own as well as his brothers'. It is only toward the end of the entry that Abū Khirāsh's conversion is mentioned. This ordering reflects a narrative strategy that implies that he recited most of his poetry while still a pagan, which, in turn, would exculpate him for his un-Islamic outlook and allow for his later transformation to a righteous, exemplary Muslim. However, the chronology of events and Abū Khirāsh's references to Islam, discussed above, indicate that he had already converted by the time of their writing. His conversion is described laconically: "He submitted to Islam and his Islam was good,"<sup>79</sup> a typical formula used for the Mukhaḍramūn. In Abū Khirāsh's case, it simply conveys his tribe's collective pledge of allegiance to the Prophet after the conquest of Mecca in 8/630. However, in al-İṣfahānī's entry, the moment of conversion acquires importance because it separates the preceding, "pagan" *akhbār* from the Islamizing end of the entry, to which we will now turn our attention.

3. Islamization: The most obvious example of an attempt to paint the poet in more Islamic colors is a *khabar* that concludes the entry. The *khabar* shows Abū Khirāsh selflessly setting out to bring water for Yemeni *ḥajj* pilgrims. A snake bites the poet on his way back, but he manages to return with water for his guests and then dies without telling them about his fatal wound. When the caliph ʿUmar hears the news, he reprimands the pilgrims for demanding the excessive favors that led to a Muslim's death and orders them to pay the *diya*.

Nothing of this detailed narrative—save for the snakebite—appears in the verses that the *khabar* accompanies:

The fates (*manāyā*) are ever-victorious over man;  
 they climb up every hill.  
 By your life, snake of the lowlands of Anf, you destroyed  
 a leg that leaves behind a severe loss for the companions.  
 / . . . /  
 Oh snake of the lowlands of Anf, you destroyed  
 a leg full of munificence for the companions.

79. Al-İṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:162: *Aslama Abū Khirāsh fa-ḥasuna islāmuh*.

Between Buṣrā and Ṣanʿā,  
It did not leave a single enemy unavenged.<sup>80</sup>

It is fair to acknowledge that the story of the poet's death by snakebite could be a topos—a poetic imagining of the brigand's death. Of the various ways in which one might die—such as in bed or on a horse in battle—a lethal snakebite is a cause of death appropriate for a brigand who moves through the desert on foot. The famous Umayyad brigand Mālik b. al-Rayb is also occasionally said to have died this way, which supports the association of death by snakebite with brigandry.<sup>81</sup>

Whether a poem attributed later to Abū Khirāsh or his own authentic production, these verses contain the typically Jāhilī belief in the unpredictable nature of fate, which lurks at every corner, ready to take down a man, along with the Jāhilī theme of bravery in the face of this reckless force. Addressing the snake, his killer, Abū Khirāsh refers to himself synecdochally as a leg because he takes pride in his fleet-footedness—a typical brigand quality, as discussed earlier. He exults in his ability to inflict harm on his enemies and swears that he did not spare the life of a single enemy who had spilled the blood of his kinfolk “between Buṣrā [in Syria] and Ṣanʿā [in Yemen]”—that is, in the whole of the Ḥijāz. Whenever the law of *tha'r* had called, he had answered its call.

The discrepancy between the verses and the narratives that accompany them is clear in this case. The dying poet, in his final words, evokes unmistakably Jāhilī tribal themes; in contrast, the *akhbār* depict him as a Muslim quasi-martyr who died serving Muslim pilgrims. ʿUmar's presence in the story strengthens Abū Khirāsh's new Islamic aura and at the same time illustrates an essential misunderstanding in terms of values. Whereas ʿUmar punishes the pilgrims for asking for favors to which they were not entitled, for Abū Khirāsh hospitality was a sacred duty, as seen in a previous poem. On a more symbolic level, the inclusion of an account in which the Muslim caliph enforces the payment of blood money (*diya*) at the end of a chapter steeped in the heat of vengeance may not be an accident. It may symbolize the transition of authority from tribal law to the caliph and from pagan blood vengeance to a more Islamic form of compensation. Overall, Abū Khirāsh's *akhbār* can be read as carrying the poet from his Jāhilī existence into Islam, thus transforming his life story into an epic conversion narrative.

As we have seen, the *akhbār* are more than just biographical notes. They have various functions—they dramatize and expand on the themes of Abū Khirāsh's verses; they raise his place in Islamic history; they exculpate the poet for his Jāhilī existence; and they transform him into a Muslim martyr. And so, they reveal how later audiences interpreted the old poetry. In the case of the second poet, Abū Miḥjan, who mainly spoke about wine and drinking parties, they facilitate his transformation into an exemplary Muslim warrior.

80. Al-Ṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:163; Appendix, 1.f.

81. *Al-Aghānī* is silent about Mālik's death. Most sources, such as al-Baghdādī in his *Khizāna*, al-Bakrī in his *Muʿjam mā istaʿjam*, and Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih in *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, record that Mālik was pierced (*tuʿin*). Only Abū Zayd al-Qurashī in *Jamʿarat ashʿar al-ʿArab* claims that he was bitten by a snake.

### 3. Abū Miḥjan al-Thaqafī: From Drunkard to Muslim Warrior

The second of the three Mukhaḍramūn, Abū Miḥjan, attained fame as a wine poet and acclaimed warrior.<sup>82</sup> He was a member of Thaqīf, a major tribe in al-Ṭāʾif, the sister city of Mecca. Abū Miḥjan's poetry features the themes of wine, exile, imprisonment, and war; *akhbār* about him offer a view into a life full of unexpected twists. Abū Miḥjan reportedly first proved his warrior qualities in the Battle of al-Ṭāʾif (8/630) against Muḥammad's army, in the course of which he wounded one of Abū Bakr's sons. This story underlines his liminal position between the Jāhiliyya and Islam. In the Islamic period, Abū Miḥjan continued to drink excessively and to recite wine poetry until the caliph ʿUmar ordered him to be flogged and sent him to distant exile, from which the poet escaped. He joined the army of Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ (d. between 50/670–71 and 58/677), a Muslim commander on campaign against Sasanian forces. Saʿd imprisoned Abū Miḥjan at ʿUmar's command, but when the Muslim forces faltered in the Battle of al-Qādisiyya (15/636),<sup>83</sup> the poet convinced Saʿd to set him free. He then fought heroically on the Muslim side.

“When I die, bury me by the trunk of a grapevine . . .”

Abū Miḥjan's poetry is steeped in wine-related imagery, as is evident in his famous verses:

When I die, bury me by the trunk of a grapevine,  
so that its roots may water my bones after my death.  
Do not bury me in the desert, for I fear  
that when I die [there] I will not taste it [the wine].  
May my grave be watered by the wine of al-Ḥuṣṣ,  
for I am its captive after I was the one carrying it along.<sup>84</sup>

The poem is framed as a testament. Abū Miḥjan asks to be buried close to a grapevine that would quench his thirst for wine, fearing the absence of the sweet drink in the afterlife. He dreams about grapevine roots watering his grave and declares the power that wine has over him: even if he once had it under his control, he eventually became its captive. Such a declaration of loyalty to drink was a scandalous act at the time. It is true that wine poetry came to form an important element of Islamic culture,<sup>85</sup> but this was a later development. During the lifetime of Abū Miḥjan, both wine and poetry were still finding their place in society, as their Qurʾānic denouncement was very recent. Poetry that celebrated wine must still have been seen as an affront to the new social order.

82. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:5–14. Abū Miḥjan also has his own *dīwān*: *Dīwān Abī Miḥjan*.

83. N. Rhodokanakis and Ch. Pellat, “Abū Miḥjan,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.

84. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:9; Appendix, 2.a. Al-Ḥuṣṣ is a place in Syria, near Homs, mainly famous for being mentioned in this poem.

85. Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 57–71.

*Wine in the World of Abū Miḥjan*

The Qurʾān forbids the drinking of wine and proclaims it a sin with the following words:

They ask thee concerning wine and gambling (*maysir*). Say: “In them is great sin, and some profit for men; but the sin is greater than the profit.”  
(Q 2:219)

O ye who believe! Intoxicants and gambling (*maysir*), [dedication of] stones, and [divination by] arrows are an abomination of Satan’s handiwork: eschew such [abomination], that ye may prosper. (Q 5:90)

The prohibition of wine represented another profound break with the poetic Jāhiliyya, in which the celebration of wine (often paired with women) constituted a classic motif, as seen in Ṭarafa’s *mu‘allaqa*. Wine was not only a tool of entertainment; it was also intimately connected with pagan beliefs in fate and the pursuit of specific religious practices.<sup>86</sup> The second of these Qurʾānic verses illustrates the connection by juxtaposing intoxicants with *maysir* (a game of chance involving arrows), the dedication of stones, and divination. Another Qurʾānic verse warns the Believers not to come drunk to prayer, intimating that drunkenness was a common phenomenon in Mecca in Muḥammad’s time: “O ye who believe! Approach not prayers with a mind befogged (*wa-antum sukārā*), until ye can understand all that ye say” (Q 4:43).<sup>87</sup> Whether because of the symbolical connection of wine with the pagan world or because of the inappropriate behavior of inebriated companions during prayer, Muḥammad’s mission challenged an important element of the familiar Jāhili world.

Abū Miḥjan sometimes comments directly on the status of wine. The wine poem quoted earlier conveys fear of the lack of wine after death. This fear may represent distrust in the Qurʾānic promise of “rivers of wine” (Q 47:15) in Paradise. Another possibility is that the poet in fact alludes to the wine of Paradise but proclaims his preference for earthly wine. In another poem, Abū Miḥjan addresses the prohibition of wine explicitly:

Though now wine has become rare and forbidden, and Islam  
and unease (*ḥaraj*) have come between it and me,  
back then, I used to . . .<sup>88</sup>

Here the poet comments on the changes he is witnessing in society: Islam has forbidden wine, and as a consequence wine has become rare. What is more, the Islamic prohibition has given rise to feelings of unease (*ḥaraj*). In the verses that follow, Abū Miḥjan contrasts this situation with his many memories of wine-drinking in the Jāhiliyya, accompanied by

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86. Sacrificial offerings using wine were well known in the ancient Near East. See W. Heimpel, “Libation,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 7 (1987–90): 1–5. W. Montgomery Watt, for example, put forward the hypothesis that the prohibition of wine stemmed from its relation with *maysir*, which might have some connection with pagan religion. Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 298.

87. A. J. Wensinck, “*Khamr*,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.

88. Al-İṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:10.

the sensual tone of a beautiful female server's voice.<sup>89</sup> Abū Miḥjan's experience of *ḥaraj* resembles Abū Khirāsh's annoyance with the stifling nature of the new Islamic morality. This *ḥaraj* that comes from God (referred to as al-Raḥmān) returns in another of Abū Miḥjan's poems. This time, the *ḥaraj* intervenes between him and Shamūs, which, according to the accompanying *khobar*, is a woman whom he saw as he was planting beans in Medina.<sup>90</sup> It should, however, be noted that *shamūs* is also a word for wine. I have translated it here as a reference to a woman:

I looked at Shamūs, but the great unease (*ḥaraj*)  
from the All-Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*) stands between us.<sup>91</sup>

Whether the object of the poet's desire is wine or a woman, in this poem as in the previous one *ḥaraj* hinders the desire's fulfillment. The Qurʾān, too, uses the term *ḥaraj*, but in the opposite context—to admonish the Believers *not* to feel *ḥaraj* when receiving God's message, marrying the wives of their adoptive sons, acknowledging an inability to give alms, and so on.<sup>92</sup> Through its employment of *ḥaraj*, the Qurʾān seeks to emphasize that God does not burden His Believers with unease: He is the sole law-giver, and they should not feel uneasy about doing something that is not forbidden. The poet thus turns the Islamic rhetoric upside down when he points to the unease, or moral scruples, that the new religion has caused him.

In the following poem, Abū Miḥjan clearly identifies the caliph as the one responsible for the sad state of wine in the present:

Have you not seen that fate makes a young man fall,  
that a man cannot avert his destiny?  
I endured the blows of fate, unjust in its judgment,  
and I did not fear and I was not a coward.  
Indeed, I was endowed with fortitude when my brothers died,  
but I cannot refrain from wine for a single day!  
The Commander of the Believers put it to death,  
so its true friends now weep around the wine presses.<sup>93</sup>

These lines begin with the traditional Jāhilī theme of the might and inevitability of fate and with the poet's boasting about his ability to endure its blows. But then Abū Miḥjan

89. For the first four lines of the poem, see the Appendix, 2.b.

90. This is how the *khobar* interprets the second line of the poem, in which the poet complains that he did not expect to come to Medina and plant beans. ("Among the people who came to Medina, I used to consider myself someone could most certainly dispense with planting beans.") Although an urbanite, Abū Miḥjan does not seem to have worked much in Ṭāʾif. Especially agricultural work was considered among the Arabs as not appropriate for them and this sentiment is evident in this verse. See Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:6; Appendix, 2.c.

91. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:6; Appendix, 2.c.

92. The word حَرَج appears in the Qurʾān fifteen times. For examples, see Q 4:65; 5:6; 7:2; 9:91; 22:78; 24:61; 33:37, 38, 50; 48:17.

93. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:13; Appendix, 2.f.

proclaims that although he can restrain himself on such tragic occasions as the death of his brothers, he cannot, even for a single day, restrain his desire for wine. He accuses the caliph of having “put it [wine] to death” and then paints a somber image of drinkers wandering around the defunct wine presses, mourning the sweet drink.

### *Exile, Imprisonment, and War in Abū Miḥjan’s Poetry*

In addition to the glorification of wine, Abū Miḥjan also dedicated many verses to the themes of exile, imprisonment, and war. According to the *akhbār*, he was exiled to the island of Ḥaḍawḍā, which is known in the Islamic tradition as a place of exile. The location of Ḥaḍawḍā is not clear, nor can we be sure that it was an island, but its appearance in Abū Miḥjan’s poetry indicates that there was indeed a designated place of exile in early Islam.<sup>94</sup> In these verses, addressed to the caliph ‘Umar (Abū Ḥafs), the poet mentions his exile when he complains about a boat and sailing on the sea (or lake).<sup>95</sup> Though the main purpose of the poem is to boast of the poet’s warrior skills, it also shows that the sailing experience left its mark on the native of the Ḥijāz desert:

Praise be to God, who saved and delivered me  
from Ibn Jahrā’ when the boat (*būṣī*)<sup>96</sup> ran aground.  
Who takes it upon himself to sail the sea with the *būṣī* as his vessel to al-Ḥaḍawḍā:  
what a terrible boat he has chosen!  
Let Abū Ḥafs, the worshipper of God, promptly know,  
whether he is at war or at peace,  
that I attack the first horse of the enemy when others are afraid,  
and I capture the enemy’s horse under my banner.  
I plunge into the tumult of war and my iron armor protects me  
when others lag behind.<sup>97</sup>

The poem strikes a defiant tone: Abū Miḥjan praises God, who allowed him to escape his jailers, and invites people to inform the caliph ‘Umar about his qualities as a warrior and his bravery in war. He provides evidence of his bravery by depicting a scene in which he fearlessly attacks the first fighter in the enemy’s army, kills him, and seizes his horse. In such battle poetics we recognize, yet again, the traditional values inherited from the poetic Jāhiliyya. The presence of ‘Umar in the poem suggests that it may have been indeed he who

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94. It is not entirely clear where this island was located and whether it existed at all. According to Yāqūt, it is not an island but “a mountainous region (*jabal*) in the west, to which the pre-Islamic Arabs used to banish outcasts.” He also mentions a certain al-Ḥāzīmī, who said that Ḥuḍūd (or Ḥaḍūd)—without ā—was an island. However, if Ḥaḍawḍā were a mountain, it would be difficult to explain Abū Miḥjan’s mention of the sea (*baḥr*) and a boat (*būṣī*) in connection with his sojourn there. In modern-day Saudi Arabia, the name is used for a mountain range in the region of al-Jawf. Interestingly, there is a large lake in this region; if this is the place that Abū Miḥjan talks about, the lake could explain his references to boats and the “sea.”

