

Poetry as a Source for the History of Early Islam: The case of (al-)‘Abbās b. Mirdās

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Abstract

We expect poetry to be poetical, an expression of emotions, meditative and the like. It seems unusual to even consider the value of poetry as a historical source, but given the characteristics of early Arabic poetry this objective becomes less farfetched: Arab poets used their poetic compositions sometimes as the media of the time, to state publicly their points of view and their deliberations. By studying these we come across motivations, reflections of discussions and considerations of the options that these individuals had. For an era of turmoil like the beginning of Islam we can hardly come closer to the persons who witnessed it than reading and interpreting their own words.

Keywords: Ancient Arabic poetry, early Islam, genesis of religions in context.

In many medieval historical works written and compiled by Arab historians or chroniclers we find the occasional piece of poetry but these fragments are often ignored or—at best—treated as “illustrations” to the text. In the following lines I will try to demonstrate the possible contribution poetry might have to offer to our understanding of the early history of Islam.

One of the first attempts to assess the importance of poetry as a historic source was made by Omar FARRUKH in his Ph.D. thesis *Das Bild des Frühislam in der arabischen Dichtung*.¹ Farrukh points at an interesting passage in the *K. al-Aghānī*:

*nahā ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb al-nāsa an yunshidū shay’an min munāqaḍati l-anṣāri wa-mushrikī Quraysh, wa-qāla: fī dhālika shatmu l-ḥayyi bi-l-mayyiti wa-tajdīdu l-aghā’ini wa-qad hadama llāhu amra l-jāhiliyyati bi-mā jā’a min al-islāmi*²

“Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb forbade the people to recite something (poetic³) that had to do with the opposition between the Anṣār and the polytheists from Quraysh, arguing: that is a case of abuse by a living person towards someone who died and a revival of a grudge. Allah destroyed everything *jāhili* with what came from Islam.”

1 FARRUKH 1937.

2 FARRUKH 1937: 2; al-Iṣfahānī, *K. al-Aghānī*, iv: 140.

3 The verb *anshada* allows this addition.

The point that Farrukh wants to make is that in early Islam the reading of poetry was suppressed. The quote of ‘Umar’s words seems to indicate that this was done to prevent social uproar or misgivings among the believers in the new faith and their former enemies.

Whatever the purpose of this ban may have been, it shows that poetry was a social factor to be taken seriously, because it could kindle old adversities, so it must have been a threat if it alluded to existing problems. And what is more: it must have conveyed controversial opinions that were still widely held in early Islamic society.

Farrukh could not avoid discussing the authenticity problem of ancient Arabic poetry, but he sides with those who trusted the acumen and sincerity of—for instance—Ibn Hishām, maybe even more so than many of the modern Arabists tend to do.⁴ He quotes al-Qālī:

Al-Zubayr < Muḥammad b. Sallām (al-Jumaḥī) < Yaḥyā b. Sa‘d al-Qaṭṭān (d. 813 A.D.):

*ruwātu l-shi‘ri a‘qalu min ruwāti l-ḥadīthi li-anna ruwāta l-ḥadīthi yarwūna maṣnū‘an kathīran wa-ruwātu l-shi‘ri sā‘ata yunshidūna l-maṣnū‘a yantaqidūna-hū wa-yaqūlūna: hādḥā maṣnū‘un*⁵

“The transmitters of poetry are more sensible than the transmitters of *ḥadīth* because the latter transmit much that is fabricated whereas the transmitters of poetry, when they recite something fabricated, immediately criticize it and say: this is fabricated.”

Charles J. LYALL seems to be cautious about the use of poetry as a historic source but does not deny the possible usefulness: “But the poems by themselves are not, strictly speaking, history. An Arabian ode hardly ever contains a consecutive narrative of events. ... The occurrences touched upon are mentioned ... allusively...” He insists that “to utilize these poems” we have to be acquainted with the situation in which they were composed.⁶

In an article published in 1964 M. KHAN tries to prove the credibility and therefore the authenticity of early Islamic *akḥbār* collections like the *Sīra* of Ibn Hishām, the *Maghāzī* of al-Wāqīdī and the *Ṭabaqāt* of Ibn Sa‘d, to name but a few, by evaluating and authenticating the poetry that these works contain.⁷

In 1968 the same author publishes an article⁸ that comes much closer to the subject of the present contribution. Its title is “Life of the Prophet at Mecca as reflected in contemporary poetry”. In it KHAN discusses several poems by a variety of poets and tries to assess the credibility of these poems in representing the actual historicity of the Prophet’s life and the circumstances of his career. In my opinion the theoretical basis of this article is a valuable contribution to Arabic and Islamic Studies. The main difference between his assessment and the present contribution is that he concentrates on the

4 FARRUKH 1937: 5.

5 Al-Qālī, (*Dhayl*) *al-Amālī*, iii: 105.

6 LYALL 1914: 68-9.

7 KHAN 1964: 249-87.

8 KHAN 1968: 75-91.

biography of one person as mirrored in contemporary poetry whereas my objective is to present an image of an evolving personality in the context of changing social and religious circumstances as expressed in his own words.