95. Al-Ṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:5–6.

96. *Lisān al-‘Arab* identifies *būṣī* as a Persian loanword.

97. Al-Ṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:5–6; Appendix, 2.d.

sent the poet to exile. Abū Miḥjan was an urban poet, hailing from the city of al-Ṭāʿif, and he appears to have been closer to the establishment than was Abū Khirāsh. In any case, in these verses Abū Miḥjan openly addresses the caliph, showing off his valor in battle. As if trying to start a new chapter in their relationship, the poet wants to prove to the caliph that his service is invaluable.

Another poem, this one related to Abū Miḥjan's time in Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ's army and his imprisonment in that period, has a similar rhetorical goal, despite its much more humble and apologetic tone. It attempts to convince someone with authority over the poet to forget about the wine incident and set him free. The poem begins with a description of the poet's miserable captivity and ends with his promise that he will stop drinking if he is granted freedom:

It is sad enough that horses are drumming the ground with their hooves,  
loaded with spears,  
while I am left tied in chains.  
When I stand the iron tortures me, and the doors were closed behind me;  
doors that [made such a deafening noise that it] would drown out  
anyone's calling.  
I was once a wealthy man with many brothers,  
but they abandoned me. I have no brother now.  
Every morning I have to deal with the tightly locked shackle;  
it has devoured my body and worn me out.  
What a great man I am! Left behind, tied up,  
while my family and tribesmen neglect me.  
Barred from the reignited war,  
while others display their glorious deeds.  
By God, I vow that I will not breach His law  
and I will no longer visit the taverns, if I am set free.<sup>98</sup>

Abū Miḥjan here poignantly describes two kinds of suffering. The first is psychological: he cannot join the battle and attain warrior glory, while “others display their glorious deeds.” The second form of suffering is physical: the iron chains torture him with his every move and wear him down. A striking image is his memory of the deafening sound of the doors closing behind him, a sound so loud that it drowns out human screams. Al-Ṣfahānī records that Abū Miḥjan was held in the palace (*qaṣr*);<sup>99</sup> al-Masʿūdī specifies that at that point Saʿd resided in Ḥisn al-ʿUdhayb and that he kept Abū Miḥjan in the lower part of his palace there.<sup>100</sup> In addition, the poet repeatedly complains that he was abandoned by his family and tribe, a comment related to a general dissolution of tribal bonds. He sarcastically calls himself “a great man,” one who is tied up and abandoned by his kin; he laments that he

98. Al-Ṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:8; Appendix, 2.e.

99. Al-Ṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:7.

100. Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-jawhar*, ed. Charles Pellat (Beirut: l'Université Libanaise, 1965–73), 3:58, quoted in Anthony, “Domestic Origins of Imprisonment,” 592.

used to have many brothers but now has none, and his family and tribesmen have cast him off. As in Abū Khirāsh's poems, the establishment, represented in this case by Sa'd b. Abī Waqqāṣ, prevents the tribe from carrying out the ancient duty of protecting its member.

Abū Miḥjan's verses offer a unique insight into the feelings of early Muslim prisoners. Imprisonment, as a state practice, appears to have spread quickly in early Islamic society.<sup>101</sup> Sean Anthony has described the shift of incarceration in early Islam from the domestic sphere to a more formalized state institution. According to Anthony, "no evidence survives attesting to the existence of formal prisons in this region before the Islamic conquests,"<sup>102</sup> and the earliest mentions of prison constructions seem to fall in 'Umar's reign<sup>103</sup>—which is also the lifetime of Abū Miḥjan, who, as we have seen, experienced both exile and imprisonment (albeit in domestic style).<sup>104</sup> However, already during the rule of al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (r. 75–95/694–714) as governor of Iraq and the East, the sources attest to a widespread use of prisons. Ibn 'Asākir, for instance, narrates on the authority of al-Aṣma'ī and others that when al-Ḥajjāj died, 33,000 people were freed from his prisons.<sup>105</sup> The exaggerated number aside, the reference suggests that by the beginning of the second/eighth century, prisons had become a central institution of the state. Abū Miḥjan's testimony indicates that already in the early days of the caliphate, the Islamic community had a designated place of banishment—the somewhat enigmatic Ḥaḍawḍā.<sup>106</sup> And it conveys first-hand experience of imprisonment and the resulting despair in the early Islamic period.

It is in this condition of despair that the poet pledges to give up wine in exchange for freedom. On the whole, therefore, Abū Miḥjan's poetry displays a deep allegiance to Jāhili themes and sentiments. He professes his love of wine, boasts of his bravery, and laments his banishment and imprisonment. His eventual forswearing of wine takes place only under strain. This is the image of Abū Miḥjan that emerges from his poetry; the *akhbār*, however, offer a very different one.

### *Abū Miḥjan in the Akhbār*

An examination of the *akhbār* in relation to the verses they accompany shows that the *akhbār* wrestle with the legacy of Abū Miḥjan in different ways. In what follows, I discuss how the drunkard poet is—through the workings of the *akhbār*—both punished and exculpated, and finally endowed with the aura of a heroic Muslim warrior. It should be noted that the earliest recorded narrators of the *akhbār*, that is, the names at the ends

101. For a bibliography on carceral practices in early Islam, see Anthony, "Domestic Origins of Imprisonment," 574, n. 13.

102. Anthony, "Domestic Origins of Imprisonment," 575.

103. Anthony, "Domestic Origins of Imprisonment," 586.

104. For Anthony's discussion of Abū Miḥjan's material, see his "Domestic Origins of Imprisonment," 590.

105. Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. 'Umar b. Gharāma al-'Amrawī (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995–2000), 12:184. On al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf, see Klasova, "Empire through Language."

106. See note 94 above.

of their *isnāds*, belong to the same generation of early ‘Abbāsīd philologists, *akhbārīs*, and historians as do the narrators of Abū Khirāsh’s *akhbār*.<sup>107</sup>

1. Islamization: As in the case of Abū Khirāsh, the *akhbār* about Abū Miḥjan construct an Islamic image of the poet. One technique is to emphasize Abū Miḥjan’s repentance for his drinking and his renouncement of wine later in life. In his poetry, we see a hint of renouncement only when he needs to get out of prison. But the narratives find a way to argue for a more substantial change of mind, even if this requires reinterpreting the verses. A good example of this strategy appears in connection with the verses quoted earlier, in which Abū Miḥjan observes that “now wine has become rare and forbidden.” These verses open a long poem (not quoted in the *Aghānī* in full) whose *nasīb* reeks of nostalgia for the happy days of drinking. By contrast, the accompanying narrative carries a decidedly more Islamic flair. It recounts that after Abū Miḥjan’s heroic performance in the Battle at al-Qādisiyya the Muslim commander Sa’d refused to implement the *ḥadd* punishment on him. This is when the poet decided to renounce wine. In the *khābar*, Abū Miḥjan explains that whereas previously the *ḥadd* punishment had purified him of his guilt, now he would have to carry his sins until the Day of Judgment.<sup>108</sup> The narrative echoes famous *ḥadīths* about people who begged the Prophet to punish them for their sins in order to cleanse their souls.<sup>109</sup> Its rhetoric may also remind us of Plato’s *Gorgias*, in which Socrates argues that the wrongdoer is better off when he is punished, because the punishment relieves his soul of the disease of injustice.<sup>110</sup> But this seems like an overly moral concern to come from a poet who, in his most famous verse, dreads the absence of wine after death. The idea that he renounced wine because he was deprived of the punishment for drinking is not consistent with the spirit of his poetry as a whole and should thus be ascribed to later narrators trying to boost Abū Miḥjan’s Islamic credentials. Admittedly, Abū Miḥjan’s renouncement of wine is supported by straightforwardly moralistic verses attributed to him. Yet we have reason to suspect that these verses were ascribed to him later precisely to polish his image as a Muslim. To give an example, the *Aghānī* quotes two lines in which Abū Miḥjan rejects wine

107. One of al-Isfahānī’s main sources for Abū Miḥjan’s material is the Kufan philologist Ibn al-A‘rābī, whose source, in turn, was his teacher (and father-in-law) al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī (d. ca. 164/781). Ibn al-A‘rābī was a contemporary of the Basran scholars al-Aṣma‘ī and Abū ‘Ubayda, whereas al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī was a contemporary of their teacher Abū ‘Amr b. al-‘Alā’. Other sources include the historians al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and al-Madā‘īnī (d. 228/843), the *akhbārī* al-Haytham b. ‘Adī (d. ca. 209/821), and the *adīb* Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889).

108. Al-Isfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:10, 12.

109. One *ḥadīth* tells of a man by the name of Mā‘īz who comes to the Prophet and asks the latter to purify him because he has sinned by engaging in illicit intercourse. The Prophet rejects the man’s confession two times and then inquires about his mental health. When the man comes and asks for punishment for the third time, the Prophet orders that he be stoned for his crime. A similar episode takes place with a woman from Ghāmid, but the woman is pregnant. The Prophet insists on waiting until the child is old enough to survive without her and then has her stoned. These *ḥadīths* illustrate the devotion and piety of Muslims who sinned but repented. See Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (Beirut), no. 2087; Abū Dāwūd, *al-Sunan* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, AH 1430), 4442, and others.

110. Plato, *Gorgias*, 472eff.

because it “has qualities that destroy the mild-tempered man (*ḥalīm*).”<sup>111</sup> *Ḥilm* (forbearance, sobriety) is a value that is embraced and promoted in Islam and is seen as opposed to the pre-Islamic *jahl* (ignorance, fierceness).<sup>112</sup> However, although most of the verses attributed to him in the *Aghānī* can also be found in his *dīwān*, such is not the case with these lines. Conversely, similar moralistic verses appear in Abū Miḥjan’s *dīwān* but are absent from the *Aghānī*. This asymmetry indicates that these two pairs of moralistic verses were probably added at a later stage.<sup>113</sup>

In Islamizing the poet, the *akhbār* also present him as an exemplary Islamic warrior. They describe, in detail, his heroic deeds at the Battle of al-Qādisiyya. In these narratives, the poet escapes from Sa‘d’s prison with the help of Sa‘d’s wife, takes Sa‘d’s horse, and rides to the battlefield. He fights so valiantly that several *akhbār* compare him to the leader of the Muslim army at al-Qādisiyya, Hishām b. ‘Utba, as well as to Khidr (sometimes equated with St. George)<sup>114</sup> and even to angels.<sup>115</sup> After the battle, Abū Miḥjan returns to his cell and chains. In this framing, Abū Miḥjan’s life story transforms into an odyssey from transgression and banishment to Islamic glory and submission to the establishment. It offers a moral example of an intractable drunkard who repents and turns into an Islamic warrior.

I do not mean to suggest that Abū Miḥjan did not take part in the Battle of al-Qādisiyya; my point is merely that the *akhbār* exaggerate his participation. Abū Miḥjan himself refers to the battle (as *laylat Qādis*) in his *fakhr* verses, which form the basis for this long narrative,<sup>116</sup> but a comment by Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī is telling: “The Battle of Aghwāth, the Battle of Armāth, and the Battle of al-Katā’ib were famous battles [at al-Qādisiyya], and narratives about them are very long. But there is no mention of Abū Miḥjan in this material, except for what we report here.”<sup>117</sup> Yet these few *akhbār* succeed in transforming a poet who dedicated his life to praising wine into a model soldier in the cause of Islam. Even today, leaders of Islamist groups—including the leader of a Lebanese terrorist group,<sup>118</sup> an al-Qaeda suicide bomber,<sup>119</sup> and an Aḥrār al-Shām commander<sup>120</sup>—choose the name Abū

111. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:12; Appendix, 2.g.

112. For a discussion of *ḥilm* and *jahl*, see, for instance, Jaroslav Stetkevych, *Muḥammad and the Golden Bough* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 5–12.

113. See Abū Miḥjan, *Dīwān*, 16, and the Appendix, 2.h.

114. A. J. Wensinck, “al-Kḥaḍīr,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.

115. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:8.

116. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:9.

117. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:7.

118. Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Sa‘dī (b. 1969) was the leader of the Lebanese group al-Anṣār, which is considered a branch of al-Qaeda. This “Abū Miḥjan” has been accused of the murder of the well-known Lebanese shaykh Nizār al-Ḥalabī and has a Wikipedia entry in Arabic.

119. On February 29, 2012, the al-Qaeda suicide bomber Abu Miḥjan al-Sayārī caused the deaths of twenty-one guards at a presidential palace in Yemen. Hakim Almasmari, “Al Qaeda Claims Responsibility for Deadly Yemen Attack,” CNN, February 29, 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/29/world/meast/al-qaeda-yemen-attack/>.

120. Aḥrār al-Shām is a Syrian opposition group; “Commander Abu Miḥjan of the group Ahraar-ul-Sham”

Miḥjan as their *nom de guerre*. One such contemporary fighter, from the ranks of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), who gave a lecture at a two-day jihad seminar held by the organization and urged Muslims to wage war against the “Crusader [that is, Christian] minority” in the Sahara, was known as “Abū Miḥjan the Nigerian,” and he delivered his lecture in the Hausa language.<sup>121</sup> The legacy of Abū Miḥjan has thus spread far and wide and is represented in multiple languages.

2. Exculpation: As in the case of Abū Khirāsh, the *akhbār* find excuses for Abū Miḥjan’s scandalous verses. If with Abū Khirāsh the solution lay in chronology, with Abū Miḥjan it consists in drawing a clear line between speech and deed. A *khbar* in which the poet outlines the reason for his imprisonment subtly plays with arguments about the nature of poetry. Abū Miḥjan is reported to have explained his imprisonment thus: “By God, he did not imprison me for eating or drinking a forbidden substance. But I used to drink wine in the Jāhiliyya, and I am a poet onto whose tongue poetry would creep, and at times the tongue would spit it out.”<sup>122</sup> In other words, the poet claims that he no longer drank wine *in reality* but merely recited verses about it. Furthermore, he argues that he does not have full control over what he says because he is a poet (*imru’ shā’ir*) and verses sometimes crept onto his tongue, as if of their own will. The idea that poetry has powers of its own is related to the traditional view of eloquent speech as the result of a natural, spontaneous process, almost an inspiration. A definition of eloquence that al-Jāhiz, in his *Kitāb al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, attributes to an esteemed orator from the famously well-spoken tribe of ‘Abd al-Qays illustrates this idea of the involuntariness of the creative process: “[Eloquence] is something that excites our hearts (*ṣudūranā*), which then throw it on our tongues.”<sup>123</sup> In Abū Miḥjan’s case, the *akhbār* use this conception of poetry to absolve the poet of blame: he could not control himself. The poet turns into a victim of his own poetry and of the Jāhili past.

The same argument about the difference between speech and deed is used elsewhere in the entry. In one *khbar*, after the battle at al-Qādisiyya, Sa’d promises Abū Miḥjan that he will not blame the poet for anything he says, unless he carries it out. Abū Miḥjan answers: “Surely, by God, I will not follow my tongue to any evil deed.”<sup>124</sup> Again, this story presents Abū Miḥjan as a good and obedient Muslim despite his immoral poetry. In another *khbar*, ‘Umar reacts furiously to the poet’s verses, quoted earlier, about his inability to abandon wine. The caliph commands that Abū Miḥjan’s punishment be increased, but ‘Alī steps in and reminds ‘Umar of the Qur’ānic verse: “And that they say what they practice not” (Q 26:226). This verse, mentioned earlier,<sup>125</sup> warns people about poets precisely because they

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is mentioned, for example, on an al-Qaeda-affiliated website: <https://almuwahideenmedia.wordpress.com/2015/06/>. Accessed May 16, 2017.

121. See Yossef Bodansky, “The Boko Haram and Nigerian Jihadism,” *ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security* 318 (2015): 8.

122. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:9.

123. Al-Jāhiz, *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, 1:96.

124. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:9.

125. See note 20 above.

say something else than what they do. Here, by contrast, the same verse is used to improve Abū Miḥjan's image, suggesting that since poets usually do not translate their words into action, his provocative poems should not be taken seriously. The story thus provides an instance in which a Qur'ānic verse, originally meant as a condemnation of poetry, later helped to include some unruly poetry into the Arabic literary canon.

In sum, even though the central themes of Abū Miḥjan's poetry are wine, exile, prison, and war, and even though they express a certain unease with the Islamic moral code, the accompanying *akhbār* stress his renouncement of drink and his jihad for Islam. They make a strong distinction between the poet's actions and his words, implying that even if he sang about wine, it does not have to mean that he also drank it. The *akhbār* transform the poet, once exiled and imprisoned for his drinking excesses and wine poetry, into the ideal of an Islamic warrior and a Muslim hero. Notwithstanding their edifying tone, however, the *akhbār* can at times also display jovial indulgence in the Jāhili aspects of the poet's persona. Haytham b. 'Adī records that a person passing by Abū Miḥjan's grave in Azerbaijan saw three branches of a grapevine growing on it, all bearing fruit. The poet's plea for wine after death was fulfilled.

As a Thaqafī, Abū Miḥjan was the most urban of the three poets and the closest to the establishment, however strained his relationship with it was. He possibly met both 'Umar and Sa'd and also composed elegies for some of the warriors who fought in the wars with the Sasanians. But he was certainly not speaking from the center of the early Islamic community: his poetry offended Islamic morality, perpetuated the poetics of the rejected Jāhiliyya, and at times expressed unease with the changes introduced by Islam. Abū Miḥjan himself did not acquire any position of power or influence; he was not patronized, he clashed with the status quo on multiple occasions, and he was exiled and imprisoned. The third poet to be discussed in this article represents a perspective even more marginal than those of the urban Abū Miḥjan and the Bedouin Abū Khirāsh. The inferior position of Suḥaym, a black slave, not only was reflected in his poetic production but also determined his view on the transition to Islam.

#### 4. Suḥaym, the Slave of the Banū al-Ḥaṣḥās: A Sinner Punished

Suḥaym, or "Blackie," was one of the so-called Crows of the Arabs (*aghribat al-'Arab*).<sup>126</sup> He was a black Abyssinian or Nubian slave,<sup>127</sup> bought and collectively owned by the Banū al-Ḥaṣḥās, one of the subtribes of Asad. He is mostly famous for his erotic poetry (*tashbīb*). He is said to have spoken Arabic with an accent due to his non-Arab background<sup>128</sup> and to

126. *Aghribat al-'Arab* were early Arabic poets of African descent, the most famous being 'Antara b. Shaddād. For more information about them, see 'Abduh Badawī, *al-Shu'ī arā' al-sūd wa-khaṣā'ishum fī al-shi'r al-'Arabī* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-Āmma li-l-Kitāb, 1973), and Bernard Lewis, "The Crows of the Arabs," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 88–97.

127. Bernard Lewis leans toward Suḥaym's having Nubian rather than Ethiopian origins because of a report that says that he was branded on his face. Lewis, "Crows of the Arabs," 94.

128. Abū 'Ubayda records that when Suḥaym wanted to express approval of his own verses, he said, "Aḥshantu wa-llāhi," instead of "Aḥsantu wa-llāhi," that is, he mispronounced *ḥā'* (ح) and *sīn* (س). Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:213.

have been “ugly as a dog.”<sup>129</sup> His lowly origin cast shadow on his whole life and determined its tragic unfolding. Suḥaym never succeeded in either joining the caliphal entourage or ridding himself of his slave status within his tribe, despite the numerous attempts recorded in his verses and *akhbār*. According to one story, an agent of the caliph ‘Uthmān bought the famed slave-poet for his master, but the caliph sent him back because of his mistrust of slave-poets.<sup>130</sup> Another *khbar* portrays Suḥaym reciting a moralistic verse in front of ‘Umar in the hope of a reward, but the caliph rejects his poem. If Suḥaym indeed tried to enter the caliph’s circle, he failed; he never attained any position of power, dignity, or wealth. However, Suḥaym’s poetry suggests that his failure to reach the status of a free man was the true tragedy of his life.

I first present the most salient examples of Suḥaym’s erotic poetry, then discuss how his poetry interacted with Islam, and finally interpret his boasting about his sexual conquests as defiance against his tribe and against the inferior position he held within it.

### *Carnal Love in Suḥaym’s Poetry*

Already in what was reportedly his first verse, Suḥaym fashions himself a black Casanova:

I describe herbage whose flora is beautiful,  
like an Abyssinian surrounded by girls.<sup>131</sup>

The *akhbār* claim that he uttered this line when he returned from a scouting mission, his tribe having sent him to assess the fertility of a new location. Instead of reporting on the conditions, he boasted about his ability to attract women.

Suḥaym’s depiction of women is of particular interest. His heroines differ greatly from the typical beloved of the nostalgic *nasīb* (which he did not use).<sup>132</sup> They are women of flesh and bone, who initiate love affairs. They are typically scantily dressed and lust for the poet:

Even an egg held tightly by a male ostrich  
who lifts his breast as he is protecting it  
is not more beautiful than she on the day when she asked:  
“Are you leaving with the riders or are you staying with us for some nights?”  
A cold north wind started blowing at the end of the night,  
and we did not have any clothes but her cloak and my robe.

129. Suḥaym mentions in a verse that some women compared him to a dog. Al-İşfahānī attributes this comparison to his ugliness. Al-İşfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:215.

130. ‘Uthmān reportedly said: “Slave-poets, when full, recite erotic poetry about their [masters’] women and, when hungry, invective poems against them.” Al-İşfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:214. A similar statement appears again later, but instead of slave-poets (*ahl al-‘abd al-shā‘ir*) it speaks of poets in general. Al-İşfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:215.

131. Al-İşfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:214.

132. A. Arazī, “Suḥaym,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed.

And my cloak retained the sweet scent of her clothes  
for a whole year until it wore out.<sup>133</sup>

The first line compares the poet's lover to an "egg held tightly by a male ostrich," that is, a protected, precious object. This is a usual image in pre-Islamic poetry. It appears, for example, in Imru' al-Qays's famous *mu'allaqa*, where the poet's beloved is described as "an egg of the curtained quarters,"<sup>134</sup> a description that conveys the meanings of delicacy and purity and, as Suzanne Stetkevych has put it, "a description of the pale complexion of the woman who is constantly veiled and secluded."<sup>135</sup> We will return to the theme of the women's whiteness below; for now let us focus on the role of Suḥaym's social status with respect to his amorous escapades.

Unlike Imru' al-Qays, Suḥaym was no prince; as a slave, he stood at the opposite end of the social hierarchy. Seizing a woman, the delicate white egg, from her protected shelter would have constituted an affront to tribal society by itself. But in Suḥaym's case the affront was even graver because of his slave social status. In the second verse, Suḥaym's lover invites the poet to enter her private chambers and spend the night with her. The whole ambience is highly sensual, with the lovers being scarcely dressed by the end of the night. The last image is powerful: even once they have separated, the woman's scent stays with the poet for an entire year. The version that al-Iṣfahānī includes is only a short song text (*ṣawt*), representing a few lines (8, 11, 19–20) of a much longer poem of ninety-one lines that is recorded in Suḥaym's *Dīwān*.<sup>136</sup> The *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, after all, is a "book of songs," and al-Iṣfahānī's selection of verses was determined by the popularity of the songs based on the poems. This poem is, in fact, relatively moderate in comparison with other verses.

Al-Iṣfahānī, for example, also includes a poem in which Suḥaym describes the private parts of one of his ladies:

Oh [that] memory, why do you remember her now,  
when you are leaving?  
[The memory] of every white [woman] who has private parts  
like the swaying hump of a young she-camel.<sup>137</sup>

As if to drive away an uncomfortable memory of an encounter with a lover, the poet recalls the event in detail, comparing his lover's private parts to a camel's hump. (Again, note the use of the color white in the description.) Other editions of the poem have the word "buttocks" (*kafal*) instead of "private parts" (*ka'thab*),<sup>138</sup> which better fits the comparison

133. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:211–12; Appendix, 3.a.

134. Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals Speak*, 251, 267.

135. Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals Speak*, 267.

136. Suḥaym, *Dīwān*, 16–33.

137. Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:216; Appendix, 3.b.

138. I am using the edition of *al-Aghānī* by Iḥsān 'Abbās; the earlier Egyptian edition and the *dīwān* both have *kafal*. See al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya, 1992), 22:308; Suḥaym, *Dīwān*, 34.

and the adjective “swaying.” In either case, depicting a Muslim woman’s physique was considered an outrageous act. Such an image was meant to shock.

Suḥaym does not hold back in the following verse either. He describes the sexual act explicitly. The *akhbār* confirm the scandalized reception of the verse when they comment that on its basis the caliph ‘Umar predicted that the poet would meet a violent death.

She offers me her head as a pillow, embraces me with her wrist,  
while her legs are behind me.<sup>139</sup>

Why such graphic language? Clearly, the poem represents rebellion against some social order. In what follows I explore two possible targets: the emergent Islamic community and Suḥaym’s more immediate tribal society.

“Grey hair and Islam are enough to restrain a man”

We need to return, once again, to the value attached to piety as the core of Muḥammad’s message to appreciate the effect of Suḥaym’s words. The pietistic framework of Islam promoted chastity and moderation in sexual relationships and insisted on their regulation through stricter marital laws. The *ḥadd* punishment for adultery (*zinā*) illustrates the tightening social morality of early Islam: it could range from a temporary banishment to stoning. And although the Qurʾān does not mention the punishment of stoning for *zinā* it does disapprove of the promiscuity of the time and repeatedly condemns unlawful sexual intercourse.<sup>140</sup> For such newly minted Islamic sensibilities, Suḥaym’s verses describing his amorous escapades in great detail were scandalous.

The entry in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* quotes Suḥaym speaking directly about Islam only in the following verse:

Grey hair and Islam are enough to restrain a man.<sup>141</sup>

Although the line occurs in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* independently, it forms part of the opening line of a ninety-one-verse *qaṣīda*, some sections of which appear elsewhere in the *Aghānī*, albeit in fragmented form. The long ode begins with an introductory *nasīb* in which the poet bids farewell to his beloved and to the passion they shared.<sup>142</sup> He associates Islam with old age, because like old age it prevents a man from enjoying amorous play. The sentiment echoes Abū Khirāsh’s complaint that the youth of his time indulge in moralistic rhetoric as if they were old men, as well as Abū Miḥjan’s objection to Islam as a source of unease. Suḥaym, like Abū Khirāsh and Abū Miḥjan, understands Islam as an obstacle that separates him from pleasure.

139. Al-Ḥafḥānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:214–215.

140. See, for example, Q 24:33; 17:32; 25:68–69. See also R. Peters, “Zinā,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.

141. Al-Ḥafḥānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:215; Appendix, 3.e.

142. The entire line reads: “Bid farewell to ‘Umayra, if you are prepared to leave in the morning [to fight], for grey hair and Islam are enough to restrain a man [from youthful passion].” Suḥaym, *Dīwān*, 16. The entire poem in the *Dīwān* covers pp. 16–33.

Other verses by Suḥaym that are not present in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* mention the Prophet Muḥammad himself:

I saw that the fates fear not even Muḥammad or anyone else,  
and that they do not let anyone live forever.  
I see no one who lives forever despite fate,  
nor anyone remaining alive without death's lying in wait for him.<sup>143</sup>

In spite of his reference to the Prophet, Suḥaym's attitude is deeply entrenched in the poetic Jāhiliyya: the fates, the master of the world, "fear not even Muḥammad or anyone else." At the same time, these verses should not be seen as anti-Islamic. Suḥaym simply wants to emphasize the power of fate by pointing out that it erases even people as magnificent as Muḥammad. Islamic doctrine stresses that the Prophet himself was only a human being in order to emphasize the oneness of God; Suḥaym does precisely the same to emphasize the power of fate. This is noteworthy for the poet treats Muḥammad in a manner similar to the way in which great men of the past were treated in early Arabic poetry with its frequent use of the *ubi sunt* motif. *Ubi sunt* is a nostalgic literary meditation on the transience of life. In its Arabic version it often uses the great leaders and kings of the past, now dead and with their peoples having been dispersed, to make the point that nothing lasts in this world. Suḥaym's verses, then, express admiration for the Prophet while maintaining a Jāhili worldview. The poet's favorable attitude toward Muḥammad, if authentic, suggests that the defiant tone and explicit eroticism in his verses may be primarily directed at another target—namely, the tribal society that denied him the rights and dignity of a free man.

#### *Sex, Race, and Defiance against One's Tribe*

Suḥaym's bawdy verses are, in my reading, primarily intended as an insult (*hijā'*)<sup>144</sup> against his own tribe, in reaction to his failure to negotiate a better social position for himself. This is where race comes in. The detail of the women's white skin, noted above, is relevant because it identifies the class that they represent—free Arab tribesmen. Suḥaym's love conquests can be understood symbolically as his attempt to retaliate against the tribe that denied him a dignified existence. Elsewhere, he speaks openly of his hope to improve his social standing:

The poems of the slave of the Banū al-Ḥaṣḥās  
outweigh a noble origin and wealth.  
Though I am a slave, my soul is free by virtue of its nobility;  
though black by color, I am white of character.<sup>145</sup>

The poet's verses constitute an early comment on racial dynamics: he argues that despite his black skin color, his soul and character are those of a free white man. Suḥaym's

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143. Suḥaym, *Dīwān*, 40; Appendix, 3.d.

144. On the genre of *hijā'*, see van Gelder, *Bad and Ugly*.

145. Al-Ḥaṣḥāsī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:214; Appendix, 3.c.

argumentation shows how deeply racial categories were ingrained in people's minds at the time, for he tries to prove not that all people are equal but that he—in the depths of his soul—is *in essence* white. A less explicit attempt to persuade the tribesmen to accept him as an equal member can be seen in other poems, which celebrate the battles of Asad. The motif of a black slave hoping to become a free man is reminiscent of the pre-Islamic heroic poet 'Antara. 'Antara's mother was an Abyssinian slave, and he allegedly earned his freedom after demonstrating bravery in battle. In Suḥaym's case, however, all his poetic efforts to become an equal member of his society seem to have come to nought. And so the poet rebelled against the unjust tribal society.

The *akhbār* provide important indications that Suḥaym's poetry was understood as tribal *hijā'*, when they claim that his tribe ultimately killed him over his poetry. This means that the poems must have been interpreted as insults to the tribe's pride. Regardless of how the poet actually died, these narratives thus shed light on the goal (*gharad*) of his poetry. The following verses are reported to have instigated the chain of events that led to Suḥaym's death:

How many dresses of double-threaded cloth did we tear apart  
and how many veils [we pulled] from eyes that were not drowsy.  
When a robe is torn off the veil goes with it,  
[and we continued] in this way until all of us were bare-skinned.<sup>146</sup>

In this scene, the poet and his lady, identified as a Ṣubayrī<sup>147</sup> girl, remove their robes and her veil so passionately that they tear them apart, emerging completely naked. The *akhbār* report that rumors about Suḥaym and the girl reached his master. He spied on Suḥaym and heard him recite the lewd verse about a white woman's private parts/buttocks quoted earlier. At that point, the tribe decided to punish Suḥaym, but one of its girls ran to warn him. The girl's arrival prompted the following verse, in which Suḥaym contemplates whether he should keep his affair with the girl hidden:

Should she be kept a secret? May you be greeted  
despite the distance by him who became infatuated with your love.

He then answers his own question:

And you wouldn't have been kept a secret, if you did a disgraceful deed,  
daughter of the tribe, nor if we engaged in a forbidden act.

The poet declares that it is not his custom to hide his affairs and proves his point by boasting about his conquests within the tribe:

[For] many a girl like you I took out from the curtained quarters of her mother  
to a party where she would trail her striped robe.<sup>148</sup>

146. Al-İşfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:216; Appendix, 3.f.

147. Strangely, this tribe is related to Tamīm and not to Asad, the poet's tribe.

148. Al-İşfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:217; Appendix, 3.g.

He makes it clear that he seduced girls against the wishes of their mothers and literally snatched them from their homes. The *akhbār* portray him as defiant, as unwilling to renounce his lewd poetry even when his life is at stake. When Suḥaym is led to his execution and a former lover among the bystanders mocks him, he retorts with a bawdy image of penetration:

Now you are mocking me, but how many a night  
I left you spread open, like a garment.<sup>149</sup>

The image is explicit: a woman “spread open like a garment” speaks for itself. But the climax of Suḥaym’s *hijā’* is still to come:

Fasten the bonds on your slave lest he escape you (*yufliṭkum*),  
for surely life is close to death,  
indeed, once sweat and scent dripped  
from the foreheads of your girls (*fatātikum*) onto the bed’s surface.<sup>150</sup>

According to the *akhbār*, Suḥaym exclaimed these lines when facing his imminent death. His principal sin was his defiance of the tribal customs and fearlessness of it.<sup>151</sup> The tribe was the main target of his hostility. It is impossible to ascertain whether this is in fact what happened, but, more importantly, the *akhbār* show that later readers understood these verses as the pinnacle of Suḥaym’s provocation. In the poem, he challenges the tribesmen to fasten the bonds on his hands and insults them by attacking the honor of their women. He claims that “sweat and scent dripped” from the girls’ foreheads, implying sexual intercourse. By targeting the tribe’s women, he is undermining the honor of the tribe as a whole in retaliation for his failed attempts to ascend the social ladder. That Suḥaym’s true target is his tribe can also be seen from his use of the second-person plural (*-kum*), because it shows that he is directly addressing his audience, the tribe (“lest he escape *you*”; “*your* girls”). Suḥaym, like ‘Antara b. Shaddād before him, protested his inferior position within the tribe, caused by his black skin and his slave status. But unlike ‘Antara, Suḥaym never, as far as we can tell, achieved the status of a free man, and he voiced the resulting bitterness and defiance in his poetry. Suḥaym’s poetry, I argue, was thus aimed primarily at this tribe. Its openly licentious tone, however, was inconsistent with the ethos of the new Islamic community. The following section looks at how the *akhbār* dealt with this unruly figure.

### *Suḥaym in the Akhbār*

The *akhbār* both Islamize and punish the slave-poet—both mechanisms that we have already seen at work on Abū Miḥjan. In Suḥaym’s case, however, the emphasis seems to

149. Al-İṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:217; Appendix, 3.h.

150. Al-İṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:217; Appendix, 3.i. See also Muḥammad b. Hāshim al-Khālīdī and Sa‘īd b. Hāshim al-Khālīdī, *al-Ashbāh wa-l-naẓā’ir* (Cairo: Lajnat al-Ta’līf wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 1958–65), 2:25–26, on the line *Qad aḥsana l-kināya ‘an al-jimā’*.

151. Two lines from a poem referred above also reinforce the theme that the poet does not fear the tribesmen who are threatening him. See lines 5 and 6 in Appendix, 3.g.

be on the latter strategy. Again, the earliest narrators of these *akhbār* belong to the same generation of ʿAbbāsīd scholars.<sup>152</sup>

1. Islamization: As in the previous cases, the *akhbār* attempt to Islamize the poet, which sometimes results in twisting the meaning of his poetry. The *akhbār*'s treatment of the verse "Grey hair and Islam are enough to restrain a man" is illustrative in this regard. As noted earlier, these words form the opening to a sensual poem in which the poet remembers his past amorous adventures and sets them against the restrictive reality of Islam. The *akhbār*, however, offer a very different interpretation. They depict Suḥaym reciting the line before the caliph ʿUmar as *praise* of Islam in the hope of a reward. But the caliph tells him: "If you had placed Islam before grey hair I would have rewarded you." The verse became so famous that it was adapted into an anachronistic<sup>153</sup> Prophetic *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet quotes Suḥaym but reverses the order of the two items ("Islam and grey hair" instead of "grey hair and Islam"), thereby breaking the rules of the meter. The Prophet is unable to recite the line properly even after Abū Bakr corrects him, whereupon the latter exclaims: "I bear witness that you are God's messenger!" This is a reference to the Qurʾānic argument (Q. 36:69) that God's messenger is no poet but simply a true, inspired prophet.<sup>154</sup> This *ḥadīth* reveals that later generations interpreted Suḥaym's verse as praise for Islam and as a sign of his repentance for his past scandalous behavior. The narrative thus transforms a nostalgic reference to pre-Islamic amorous pleasures into evidence of penitence. In the process, the black slave Suḥaym becomes a powerful model for all Muslims who have sinned.

2. Punishment: At the same time, the *akhbār* highlight harsh punishment of Suḥaym's sins to provide a deterring example. Suḥaym's poetry is naturally largely silent on his death, but the narratives about his life revel in the details of his bold defiance and violent death. They report that Suḥaym was killed in the most miserable way: the tribesmen murdered him and (contrary to Islamic precepts) burned his body. According to the variant telling of Ibn Daʿb, the tribesmen dug a trench, threw Suḥaym in it, and burned him alive.<sup>155</sup> The word "trench" (*ukhdūd*) may have resonated in the minds of the audience with the Qurʾānic mention of the "people of the trench" (*aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*; Q. 85:4–8). They are generally believed to have been the Christian martyrs of Najrān, whom the Judaizing king of Ḥimyar, Dhū Nuwās, burned to death around 520 CE.<sup>156</sup> The description of Suḥaym's death may thus allude to the tragic fate of the famous Christian martyrs.

152. Two names that recur often in these reports are Abū ʿUbayda, mentioned earlier, and Ibn al-Māʾjishūn (d. 185/801), who moved in Medinese circles but was a contemporary of most of the other transmitters.

153. The story does not fit Suḥaym's life chronologically, since he lived and earned his fame during the reigns of ʿUmar and ʿUthmān.

154. Al-Ḥṣḥānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:213.

155. Al-Ḥṣḥānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:217.

156. On the martyrs of Najrān see I. Shahīd, "Najrān," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.; Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najran: New Documents* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1971); Monferrer Sala, Juan Pedro, *Redefining History on Pre-Islamic Accounts: The Arabic Recension of the Martyrs of Najrān* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010).

Therefore, if Suḥaym's verses themselves speak of his class and racial struggle, his *akhbār* are more interested in finding a place for his poetry within the framework of Islamic *adab*. Irrespective of Suḥaym's true life story, a poet who violated the norms of the new society in such a conspicuous way could not have been allowed to succeed with his obscenity, excesses, and defiance. Although he ultimately fell victim to pre-Islamic tribal customary law (if we are to believe the *akhbār*), his literary death happened in the name of the new world order. Suḥaym's poetry disrupted the new Islamic ethics and the message of moderation, and as such it had to be restrained.

Why was Suḥaym not redeemed through the workings of the *akhbār*, as Abū Khirāsh and Abū Miḥjan were? An explanation may lie in the fact that his lewd language was aimed directly at his tribe. The affront to tribal values was all the more serious because Suḥaym, in contrast to, say, Imru' al-Qays, was a black slave and thus at the bottom of the tribal social hierarchy. Therefore, we can imagine that whereas the later tribal narrators (*ruwāt*) of Hudhayl and Thaḳīf were interested in redeeming their poets, those of the Banū al-Ḥashās were not keen on rehabilitating theirs. However, despite their harshness toward the poet, the *akhbār* show a modicum of empathy in the end. Having turned Suḥaym into a discouraging example of a punished sinner, they finally also make him victorious: although he was killed, the slave still managed to bring shame on the tribe of his killers.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

This study has addressed two main questions: What can the poems of Abū Khirāsh al-Hudhalī, Abū Miḥjan al-Thaqafī, and Suḥaym, the slave of the Banū al-Ḥashās, tell us about the period of the coming of Islam in the Ḥijāz? And how did later audiences receive these three poets? I have examined the entries for the three poets in al-Iṣfahānī's *Kitāb al-Aghānī* and highlighted two types of tension that help answer these questions—first, a historical tension between the worldview of the poets and the emergent Islamic ideology, and second, a historiographical tension between the poetry and the accompanying *akhbār* in al-Iṣfahānī's entries. I have argued that this second tension results from the fact that whereas the poetry, for the most part, reflects the reactions of the poets themselves, the *akhbār* should be mainly understood as the attempts of later audiences to interpret the earlier poems. As such, the poetry can answer the former question and the *akhbār* the latter. In these concluding remarks I recapitulate my analysis of the poets' verses; consider two important side arguments regarding the historical value of Mukhaḍram poetry that my analysis implies; and offer a rough sketch of the possible stages of the transmission of this poetry's *akhbār*.

### *The Poetic Legacy of Abū Khirāsh, Abū Miḥjan, and Suḥaym*

An examination of the poetry of the three Mukhaḍram poets reveals a worldview that was, in many ways, incompatible with the ethics of the gradually emerging Islamic religion and akin to the poetic Jāhiliyya, the principal discourse of pre-Islamic poetry. The poetic Jāhiliyya emphasized the present moment, whereas Muḥammad's new salvation model centered on the afterlife. Similarly, Abū Khirāsh's reckless and constant fighting

for the sake of tribal loyalty and honor stood in contrast to the new way of waging war—organized, controlled, and motivated by a higher good. Abū Miḥjan’s celebration of wine, drinking parties, and loyalty to the drink clashed with the Islamic prohibition of wine and the prescription of restraint and moderation in life. And Suḥaym’s detailed descriptions of women and his erotic encounters with them were incongruous with both the newly proclaimed Islamic moral code and the laws of tribal honor. The poets’ sentiments, however, went beyond superficial hedonism. They bespoke belief in a merciless and unpredictable fate that cast its shadow on all living beings and a conviction that all that humans could do was to heroically stand up to it. In a world without the prospect of salvation, heroic poetry—which memorialized human bravery—was the only means by which to achieve immortality. Its tragic undertones may have had a profound emotional and purifying effect, in the sense of Aristotelian *katharsis*, on those who listened to it.<sup>157</sup>

Furthermore, the three poets comment directly on the new world in which they find themselves, most commonly expressing unease (*ḥaraj*) with it. They were indeed *mukhaḍramūn*, “split” or “cut in half” between two worlds, belonging to both and neither at the same time. In a sense, their vivid recall of the golden days of the Jāhiliyya can be considered a political act and a poetic rebellion at a time when a powerful new ideology, one whose worldview was contrary to this poetry, was establishing itself. Suḥaym’s poetry displays an additional layer of defiance related to his inferior social standing within his tribe. Through his poetry, the black slave-poet attempted to improve his status, and when he failed, he attacked the honor of the tribe’s women with his verses. While the Mukhaḍramūn’s poetry is still Jāhili in spirit, its context is pronouncedly Islamic, which is what makes it so fascinating.

A question inevitably arises: to what extent is the poetic Jāhiliyya representative of the reality of pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia? Although the two are traditionally equated, this representation is misleading. Scholars such as Rina Drory and Peter Webb have noted that the Jāhiliyya as a concept was constructed in the Islamic era and crystallized during its first centuries.<sup>158</sup> It is absolutely not the point of this study to present the early Muslim poets and their society as “tribal, pagan, and barbaric,” notions that, according to Webb’s critique, tend to guide scholarly treatment of the Jāhiliyya.<sup>159</sup> Although the three poets do express tribal values, their occasional hedonism is not “barbaric” but underlined by a deeper existential(ist) framework. Finally, they were no “pagans,” at least according to the

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157. I am referring to Aristotle’s discussion of tragedy and its cathartic possibilities in his *Poetics*: “Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, [. . .], performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification [katharsis] of such emotions.” Aristotle, *Poetics*, 49b27f.

158. For varying accounts of the changing image of the Jāhiliyya, see Rina Drory, “The Abbasid Construction of the Jahiliyya: Cultural Authority in the Making,” *Studia Islamica* 83 (1996): 33–49, esp. 35; Peter A. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 255–70; Webb, “Creating Arab Origins: Muslim Constructions of al-Jāhiliyya and Arab History” (PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2014); Webb, “Al-Jāhiliyya: Uncertain Times of Uncertain Meanings,” *Der Islam* 91, no. 1 (2014): 69–94.

159. Webb, “Creating Arab Origins,” 16.

Muslim tradition. Judging by their poetry, they were simply not particularly interested by religion or, at times, were annoyed by it. Besides, I want to stress that the Jāhilī sentiments represent only one among various competing cultural models. Different monotheistic trends, as is now generally accepted, were far stronger in pre-Islamic Arabia than the Muslim tradition suggests.<sup>160</sup> It is impossible to determine what part of the population engaged in the production and reception of this type of poetry at the time of Islam's emergence. We know that in the sixth century poets such as Ṭarafa could achieve high social status and wealth by reciting their poetry at the court in Ḥīra, but by the time of Abū Khirāsh, Abū Miḥjan, and Suḥaym the court in Ḥīra had been silent for decades.<sup>161</sup> Though poetry most likely still played an important social role, Christianity and Judaism were well established in the regions adjacent to pre-Islamic Arabia, and these monotheists did not leave behind a body of literature that would be comparable to the body of Jāhilī poetry. Furthermore, poetry may be group-specific and may reflect mainly the ideals of Arabian nomads and seminomads, not those of the urban populations of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>162</sup> Establishing the actual spread of the ideals of the poetic Jāhiliyya among the inhabitants of pre-Islamic Arabia is beyond the scope of this paper, but we can nonetheless identify two likely reasons these ideals were later selected to represent the “original” Arabic culture: the scarcity of sources to have come down to us from this period and the deliberate later reconstructions of the Jāhiliyya. An instructive comparison is the case of a community of Italian peasants, described by Carlo Levi and used by James Fentress and Chris Wickham to illustrate the formation of class and group memories.<sup>163</sup> In the year 1936, the peasants did not remember much of the First World War but passionately recalled brigand clashes almost seventy years earlier, which were significant for their community. If the history of the late nineteenth

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160. Even the *mushrikūn*, the Qurʾānic opponents of Muḥammad whom the tradition sees as “polytheists” or “associators,” have now been recast as monotheists, most famously by Gerald Hawting. Patricia Crone, agreeing with him, concluded: “If we base ourselves on the evidence of the Qurʾān alone, the *mushrikūn* were monotheists who worshipped the same God as the Messenger, but who also venerated lesser divine beings indiscriminately called gods and angels, including some identifiable as Arabian deities, and perhaps also in some cases the sun and the moon. The *mushrikūn* saw the lesser divine beings as mediators between themselves and God, sometimes apparently only venerating one mediator figure, at other times several, sometimes including female ones.” See Gerald R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Patricia Crone, *Collected Studies in Three Volumes*, vol. 1, *The Qurʾānic Pagans and Related Matters*, ed. Hanna Siurua (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 77. Chase Robinson has pointed out that the emergence of various prophetic figures, the most notorious being Musaylima b. Ḥabīb, confirms the general rise in monotheism in this period. Chase F. Robinson, “The Rise of Islam, 600–705,” in *New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 1, ed. Chase F. Robinson, 171–225 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). On monotheism before Islam, see Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

161. Khosrow II, the last Sasanian king, annexed Ḥīra to his empire in 602 CE.

162. Michael Lecker, “Pre-Islamic Arabia,” in *New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 1, ed. Chase F. Robinson, 153–170 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Hoyland has also suggested that Arab identity was drawn mainly from tribal values, for the city, although strong in religion, was weak in identity. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 242.

163. See James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 87–88, and Carlo Levi, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, trans. Francis Frenaye (London: Cassell, 1948), 137.

and early twentieth centuries were written on the basis of their memories, the First World War would appear a minor event in comparison to the war of the Italian brigands. The peasants thus passed on what had meaning for their group and what legitimized their present. Similarly, pre-Islamic poetry may have originally reflected the memories of one group and may have been chosen only later to bolster the collective identity of the new Muslim society.

### *The Historical Value of Mukhaḍram Poetry*

My analysis gives rise to two important side arguments concerning the historical value of Mukhaḍram poetry. The first is that Mukhaḍram poetry is a fruitful source for the study of early Islam, as demonstrated by their historically bounded engagement with emergent Islam, on which this article focuses. Yet Mukhaḍram poetry is still a largely underexplored field. In addition to elucidating the sentiments of some early Muslims about the rapid spread of Muḥammad’s message, this study illustrates the historiographical value of this poetry in other areas as well. With regard to key concepts of the time, one of Suḥaym’s long odes offers a rare extra-Qur’ānic example of the term “Islam” used for a belief system.<sup>164</sup> On a broader level, the poetry of these three poets provides arguments against the skeptical revisionist position that doubts that Mecca and Medina were the true birthplace of the Believers’ movement.<sup>165</sup> As noted earlier, the three poets belonged to tribes that lived in the hinterland of the two cities. Since the poets’ direct commentary on the impact of this movement suggests their closeness to it, it also places the movement squarely in this region.

Furthermore, Mukhaḍram poetry provides an important insight into how individuals reacted to the changes that were taking place in society, and the sentiments it expresses contribute to our knowledge of the temporal and social context from which it emerged. Naturally, not all contemporary reactions to Muḥammad’s message were negative; the most famous example of poetic cooptation may be Ka‘b b. Zuhayr’s famous Mantle Ode, “Su‘ād Has Departed” (*Bānat Su‘ādu*)—a panegyric poem that Ka‘b is said to have presented to the Prophet on the occasion of his conversion to Islam.<sup>166</sup> The difference between Ka‘b’s poem and, say, Abū Khirāsh’s work is that the latter could not expect a reward for his verses from Muḥammad’s community. In either case, their divergent voices represent the mixed reactions to the ascendancy of Islam, adding nuance to our understanding of the process. Whereas Muslim narratives depict Muḥammad’s prophecy as a decisive break with the pagan Jāhiliyya, revisionist scholars have downplayed Muḥammad’s role, depicting Islam as emerging gradually from the cultural milieu of the Judeo-Christian

164. In the line “Grey hair and Islam are enough to restrain a man.”

165. For a concise account of the skeptical approach, see Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 2006), 20–25. Although some important revisionists have altered and refined their views over time, questions about the location of the Qur’ānic community remain to be resolved. See, for instance, Patricia Crone, “How Did the Quranic Pagans Make a Living?” in Crone, *Collected Studies in Three Volumes*, 1:1–20, esp. 12; Gerald R. Hawting, “Pre-Islamic Arabia and the Qur’ān,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*.

166. For an analysis of the poem, see Stetkevych, *Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy*, 48–79.

Late Antiquity.<sup>167</sup> But even in nonrevisionist scholarship it has become commonplace to emphasize continuities rather than discontinuities, often fueled by the wish to see Islam as part of the larger late antique world and not as an isolated phenomenon.<sup>168</sup> Aziz al-Azmeh has recently sketched a middle way, arguing for a model of Islam in Late Antiquity in which Islam remains an autochthonous cultural product of Arabia but at the same time represents the culmination of long-term processes that the peninsula shared with the rest of the late antique world.<sup>169</sup> To stress the continuities and the embeddedness of the early Islamic state in the larger late antique world is extremely important; yet equally important for understanding this period is to pay attention to the tensions that Muḥammad's prophecy generated among his contemporaries, such as those that can be sensed in the poetry of the three Mukhaḍramūn. The fact that the three men were poets is relevant because they were carriers of the values of the now-rejected cultural model of the poetic Jāhiliyya. Therefore, the poetry of Abū Khirāsh, Abū Miḥjan, and Suḥaym provides a window into a clash of competing cultural models and reveals how some marginal early Muslims from the Ḥijāz of the first/seventh century reacted to the epoch-making developments around them. Especially in view of the scarcity of early Islamic sources, we cannot afford to ignore their voices and the voices of others like them.

The second side argument arises from my analysis of the discrepancy between the poetry and the *akhbār*. This discrepancy provides further arguments in favor of the stability and historicity of this ancient (i.e., Jāhili and Mukhaḍram) poetry. The question of the authenticity of this poetry has been debated for more than a century.<sup>170</sup> In 1925, the British orientalist D. S. Margoliouth and the Egyptian scholar Ṭāhā Ḥusayn published influential studies in which they undermined the authenticity of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.<sup>171</sup> They based their respective arguments on the poetry's contents and language, claiming that the

167. The two most influential revisionist books, which changed the face of the field, are John Wansbrough, *The Sectarial Milieu* (1978) and Michael Cook and Patricia Crone, *Hagarism* (1977).

168. Peter Brown, the founder of this field of study, included the Islamic Umayyad period in Late Antiquity. Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150–750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971). See also Michael G. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Robert Hoyland, "Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, 1053–77 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). See also Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

169. Al-Azmeh, *Emergence of Islam*.

170. It should be pointed out that this debate concerns only pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry; there is consensus with regard to the authenticity of Umayyad poetry. Even D. S. Margoliouth, in his famous 1925 article of 1925, mentions that "it would be difficult to shake the genuineness of those [*dīwāns*] of the Umayyad poets." D. S. Margoliouth, "The Origins of Arabic Poetry," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 57, no. 3 (1925): 446. Chase Robinson, among other recent scholars, has drawn on Umayyad poetry as a primary source in his *ʿAbd al-Malik* (New York: Oneworld, 2012). Salih Said Agha and Tarif Khalidi called poetry "perhaps the most primary of Arabic sources" in "Poetry and Identity in the Umayyad Age," *Al-Abḥāth* 50–51 (2002–3): 55. On the historical value of poetry see also Saleh Said Agha, Ramzi Baalbaki, and Tarif Khalidi, eds. *Poetry and History: The Value of Poetry in Reconstructing Arab History* (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 2011).

171. Margoliouth, "Origins of Arabic Poetry"; Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Fī al-shiʿr al-jāhili* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1926). A. J. Arberry lays out the discussion clearly and sums up the counterarguments made in his *Seven Odes*, 228–245.

so-called Jāhilī poetry did not reflect the polytheistic world of the pre-Islamic poets but rather an Islamic environment and that all these poems from different parts of Arabia could not have been written in the language of the Qurʾān and the Quraysh. Many have attempted to refute the two scholars' claims, most notably Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Asad, who in his 1956 study focused on the transmission of poetry that he deemed to have had a larger written element than previously thought.<sup>172</sup>

Later, in the 1970s, James T. Monroe and Michael Zwettler provided a new understanding of the issue with the help of Parry-Lord's oral-formulaic theory.<sup>173</sup> In their older work on Homer, Milman Parry and A. B. Lord had argued that oral and written poetry can be distinguished from one another by their particular use of formulas: oral poetry is formulaic, while written verse is not. Monroe and Zwettler's turn to oral-formulaic theory revised the discussion about the authenticity of ancient Arabic poetry by recharacterizing orality as a mode to be studied on its own terms. The oral poet masters a large repertoire of themes, motifs, proper names, and formulas and recreates—that is, improvises—the poems with each new performance, which explains the resulting different versions of the poem. The poems are fluid, and the search for an “original text” is therefore pointless, as all of the versions are equally “authentic.” As quoted earlier, Monroe nevertheless claimed that pre-Islamic poetry represents “a fairly close picture” of what was orally transmitted. Gregor Schoeler, in turn, presented the most influential critique of Monroe and Zwettler's application of oral-formulaic theory to pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.<sup>174</sup> He postulated, like al-Asad, the pre-Islamic existence of writing and written collections of poems already early on and rejected the idea that the great poems were largely improvised.<sup>175</sup> Though Schoeler's main theoretical contribution lies in a fresh understanding of the oral and written modes as coexisting and in the division of written “texts” into *hypomnēmata* and *syngrammata*, his refutation of the importance of improvisation and his argument for early writing further support the perception of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry as stable.<sup>176</sup>

The poetry of Abū Khirāsh, Abū Miḥjan, and Suḥaym examined in this article informs the debate regarding the stability and historicity of the poetry of this period in two ways. First, its direct engagement with emergent Islam places it historically. It would be absurd to

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172. Naṣir al-Dīn al-Asad, *Maṣādir al-shi'r al-jāhilī wa-qīmatuhā al-tārīkhiyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1962; first ed. 1956). Al-Asad produced the most detailed account of the *rāwī* and collected much evidence about the spread of writing in pre-Islamic Arabia and the existence of written collections of poetry in the first centuries of Islam. He relied on stories about the transmitters of poetry, their work, and their study circles, and on comments about writing found in the poetry itself. A particularly convincing part of his argument is his comparison of different versions of poems, which can be explained only with reference to written transmission (pp. 176–178).

173. Monroe, “Oral Composition in Pre-Islamic Poetry,” and Zwettler, *The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry*.”

174. For a critique of Zwettler (and Monroe), see Gregor Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*, trans. Uwe Vagelpohl, ed. James Montgomery (London: Routledge, 2006), 87–110 (chap. 4).

175. See Schoeler, *Oral and Written*, 62–86 (chap. 3).

176. With regard to Schoeler's critique of Monroe and Zwettler, it is fair to point out that Monroe himself observed that pre-Islamic poetry is characterized by “a far greater textual stability” than the oral epic that served as his point of reference. Monroe, “Oral Composition in Pre-Islamic Poetry,” 40.

suppose that later narrators fabricated verses with an anti-Islamic flair and ascribed them to poets whom they saw as Muslims. Second, the fact that the poetry expresses values that differ from those of the *akhbār* that accompany the poems suggests that the two bodies of literature come from different periods. The Mukhaḍramūn poetry's spirit, themes, and unease with the new religion point to a very early date, whereas the *akhbār*'s occasionally moralizing tone and misinterpretation of the verses are signs of a later reception of this poetry by an already Islamized audience. A different understanding of the ideological rift between the poetry and the *akhbār* is hard to maintain, for if we were to assume that both were fabricated later, as has once been claimed, would we not likewise expect that they would be in harmony with each other?

### *The Transmission of the Akhbār*

This study has addressed the ways in which later audiences absorbed the verses of the Mukhaḍramūn by focusing on the *akhbār* about them. Consequently, we must ask what can be said about the transmission history of the *akhbār*. How did the memory of the unruly poets emerge, find its way to scholars, coalesce into larger narrative units, and acquire the archetypal contours that we have observed here (Muslim martyr, Muslim warrior, punished sinner)? I have examined specifically the *akhbār* in al-İṣfahānī's *Kitāb al-Aghānī* and highlighted the occasional discrepancies between the *akhbār* and the poetry. On the basis of these divergences, I have argued that the *akhbār* both recorded and mediated the reception of the three Mukhaḍramūn and their legacy after their poetry had already been stabilized. For the purposes of this argument, I have treated the *akhbār* as a homogenous body of material. Now, however, it is time to admit that such homogeneity is an illusion. Many factors point to a long and unwieldy process of collection. In what follows, I mention some of these factors and provide a possible sketch of the *akhbār*'s collection and transmission. The possible agents of this process are presented here in reverse chronological order:

1. Fourth/tenth century: Abū al-Faraj al-İṣfahānī and his *Kitāb al-Aghānī*
2. Late second/eighth and early third/ninth centuries: early 'Abbāsīd scholars
3. Early second/eighth century: Umayyad scholars
4. First/seventh century: living tradition/social memory/communicative memory

1. Fourth/tenth century: Abū al-Faraj al-İṣfahānī and his *Kitāb al-Aghānī*. The organization of the *Aghānī*'s entries as a whole offers insight into the work of an author harmonizing and interpreting his material. To be clear, I do not want to imply that Abū al-Faraj al-İṣfahānī fabricated the *akhbār* that he included in his work. As already noted, he relied on earlier sources, which he meticulously quotes. But his auctorial intervention in the selection of the *akhbār*, their organization (an act that automatically participates in interpreting and creating their meaning), and his own occasional comments is clear. An illustrative example is al-İṣfahānī's placement of the mention of Abū Khirāsh's conversion to Islam ("He converted to Islam and his Islam was good") *at the end* of his biography, which creates the semblance of a deliberate chronology. Through such organization of the *akhbār*,

al-İşfahānī implies that the poet engaged in his blood feuds and composed his anti-Islamic verses before converting to Islam and that, by virtue of his conversion, he subsequently rejected his Jāhilī past.

2. Late second/eighth and early third/ninth centuries: early ‘Abbāsīd scholars. Most of the *isnāds* that accompany Abū Khirāsh’s, Abū Miḥjan’s, and Suḥaym’s poetry end with this generation of scholars. At first glance, this fact leaves us with two possibilities: either these scholars created the *akhbār* as a way of embellishing and making sense of the old poetry, or they, as they claim, recorded a living oral tribal tradition. But we have reason to believe that there is yet another, third, option: that the ‘Abbāsīd scholars were drawing on an older Umayyad scholarly literary tradition. I contend that the absence of oral informants or earlier Umayyad scholars from the *isnāds* may be explained by a methodological shift in early ‘Abbāsīd scholarship rather than by the nonexistence of such earlier transmitters. In actuality, the *akhbār* are surely the result of a mix of all these possible scenarios. However, the first possibility (‘Abbāsīd creation of the *akhbār*) is likely to have been a rare phenomenon at this relatively late stage, when expertise in poetry was already established and reliability and precision were already scholarly trademarks, as the famous story about al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī and al-Ḥammād al-Rāwiya at al-Mahdī’s court illustrates.<sup>177</sup> Therefore, I believe that most of the *akhbār* existed in some form already in the Umayyad era and were transmitted either as living tribal lore or through the Umayyad scholarly tradition.

The methodology of scholars underwent a major change in the ‘Abbāsīd period, most easily noticeable in the new emphasis on collecting material directly from the Bedouins through personal visits. Abū ‘Amr b. al-‘Alā’ (d. ca. 154/771) is seen as the first pioneer of this approach.<sup>178</sup> According to the Kufan grammarian Tha‘lab, his namesake, Abū ‘Amr al-Shaybānī (d. 206/821), likewise used to go to the desert with two big inkwells and would not return until they were empty.<sup>179</sup> Many of the early ‘Abbāsīd scholars with whom Abū al-Faraj’s *isnāds* usually end, including al-Aṣma‘ī, Abū Ubayda, and Abū ‘Amr al-Shaybānī, belonged to Abū ‘Amr b. al-‘Alā’’s circle. Appreciating the broader significance of this methodological shift is, in my view, more important for our understanding of scholarly society at that time than is determining whether al-Aṣma‘ī and the others recorded and

177. The caliph al-Mahdī rewarded al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī over al-Ḥammād al-Rāwiya and revoked the latter’s status as a transmitter because he had added a few lines to an ancient poem. Al-İşfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 6:89–91. On the emergence of the scholars’ authoritative expertise in poetry, see Drory, “Abbasid Construction of the Jahiliyya.” Drory and Suzanne Stetkevych also mention the story of al-Mahdī, and Stetkevych uses it to discuss the parameters of scholarly reputation and honesty. Suzanne Stetkevych, *Abū Tammām and the Poetics of the ‘Abbāsīd Age* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 246. For other, similar stories, see also Ilse Lichtenstädter, “Al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.

178. For more details about the collection process, see Gregor Schoeler, *The Genesis of Literature in Islam: From the Aural to the Read* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); Beatrice Gruendler, “Early Arabic Philologists: Poetry’s Friends or Foes?,” in *World Philology*, ed. Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin A. Elman, and Ku-min Kevin Chang, 92–113 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Stetkevych, *Abū Tammām*, 241–256; Ignaz Goldziher, “Some Notes on the Dīwāns of the Arabic Tribes,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 29 (1897): 325–334.

179. Al-Asad, *Maṣādir*, 193.

transmitted their material orally or in written form, which is what modern scholars investigating the transmission of early Islamic material have mainly focused on.<sup>180</sup> The methodological transition is related to the invention of expertise in poetry (*al-ʿilm bi-l-shiʿr*) as a legitimate field of learning and to the creation of a “body of authorized knowledge,” a process described by Drory. In Drory’s depiction, the transition entailed the scholars’ assumption of professional authority over ancient poetry from the hands of poets and transmitters.<sup>181</sup> I disagree with Drory’s excellent article on one point: its linear chronology. Admittedly, Drory herself rejects simple linearity in the three-stage transfer of authority on poetry (1. poets; 2. transmitters; 3. scholars), preferring instead to see the process as a competition of power between these three groups. Still, her conclusions suggest that scholars of poetry emerged as a group claiming independent professional authority in Ancient Arab poetry only in the last quarter of the second/eighth century.<sup>182</sup> I contend, however, that scholars claimed expertise in this field already in the Umayyad period and that we should therefore see the main question about this particular moment as consisting not of *who* (poets, transmitters, scholars) but of *how* (method).

The creation of a body of authorized knowledge and the emphasis on recording living tribal lore points to a shift in the method of scholarship that took place among the ʿAbbāsīd scholars. A report quoted by al-Asad is illustrative of the shift. It records Ibn Salām al-Jumāhī (d. 231–32/845–46) complaining about earlier scholars who relied solely on written sources and did not corroborate their material orally with a teacher: “People passed it on from book to book; they did not take it from the people of the desert and did not show it to their scholars.”<sup>183</sup> Famously, Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833), in his redaction of the *sīra*, or biography, of the Prophet, expressed many misgivings about the authenticity of the materials used by his predecessor in this undertaking, Ibn Iṣḥāq (d. ca. 150–59/761–70).<sup>184</sup> These and similar reports suggest that ʿAbbāsīd scholars, with their new methodology, looked at some earlier scholars as dilettantes who had collected material indiscriminately. The ʿAbbāsīd scholars may thus have deemed it unnecessary to quote earlier scholars who had not adhered to their “scientific” method. What is more, they may have preferred to claim that they had heard their material directly from Bedouins, because that was what

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180. The use of oral vs. written modes in the transmission of early Islamic material has been discussed in modern scholarship since Goldziher’s *Muhammedanische Studien* (1889–1890), which pointed to the oral tradition to argue that the *ḥadīths* are a product of later centuries. For a survey of scholars who followed Goldziher’s lead, see Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 13ff. From a different perspective, Michael Cook tackles the early Islamic preference for oral transmission of *ḥadīths* in his “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam,” *Arabica* 44 (1997): 437–530. In his influential recent works on the transmission of early Islamic texts, Gregor Schoeler blurs the strict distinction between the oral and written modes, but he retains them as the two main operative categories. See his *Oral and Written* and *Genesis of Literature*.

181. Drory, “Abbasid Construction of the Jahiliyya,” 46.

182. Drory, “Abbasid Construction of the Jahiliyya,” 42–43.

183. Al-Asad, *Maṣādir*, 195.

184. With regard to Ibn Hishām’s complaints about Ibn Iṣḥāq, the modern editor of the *Sīra*, Alfred Guillaume, makes the following comment: “Doubts and misgivings about the authenticity of the poems in the *Sīra* are expressed so often by I.H. that no reference to them need be given here.” Ibn Iṣḥāq and Ibn Hishām, *The Life of Muḥammad*, ed. and trans. Alfred Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), xxv.

counted for science at this time. Even in such cases, they would name their informants only occasionally—mostly if they were part of the story.

The method of visiting tribes and collecting their lore further signals a turn in the relationship between the scholars and their object of study. As Drory concludes, “from a living tradition [. . .] the texts of ancient poetry became like archival documents, representing the tableau of *distant* past.”<sup>185</sup> The word “distant” is key. By this time, the urban scholars of Basra, Kufa, and Baghdad had become estranged from the world of ancient poetry, and a distance had opened up between them and their subject.<sup>186</sup> Traveling through the desert in search of “native informants” for old poetry and *akhbār*, they can be compared to modern ethnographers. The distance between observer and observed and the processes of selecting, recombining, and harmonizing the material entail unequal power dynamics between the scholars and their informants, much discussed in modern ethnographic writing but still waiting to be explored in the case of the early ‘Abbāsīd scholars.<sup>187</sup> This case is further complicated by the scholars’ ambivalent attitudes toward the Bedouins, who, over time, were transformed from marginalized secondary citizens to symbols of the great Arab past.<sup>188</sup> For the purposes of this article, however, we can simply conclude that the distance and unequal authority account for the observed discrepancies between the poetry and its commentaries and for the liberties that the scholars took in interpreting the old material according to their own sensibilities.

3. Early second/eighth century: Umayyad scholars. Although poetry is not the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of Umayyad scholars, we have reason to believe that these scholars did, in fact, engage in the collection and transmission of poetry and its *akhbār* and, what is more, did so with institutional backing. The reason this scenario seems counterintuitive lies in the long-assumed paradigm of pious Umayyad scholars vs. impious Umayyad rulers and in the presumption that Islamic piety has little patience with old Arabic poetry. This paradigm has, however, been disproved, most recently by Steven Judd, who has argued that scholarly culture was much more developed and much more intertwined with state structures than traditionally thought.<sup>189</sup> With regard to poetry specifically, Goldziher, in an early study, collected narratives testifying to the eagerness of the Umayyads to preserve both poetry and *akhbār*.<sup>190</sup> Ruth Mackensen has argued that literary activities took

185. Drory, “Abbasid Construction of the Jahiliyya,” 48.

186. For an earlier discussion of the relationship between the poet and the scholar see H. A. R. Gibb, “Arab Poet and Arabic Philologist,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 12, no. 3/4 (1948): 574–578.

187. For a felicitous comparison of a late antique text (the Babylonian Talmud) with modern ethnographical writings and their respective representations of authority, see James A. Redfield, “Redacting Culture: Ethnographic Authority in the Talmudic Arrival Scene,” *Jewish Social Studies* 22, no. 1 (2016): 29–80.

188. A key article on the topic is Athamina, “A‘rāb and Muhājirūn.” For a recent treatment of the issue of the Bedouinization of Arabness and a relevant bibliography, see Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 294ff.

189. Steven C. Judd, *Religious Scholars and the Umayyads: Piety-Minded Supporters of the Marwānīd Caliphate* (London: Routledge, 2014). On state-sponsored Umayyad historical writing, see Borrut, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir*, 33–60.

190. See Goldziher, “Notes on the Dīwāns.” See also al-Asad, *Maṣādir*, 197.

place in that period on a much greater scale than the tradition acknowledges; and al-Asad, Schoeler, and others have shown that writing and written texts played a larger role in the transmission of poetry than was once believed.<sup>191</sup> All of this indicates that poetry and the *akhbār* that accompany it were collected, transmitted, and recorded during the Umayyad period.

Furthermore, a number of anecdotes seem to suggest that the Umayyad rulers themselves were concerned with collecting literary material. For instance, Abū ‘Ubayda (and al-Aṣma‘ī in a similar story) narrates that when the Umayyads disagreed about a certain verse or *khbar* they would send a messenger to Iraq to seek an authoritative answer, and that a day would not pass without a messenger from the Umayyads knocking on the door of the famous scholar Qatāda (d. 118/736).<sup>192</sup> Regardless of its historicity, the anecdote is instructive in two ways: first, it portrays the Umayyads’ concern for knowledge of poetry and *akhbār*, and second, it shows that the recognized authority on the subject was an urban scholar in Iraq rather than Bedouins in the desert. In the Umayyad period, it seems that expertise in poetry and *akhbār* was not only the domain of the exotic Bedouins in the desert but at least equally the prerogative of urban scholars. The distance between the scholars and their object of study was much smaller than it came to be in the ‘Abbāsīd period.

At the same time, poetry and its *akhbār* were recited, enjoyed, and transmitted well beyond the scholarly circles, whether in the city or in the desert. We should not forget that the layout of the Umayyad garrison cities had the inhabitants distributed according to their tribal affiliation, and they could thus continue to share and transmit their literary lore. Poetry and *akhbār* in the Umayyad period were, to a large extent, still a “living tradition,” in Drory’s words. This observation applies also to the earliest stage in the process of the *akhbār*’s collection, to which we now turn our attention.

4. First/seventh century: living tradition/social memory/communicative memory. The core of the *akhbār*, then, originates in a time when it constituted a living tradition, comprising circles wider than those of the poets and the transmitters alone and including also the *akhbār*’s audiences and secondary, anonymous narrators. Al-Asad refers to this period as one of *al-tadwīn bi-l-‘amma*, “the writing down [of the tradition] by the general population” and specifically by *ruwāt* about whose lives we know little.<sup>193</sup>

Given the obscurity of this stage in the spread of the *akhbār*, it may be productive to consider what we know of the workings of memory in general. The early stage is characterized by what Aleida Assmann called “social memory,” and Jan Assmann, “communicative memory.” This type of organic collective memory stays alive for eighty to a hundred years

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191. Ruth Stelhorn Mackensen, “Arabic Books and Libraries in the Umayyad Period,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 52, no. 4 (1936): 245–253; Mackensen, “Arabic Books and Libraries in the Umayyad Period (Continued),” *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, 53, no. 4 (1937): 239–250; Mackensen, “Arabic Books and Libraries in the Umayyad Period (Concluded),” *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 54, no. 1/4 (1937): 41–61; al-Asad, *Maṣādir*; Schoeler, *Oral and Written*; Schoeler, *Genesis of Literature*.

192. Goldziher, “Notes on the Dîwāns,” 326, n. 4.

193. See al-Asad, *Maṣādir*, chap. 3.

and is handed down through direct communication. It constitutes the intermediate step between individual memory, which vanishes quickly, and the lasting cultural memory that is supported through symbolic practices and material representations.<sup>194</sup> The earliest *akhbār* should be seen primarily as products of the natural human inclination to storytelling, which at the same time helped preserve the poetry in memory. As the verses were recited and passed from one narrator to another, so were the stories attached to them, because “a story is a sort of natural container for memory; a way of sequencing a set of images, through logical and semantic connections, into a shape which is, itself, easy to retain in memory.”<sup>195</sup> Therefore, we should not see the *akhbār* simply as conscious manipulations of the material (though at times they may have been just that) but also as testimonies to the popular absorption of poetry within the structures of the social and communicative memory of early Islamic audiences, a process that at times produced clear discrepancies.

To summarize: I have treated the *akhbār* as a window into the multilayered process of the transmission of cultural heritage and the readjustments and reinterpretations that happen along the way. Later narrators, collectors, and commentators in these various periods lived in an age and a milieu that differed from those of the Mukhaḍram poets, and they approached the latter’s poetry from their own perspective. Some *akhbār* redeemed the defiant poets by emphasizing their repentance and concern for Islam (Abū Khirāsh, Abū Miḥjan, Suḥaym), by keeping silent about their anti-Islamic verses (Abū Khirāsh), or by turning them into Muslim warriors (Abū Miḥjan) or Muslim martyrs (Abū Khirāsh). Others emphasized the poet’s violent death and eternal disgrace (Suḥaym) to convey a message of warning to obstinate sinners. Another technique of accommodation observed here was the drawing of a sharp line between a poet’s deeds and his poetry, supported by a Qur’ānic verse; this strategy gave legitimacy to the preservation of even potentially scandalous verses. The organization of the *akhbār* in al-Iṣfahānī’s compilation also proved significant in shaping a poet’s later image and mitigating his un-Islamic demeanor (Abū Khirāsh). Although in this article I have focused on these tensions, it is clear that the later narrators also cherished the aesthetic of the old poetry and often made efforts to portray the poets candidly in their own contexts. The multifarious and often dialectical forces of later storytelling continued to mold the images of Abū Khirāsh, Abū Miḥjan, and Suḥaym and to reinterpret their poetry. At the same time, they made space for these three poets and their poetry in the Arabo-Islamic literary canon.

194. Marek Tamm, “Beyond History and Memory: New Perspective in Memory Studies,” *History Compass* 11, no. 6 (2013): 462.

195. Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, 50.

## Appendix

## 1. Abū Khirāsh al-Hudhalī

a) *Elegy on Zuhayr*

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|--|--|
| بذي فَجَرَ تَأْوِي إِلَيْهِ الْأَرَامِلُ                   | 1. فَجَعَ أَصْحَابِي جَمِيلٌ بِنَ مَعْمَرٍ         |
| إِذَا قَامَ وَاسْتَنْتَ عَلَيْهِ الْحَمَائِلُ <sup>1</sup> | 2. طَوِيلٌ نِجَادِ السَّيْفِ لَيْسَ بِحَيْدَرٍ     |
| وَمُهْتَلِكٌ بِالْيَدْرِيسِينَ عَائِلُ <sup>2</sup>        | 3. إِلَى بَيْتِهِ يَاوِي الْغَرِيبُ إِذَا شَتَا    |
| لَهَا حَدَبٌ تَحْتُهُ فَيَوَائِلُ                          | 4. تَرَوِّحُ مَقْرُورًا وَرَاحَتُ عَشِيَّةٍ        |
| مِنَ الْقَرِّ لَمَّا اسْتَقْبَلْتَهُ الشَّمَائِلُ          | 5. تَكَادُ يَدَاهُ تُسَلِّمَانِ رِدَاءَهُ          |
| وَقَدْ خَفَّ مِنْهَا اللَّوْذَعِيُّ الْخُلَّاحِلُ          | 6. فَمَا بِأَلِ أَهْلِ الدَّارِ لَمْ يَتَصَدَّعُوا |
| لَأَبِكَ بِالْجِزَعِ الضَّبَاعِ النَّوَاهِلُ               | 7. فَأَقْسِمُ لَوْ لَأَقْبَيْتَهُ غَيْرَ مَوْتِقٍ  |
| وَلَكِنْ ظَهَرَ الْقَرْنُ لِلْمَرَّةِ شَاغِلُ              | 8. لَظَلَّ جَمِيلٌ أَسْوَأَ الْقَوْمِ تَلَّةً      |
| وَلَكِنْ أَحَاطَتْ بِالرِّقَابِ السَّلَاسِلُ               | 9. فَلَيْسَ كَعَهْدِ الدَّارِ يَا أُمَّ مَالِكِ    |
| سِوَى الْحَقِّ شَيْئًا فَاسْتَرَاحَ الْعَوَادِلُ           | 10. وَعَادَ الْفَتَى كَالْكَهْلِ لَيْسَ بِقَائِلِ  |
| بِحَلِيَّةٍ إِذْ نَلَقَى بِهَا مَا نَحَاوُلُ               | 11. وَلَمْ أُنْسَ أَيَّامًا لَنَا وَلِيَالِيَا     |
| أَهَالٍ عَلَيْهِمْ جَانِبَ الثُّرْبِ هَانِلُ <sup>3</sup>  | (فَأَصْبَحَ إِخْوَانُ الصَّفَاءِ كَأَنَّمَا        |

(al-Isfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:151–152, meter: *ṭawīl*)<sup>4</sup>

1. Jamīl b. Ma‘mar grieved my guests with the slaughter of a munificent man with whom widows sought refuge;
2. whose sword-belt was long, who was not corpulent, and whose sword-straps moved about on his body [as he was slender] when he stood up;
3. in whose house a stranger would take shelter in wintertime, even a destitute man dressed in worn-out rags, in need to feed his family,
4. who—suffering from cold, chased by the evening wind that made him call out for help—went to him [Zuhayr];
5. whose hands almost lose his cloak when the north winds blow in his face.
6. So what is the matter with the people of his tribe that they did not collapse when such a wise and noble man departed?

1. Al-Sukkārī’s version prefers to cast Zuhayr as not short rather than not plump. Al-Sukkārī, *Sharḥ ash‘ār al-Hudhaliyyīn*, 1223.

2. Al-Sukkārī’s version adds a line here: “For surely, had you met him in battle, you would have fought him or he would have fought you.”

3. This last verse appears only in al-Sukkārī’s version.

4. Cf. al-Sukkārī, *Sharḥ ash‘ār al-Hudhaliyyīn*, 1221–1223.

7. And I swear, had you not found him tied up, thirsty hyenas would have come to drink your blood where the *wādī* bends.

8. Then Jamīl would have been the one among his people slain most ignominiously.

But a man's concern is his opponent's back [i.e., Zuhayr was slain unfairly].

9. Nothing is like the times of our [old] abode, Umm Mālik! Now, chains have encircled [our] necks,

10. and the youth has become like a middle-aged man, saying only the right things; the railing women are relieved.

11. But I have not forgotten our days and nights together at Ḥalya when we met with the ones that we desired.

(And our sincere friends now seem as if someone were pouring [sand] on them by a graveyard [i.e. burying them alive].)

b) *Second Elegy on Zuhayr*

1. أَفِي كُلِّ مَمْسَى لَيْلَةٍ أَنَا قَائِلٌ  
 2. فَمَا كُنْتُ أَحْشَى أَنْ تَصِيبَ دِمَاعَنَا  
 3. فَأَبْرُحُ مَا أَمْرْتُمْ وَعَمَّرْتُمْ  
 مِنْ الدَّهْرِ لَا يَبْعَدُ قَتِيلُ جَمِيلٍ  
 قَرِيشٌ وَلَمَّا يُقْتَلُوا بِقَتِيلٍ  
 مَدَى الدَّهْرِ حَتَّى تُقْتَلُوا بِغَلِيلٍ

(al-İşfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:152, meter: *ṭawīl*)<sup>5</sup>

1. Would I be saying every single night: “May he not depart, the one killed by Jamīl?”

2. I never used to doubt that if the Quraysh killed one of us we would take vengeance [lit. they would be killed for our killed].

3. And so I remain with a burning thirst, as long as you rule and prosper, until you are killed

c) *Elegy on Abū Khirāsh's Brother 'Urwa*

1. لَعْمَرِي لَقَدْ رَاعَتْ أُمَيْمَةَ طَلْعَتِي  
 2. وَقَالَتْ أَرَاهُ بَعْدَ عُرْوَةَ لَاهِيَا  
 3. فَلَا تَحْسَبِي أَنِّي تَنَاسَيْتُ فَقْدَهُ  
 4. أَلَمْ تَعْلَمِي أَنْ قَدْ تَفَرَّقَ قَبْلَنَا  
 وَإِنَّ ثَوَانِي عِنْدَهَا لَقَلِيلُ  
 وَذَلِكَ رُزْءٌ لَوْ عَلِمْتَ جَلِيلُ  
 وَلَكِنَّ صَبْرِي يَا أُمَيْمَ جَمِيلُ  
 نَدِيمًا صَفَاءً مَالِكٌ وَعَقِيلُ

5. Cf. al-Sukkarī, *Sharḥ ash-ʿār al-Hudhaliyyīn*, 1229.

5. أَبِي الصَّبْرِ أَنِّي لَا يَزَالُ يَهَيِّجُنِي      مَبِيتٌ لَنَا فِيمَا خَلَا وَمَقِيلٌ  
6. وَأَنِّي إِذَا مَا الصُّبْحُ أَنَسْتُ ضَوْءَهُ      يُعَاوِدُنِي قُطْعٌ عَلَيَّ ثَقِيلٌ

(al-Iṣfhānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:159, meter: *ṭawīl*)<sup>6</sup>

1. By my life, my appearance has made Umayma worried; she doesn't see much of me.
2. She says: "I see him having a good time after the death of 'Urwa." If only you knew how great an affliction this is [to me].
3. Do not believe that I forgot the loss, Umayma; yet my patience is a virtue.
4. Don't you know that before us the pure brothers Mālik and 'Aqīl were separated?
5. The view of our now-emptied home and resting place still disturbs me and robs me of my patience.
6. And so does the fact that I embrace every morning light with a deep, heavy sigh . . .

d) *My Thirsty Lips*

1. إِلَيْكَ أُمَّ ذِبَانُ  
2. مَا ذَاكَ مِنْ حَلَبِ الضَّانِ  
3. لَكِنْ مِصَاعِ الْفَتْيَانِ  
4. بِكَلِّ لَيْنِ حَرَانُ

(al-Iṣfhānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:156, meter: *manhūk al-munsariḥ*)

1. My thirsty lips,
2. this is no sheep's milk.
3. Instead, it is a gathering of young men,
4. each with a refined spearhead, heated up [and yearning for blood].

e) *Khīrāsh in the Muslim Army*

1. يُنَادِيهِ لِيُعْفِقَهُ كَلِيبٌ      وَلَا يَأْتِي لَقَدْ سَفَّهُ الْوَلِيدُ  
2. فَرْدٌ إِنَاءَهُ لَا شَيْءَ فِيهِ      كَأَنَّ دَمُوعَ عَيْنِيهِ الْقَرِيدُ  
3. وَأَصْبَحَ دُونَ غَابِقِهِ وَأَمْسَى      جِبَالٌ مِنْ حِرَارِ الشَّامِ سُودُ

6. Cf. al-Sukkarī, *Sharḥ ash'ār al-Hudhaliyyīn*, 1189.

4. ألا فاعلم خِرَاشُ بَأَنَّ خَيْرَ الـ  
5. رأيتك وابتغاء البرِّ دوني  
مهاجر بعد هجرته زهيد  
كمحصور اللبَّان ولا يصيد

(al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:162, meter: *wāfir*)

1. [A thirsty man, i.e., the poet] calls him [his son Khrāsh] to give him his evening drink, but he doesn't come; the boy has truly become foolish.
2. And he [the poet] receives his cup back, empty, as if the tears of his eyes were pearls.
3. In the morning, in the evening, between him and his cup-bearer [son] are the black mountains of Syria, as though burnt with fire.
4. Know, Khrāsh, that only meager good awaits the muhājir after his hijra.
5. I saw you wishing for goodness without me, like a dog daubed with blood to make it seem that he has hunted, although he has not.

f) *By Your Life, Snake*

1. لعمرُك والمنايا غالبات  
2. لقد أهلكت حيةً بطنِ أنفِ  
...  
1. لقد أهلكت حيةً بطنِ أنفِ  
2. فما تركتُ عدوًّا بين بُصرى  
على الإنسان تطلع كلَّ نجدِ  
على الأصحاب ساقًا ذات فقدِ  
على الأصحاب ساقًا ذات فضلِ  
إلى صنعاء يطلبه بذحلِ

(al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 21:163, meter: *wāfir*)

1. The fates are ever-victorious over man; they climb up every hill.
2. By your life, snake of the lowlands of Anf, you destroyed a leg that leaves behind a severe loss for the companions.
- ...
1. Oh snake of the lowlands of Anf, you destroyed a leg full of munificence for the companions.
2. Between Buṣrā and Ṣan<sup>ʿā</sup>, it did not leave a single enemy unavenged.

## 2. Abū Miḥjan al-Thaqafī

a) *When I Die Bury Me*

1. إذا مِتُّ فادفني إلى أصل كرمة  
 2. ولا تدفني في الفلاة فإنني  
 3. ليروي بخمر الخص لحمي فإنني  
 ثروي عظامي بعد موتي عروفا  
 أخاف إذا ما مت ألا أدوقها  
 أسير لها من بعد ما قد أسوقها

(al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:9, meter: *ṭawīl*)

1. When I die, bury me by the trunk of a grapevine, so that its roots may water my bones after my death.
2. Do not bury me in the desert, for I fear that when I die [there] I will not taste it [the wine].
3. May my grave be watered by the wine of al-Ḥuṣṣ, for I am its captive after I was the one carrying it along.

b) *Forbidden Wine-Drinking*

1. إن كانت الخمر قد عزت وقد منعت  
 2. فقد أبكرها صرفاً وأشربها<sup>7</sup>  
 3. وقد تقوم على رأسي منعمة  
 4. ترفع الصوت أحياناً وتخفضه  
 وحال من دونها الإسلام والحرج  
 رياً وأطرب أحياناً وأمتزج  
 خوداً إذا رفعت في صوتها غنج  
 كما يطن ذباب الروضة الهزج

(al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:10, meter: *basīṭ*)

1. Though now wine has become rare and forbidden, and Islam and unease have come between it and me,
2. back then, I used to drink from the morning, sometimes pure, and other times I used to drink my fill, and at times I am excited and at times I mix the wine [with water].
3. Above my head would stand a young, tender, and soft woman, and when she raised her voice it was an amorous gesture.
4. At times she would talk in a high-pitched voice and at times she would deepen it, like the garden flies making a buzzing sound.

7. Though I generally rely on the *Aghānī*, this word is from Abū Miḥjan's *Dīwān*, as the *Aghānī* has *amzujuhā*. See Abū Miḥjan, *Dīwān Abī Miḥjan*, 20.

c) *Forbidden Love*

1. ولقد نظرتُ إلى الشَّموسِ ودونها  
2. قد كنتُ أحسبني كأغنى واحدٍ  
حَرَجٌ من الرِّحمنِ غيرُ قليلٍ  
وَرَدَ المدينةَ عن زراعةِ فولٍ

(al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:6, meter: *kāmīl*)

1. I looked at Shamūs, but the great unease from the All-Merciful stands between us.
2. Among the people who came to Medina, I used to consider myself someone could most certainly dispense with planting beans.

d) *About al-Ḥaḍawḍā*

1. الحمد لله نجاني وخلصني  
2. من يجشم البحر والبوصي مركبه  
3. أبلغ لديك أبا حفص مغلغلة  
4. أني أكر على الأولى إذا فرعوا  
5. أغشى الهياج وتغشاني مضاعفة  
من ابن جهراء والبوصي قد حبسا  
إلى حصوضي قبئس المركب التمسنا  
عبد الإله إذا ما غار أو جلسنا  
يوماً وأحيس تحت الزاية الفرسا  
من الحديد إذا ما بعضهم خنسا

(al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 19:5–6, meter: *basīṭ*)

1. Praise be to God, who saved and delivered me from Ibn Jahra<sup>3</sup> when the boat (*būṣī*) ran aground.
2. Who takes it upon himself to sail the sea with the *būṣī* as his vessel to al-Ḥaḍawḍā: what a terrible boat he has chosen!
3. Let Abū Ḥafs, the worshipper of God, promptly know, whether he is at war or at peace,
4. that I attack the first horse of the enemy when others are afraid, and I capture the enemy's horse under my banner.
5. I plunge into the tumult of war and my iron armor protects me when others lag behind.

e) *Imprisonment during Battle*

1. كفى حزناً أن تردّي الخيلُ بالقتنا  
2. إذا قمتُ عتاني الحديدُ وغلقت  
3. وقد كنتُ ذا مالٍ كثيرٍ وإخوةٍ  
4. وقد شفتُ جسمي أنني كلُّ شارقي  
5. فإله دري يوم أترك موثقاً  
وأترك مشدوداً عليّ وثاقياً  
مصاريغ من دوني تُصمُّ المناديا  
فقد تركوني واحداً لا أخوا ليا  
أعالج كبلًا مُصمتًا قد برانيا  
وتذهل عني أسرتي ورجاليا

6. حبیبًا عن الحربِ العوانِ وقد بدت  
وإعمالُ غيري يومَ ذاكِ العواليا  
7. والله عهدٌ لا أخيسُ بعهدِهِ  
لئن فرجتُ ألا أزورَ الحوانيا

(al-Iṣfahānī, al-Aghānī, 19:8, meter: ṭawīl)

1. It is sad enough that horses are drumming the ground with their hooves, loaded with spears, while I am left tied in chains.
2. When I stand the iron tortures me, and the doors were closed behind me; doors that [made such a deafening noise that it] would drown out anyone's calling.
3. I was once a wealthy man with many brothers, but they abandoned me. I have no brother now.
4. Every morning I have to deal with tightly locked shackle; it has devoured my body and worn me out.
5. What a great man I am! Left behind, tied up, while my family and tribesmen neglect me.
6. Barred from the reignited war, while others display their glorious deeds.
7. By God, I vow that I will not breach His law and I will no longer visit the taverns, if I am set free.

f) *Patience*

1. ألم ترَ أنَّ الدهرَ يعثرُ بالفتى  
2. صبرتُ فلم أجزع ولم أك كائعًا  
3. وإني لذو صبرٍ وقد مات إخوتي  
4. رماها أميرُ المؤمنين بحتفِها  
ولا يستطيع المرءُ صرفَ المقادرِ  
لحادثِ دهرٍ في الحكومة جائرِ  
ولست عن الصهباءِ يومًا بصابرِ  
فخلأنها يكون حول المعاصرِ

(al-Iṣfahānī, al-Aghānī, 19:13, meter: ṭawīl)

1. Have you not seen that fate makes a young man fall, that a man cannot avert his destiny?
2. I endured the blows of fate, unjust in its judgment, and I did not fear and I was not a coward.
3. Indeed, I was endowed with fortitude when my brothers died, but I cannot refrain from wine for a single day!
4. The Commander of the Believers put it to death, so its true friends now weep around the wine presses.

g) Forswearing Wine I

1. رأيتُ الخمرَ سالحةً وفيها  
2. فلا واللهِ أشربُها حياتي  
مناقِبُ تُهكُّ الرِّجْلَ الخَلِيمَا  
ولا أسقي بها أبدًا نديما

(al-Iṣfahānī, al-Aghānī, 19:12, meter: wāfir)

1. I considered wine to be good, yet it has qualities that destroy the mild-tempered man.
2. And by God, I will not drink it any more in my life, and neither shall I give it to a drinking companion to drink.

h) Forswearing Wine II

1. يقولُ أناسٌ اشربِ الخمرِ إنَّها  
2. فقلتُ لهم جهلاً كذبتُم ألم تروا  
إذا القومُ نالوها أصابوا العنَّانما  
أخاها سفيهاً بعدما كان حالما

(Dīwān Abī Miḥjan, 16, meter: ṭawīl)

1. People say that drinking wine is as if one were granted spoils.
2. I told them: “You lied out of ignorance; did you not see that a reasonable man who drank it became silly after drinking it?”

3. Suḥaym ‘Abd Banī Ḥaṣḥās

a) The Smell of Her Clothes

1. فما بيضةٌ بات الظلِّمُ يحفُّها  
2. بأحسنَ منها يومَ قالتْ: أظاعنْ  
ويرفَعُ عنها جُوجُؤًا مُتجافيا  
مع الرِّكبِ أم ثاوٍ لدينا لياليا؟  
ولا ثوبٍ إلَّا برُدِّها وردائيا  
إلى الحولِ حتى أنهَجَ الثَّوبُ باليا  
3. وهبَّتْ شمالاً آخرَ اللَّيلِ قَرَّةً  
4. وما زال بُردِي طيِّبًا من ثيابِها

(al-Iṣfahānī, al-Aghānī, 22:211–212, meter: ṭawīl)

1. Even an egg held tightly by a male ostrich who lifts his breast as he is protecting it
2. is not more beautiful than she on the day when she asked: “Are you leaving with the riders or are you staying with us for some nights?”
3. A cold north wind started blowing at the end of the night, and we did not have any clothes but her cloak and my robe.
4. And my cloak retained the sweet scent of her clothes for a whole year until it wore out.

b) *Swaying Hump of a Young She-Camel*

1. يا ذِكرَةً ما لك في الحاضرِ  
تذكُرُها وأنتَ في الصّادرِ  
2. من كلِّ بيضاءٍ لها كعُثْبٌ  
مثلُ سنامِ البكرةِ المائِرِ

(al-Iṣfahānī, al-Aghānī, 22:216, meter: sarīʿ)

1. Oh [that] memory, why do you remember her now, when you are leaving?
2. [The memory] of every white [woman] who has private parts large like the swaying hump of a young she-camel.

c) *Black and White*

1. أشعارُ عبدِ بني الحساسِ فَمَنْ له  
عندِ الفخارِ مقامِ الأصيلِ والورقِ  
2. إن كنتُ عبداً فنفسي حرّةٌ كَرَمًا  
أو أسودَ اللونِ إني أبيضُ الخُلُقِ

(al-Aghānī, 22:214, meter: basīṭ)

1. The poems of the slave of the Banū al-Ḥashās outweigh a noble origin and wealth.
2. Though I am a slave, my soul is free by virtue of its nobility; though black by color, I am white of character.”

d) *Fate Does Not Fear Even Muḥammad*

1. رأيتُ المنايا لم تهبنَ محمّدا  
ولا أحداً ولم يدعنَ مخلّدا  
2. ألا لا أرى على المنونِ مخلّدا  
ولا باقياً إلا له الموتُ مرصدا

(Dīwān Suḥaym, 40, meter: ṭawīl)

1. I saw that the fates fear not even Muḥammad or anyone else, and that they do not let anyone live forever.
2. I see no one who lives forever despite fate, nor anyone remaining alive without death's lying in wait for him.

e) Grey Hair and Islam

1. عُمِيرَةٌ وُدَّعَ إِنْ تَجَهَّزْتَ غَادِيَا  
كفَى الشَّيْبُ وَالْإِسْلَامُ لِلْمَرْءِ نَاهِيَا  
2. جَنُونًا بِهَا فِيمَا اعْتَشَرْنَا عِلَالَةً  
عِلَاقَةً حَبًّا مُسْتَسِرًّا وَبَادِيَا

(al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:213, 215 for only the “*kafā . . . nāhiyā*” part;  
*Dīwān Suḥaym*, 16–17, meter: *ṭawīl*)

1. Bid farewell to ‘Umayra if you are prepared to leave in the morning [to fight], for grey hair and Islam are enough to restrain a man.
2. [I recall my] obsession with her during the time we spent together, comforting each other, in a relationship that was sometimes hidden and other times shown.

f) Ṣubayrī Girls

1. كَأَنَّ الصَّبِيرِيَّاتِ يَوْمَ لَقَيْنَا  
ظِبَاءَ حَنَتْ أَعْنَاقَهَا فِي الْمَكَائِسِ  
2. فَكَمْ قَدْ شَقَّقْنَا مِنْ رِدَائِ مُنِيرٍ  
وَمَنْ بَرَقَ عَنْ طِفْلَةٍ غَيْرِ نَاعِسٍ  
3. إِذَا شُقَّ بَرْدٌ شُقٌّ بِالْبَرْدِ بُرُقٌ  
عَلَى ذَاكَ حَتَّى كَلْنَا غَيْرَ لَابِسِ

(al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:216, meter: *ṭawīl*)

1. It is as if the women of Ṣubayr, on the day that they met us, were gazelles whose necks were bent in their coverts.
2. How many dresses of double-threaded cloth did we tear apart and how many veils [we pulled] from eyes that was not drowsy.
3. When a robe is torn off the veil goes with it, [and we continued] in this way until all of us were bare-skinned.

g) Should She Be Kept a Secret?

1. أَتَكْتَمُ حَيْثُكُمْ عَلَى النَّأْيِ تُكْتَمَا  
تَحِيَّةً مِنْ أَمْسَى بِحَبِّكَ مُغْرَمَا  
2. وَمَا تُكْتَمِينَ إِنْ أَتَيْتِ دَنِيَّةً  
وَلَا إِنْ رَكَبْنَا بَابِنَةَ الْقَوْمِ مَحْرَمَا  
3. وَمِثْلِكَ قَدْ أَبْرَزْتُ مِنْ خِدْرِ أَمَّهَا  
إِلَى مَجْلِسٍ تَجَرُّ بُرْدًا مُسَهْمَا  
4. وَمَاشِيَةَ مَشَى الْقَطَاةِ اتَّبَعْتُهَا  
مَنْ السِّتْرِ تَخْشَى أَهْلَهَا أَنْ تَكَلَّمَا  
5. فَقَالَتْ: صِهْ يَا وَيْحَ غَيْرِكَ إِنِّي  
سَمِعْتُ حَدِيثًا بَيْنَهُمْ يَقَطُرُ الدَّمَا  
6. فَفَضْتُ ثَوْبِيهَا وَنَظَرْتُ حَوْلَهَا  
وَلَمْ أَحْشَ هَذَا اللَّيْلُ أَنْ يَتَصَرَّمَا  
7. أَعْفَى بِأَثَارِ الثِّيَابِ مَبِيَّتَهَا  
وَأَلْفَطَ رَضًا مِنْ وَقُوفٍ تَحْطَمَا

(al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:217, meter: *ṭawīl*)

1. Should she be kept a secret? May you be greeted despite the distance by him who became infatuated with your love. 2. And you wouldn't have been kept a secret, if you did a disgraceful deed, daughter of the tribe, nor if we engaged in a forbidden act.
3. [For] many a girl like you I took out from the curtained quarters of her mother to a party where she would trail her striped robe.
4. Many a girl walking like a sound-grouse I have observed from behind a curtain, for their family worried that they might speak to me.
5. And she said: "Shh, woe onto other than you! For I overheard a conversation among them that dripped with blood."
6. So I dusted off her clothes and I looked around her and I did not fear that the night would pass
7. while wiping the traces off her clothes in our overnight shelter and gathering the fragments of her bracelets.

*h) Now You are Mocking Me*

1. فَإِنْ تَضْحَكِي مِنِّي فَيَا رَبِّ لَيْلَةٍ      تَرَكْتِكِ فِيهَا كَالْقَبَاءِ الْمَفْرَجِ

(al-Isfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 22:217, meter: *ṭawīl*)

1. Now you are mocking me, but how many a night I left you spread open, like a garment.

*i) Sweat and Scent*

1. شُدُّوْا وَثَاقَ الْعَبْدِ لَا يَفْلِتْكُمْ      إِنَّ الْحَيَاةَ مِنَ الْمَمَاتِ قَرِيبُ  
2. فَلَقَدْ تَحَدَّرَ مِنْ جَبِينِ فَتَاتِكُمْ      عَرَقٌ عَلَى مَتَنِ الْفَرَّاشِ وَطِيبُ

(*al-Aghānī*, 22:217, meter: *kāmil*)

1. Fasten the bonds on your slave lest he escape you, for surely life is close to death,
2. indeed, once sweat and scent dripped from the foreheads of your girls onto the bed's surface.

4. Ṭarafa

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>فَدَغِي أَبَادِرَهَا بِمَا مَلَكَتْ يَدِي<br/>وَجِدَّكَ لَمْ أَحْفَلْ مَتَى قَامَ عَوْدِي<br/>كُمَيْتِ مَتَى مَا تُغَلِّ بِالمَاءِ تُزِيدِ<br/>كَسِيدِ الغَضَا نَيْهَتَهُ المَتَوَرِدِ<br/>بِبَهْكَنَةٍ تَحْتَ الخِبَاءِ المَعْمَدِ<br/>عَلَى عَشْرِ أَوْ خِرْوَعٍ لَمْ يُخْضِدِ</p> | <p>1. فَإِنْ كُنْتَ لَا تَسْطِيعُ دَفْعَ مَنِيَّتِي<br/>2. وَلَوْلَا ثَلَاثٌ هُنَّ مِنْ عَيْشَةِ الفَتَى<br/>3. فَمِنْهُنَّ سَبْقِي العَاذِلَاتِ بِشَرْبَةِ<br/>4. وَكَرِّي إِذَا نَادَى المُضَافُ مُجَنَّبًا<br/>5. وَتَقْصِيرُ يَوْمِ الدَّجْنِ وَالدَّجْنُ مُعْجَبٌ<br/>6. كَأَنَّ البُرَيْنَ وَالدَّمَالِيحَ عُلِّقَتْ</p> |
|---|--|

(translation from Arberry, *Seven Odes*, 86, meter: *ṭawīl*)

1. If you can't avert from me the fate that surely awaits me / then pray leave me to hasten it on with what money I've got.
2. But for three things, that are the joy of a young fellow / I assure you I wouldn't care when my deathbed visitors arrive—
3. first, to forestall my charming critics with a good swig of crimson wine / that foams when the water is mingled in;
4. second, to wheel at the call of the beleaguered a curved-shanked steed / streaking like the wolf of the thicket you've startled lapping the water;
5. and third, to curtail the day of showers, such an admirable season / dallying with a ripe wench under the pole-propped tent,
6. her anklets and her bracelets seemingly hung on the boughs / of a pliant, unriven gum-tree or a castor-shrub.

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