AGHA points at the wide use that the *akhbāriyyūn* made of Arabic verse.⁹ He goes as far as to suppose that “one may even conjure up an outline ... of at least the major contours of early Arab history by solely tapping Arabic verse”. But he argues that before we can work with poetry as a source two obstacles have to be overcome: we need to distinguish between contemporaneous poetry and poetry composed commemorating the event afterwards; secondly, the subject of authenticity has to be discussed for each individual poem.¹⁰

Thomas BAUER recently discussed the role that ancient Arabic poetry can play in interpreting the Koran.¹¹ He stresses the importance of intertextuality between the Koranic text and pre-Islamic poetry and arrives at convincing new interpretations of some koranic passages. He discusses the reasons why the “somewhat bulky mass of literature” has hardly been used for interpreting the Koran:¹²

- the Koran should be understood in itself,
- the authenticity problem of poetry
- and the little that literary texts can contribute to understanding a religious text, a statement similar to the first one mentioned.

The authenticity problem has lost its relevance for the contemporary study of pre- and early Islamic poetry because “[t]he complexity of the corpus puts to rest any notions of falsity, for in order to create such an extensive literature with its own development (sometimes even its own peculiar grammar, syntax and idiom, G.B.) over a considerable time span... it would have been necessary to invent a whole history of literature.”¹³

If we add the sheer number of verses concerned¹⁴ and try to imagine how most of these poems would have been embedded in their own “invented” historical context, the real dimensions of such a fictional undertaking become clear. An operation on this scale would hardly go unnoticed.

BAUER’s argument for establishing an intertextual relationship between the Koran and early Arabic poetry is intriguing and convincing, and it promises relevant results. He hints to one aspect of this poetry that is of particular interest in this context: “... the ways in which pre- and early Islamic society has used this literature for communicative purposes”. One might also say: the poets, the major poets and the lesser ones, confronted with the

9 AGHA 2011: 7.

10 AGHA 2011: 8.

11 BAUER 2010.

12 BAUER 2010: 700-3.

13 BAUER 2010: 702.

14 The *Mawsūʿa Shiʿriyya*, a CD-ROM edited by the Cultural Foundation of the U.A.E. in 2003, lists 6,820 poems (= 55,162 verses) for the *jāhili* and *mukhaḍḍam* period. Some verses are of course doubly attributed, but if we add the number of poems/verses that are not presented in edited diwans and are therefore not listed in the *Mawsūʿa*, this number is easily outweighed.

emergence of a new religion and the zeal of its Prophet, actually talk back to the Prophet, the members of the Islamic community and society in general, often in poetry.

Still, to identify poetry as a source with historical content and some value for historians is an unusual approach because it seems to contradict our common sense understanding of poetry as an individual expression of emotions. Therefore as a starting point I will use the following digression which will serve as a conceptual reference for the issue at hand.

Digression

In 1830 a number of circumstances led the population in present day Belgium—then part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands—to secede from the northern provinces. This political development provoked a wave of patriotic sentiment in the north and caused King William of Orange to call upon volunteers to serve in his army. This was the beginning of a military campaign called the “Tiendaagse Veldtocht” (Ten Day Campaign) which effectively continued until the next year and was a failure from the beginning: the actual partition of the country had already been decided on a diplomatic level elsewhere in Europe.

Some volunteers were recruited from universities (then called “Hoogeschool” or “Atheneum”). Most of these volunteers were—*mirabile dictu*—students of Theology. From the University of Groningen about 200 students joined William’s forces as so called “flankeurs”. Their short heroic career consisted mainly of boredom while hanging out in a number of small towns in present day (Flemish and Dutch) Brabant. The casualties were limited. Rumour has it that two of them were injured in a scuffle and one died from falling out of a tree while spying on the enemy.

Without ever confronting the enemy forces the battalion returned to Groningen in September 1831 and King William granted these students a delay for the start of their courses until October 3rd.

During the events leading up to this campaign, when the students left to fight, as well as on their return, a large number of poems were published in the media, also to be recited at various events. From a literary point of view most of these poems have to be assessed as pathetic rubbish.¹⁵ Does this poetry reflect history; can we reconstruct a “past” using these texts?

One of the poets who more or less succeeded in composing reasonably good poetry around these historic developments was B. H. LULOFS (1787-1849), professor of Dutch Language and Rhetoric at Groningen University. In a collection of his poetry edited in 1852 we find two poems concerning the Groningen student-volunteers who participated in the Ten Day Campaign, one poem composed on the occasion of their departure and one on their return.

15 VAN ZONNEVELD 1981: 200-212.

Both poems are composed in stanzas; the first¹⁶ has five stanzas and the second¹⁷ has fifteen. For brevity's sake we will only have a closer look at the second poem. Its stanzas can be paraphrased as follows:

- Stanza 1: Welcome to you, young heroes. Rumour has told us of your courage and loyalty in the hardest of battles. Behold how young and old greet you in awe.
- Stanza 2: You defied danger and bitter need, even without food, water and sleep. You never became cowards.
- Stanza 3: In the heat of the hard-fought battle when the killing was going on, your courage and your loyalty to King and country did not fail.
- Stanza 4: Because of you the Belgians cannot call us cowards. Former grief and misery have been forgotten; we will only die as men.
- Stanza 5: Let the virgins bind garlands to the banner from which the enemy fled. Let the banner find its place next to the one that made Galen¹⁸ leave, the banner of the courageous.
- Stanza 6: Young heroes! As long as you will live the fatherland will owe you, proud of those who faced death. Future generations will envy you for the occasion to fight for Holland's right.
- Stanza 7: Return to quieter exercises now on the uneasy path to knowledge. First Bellona¹⁹ covered you with bloody bay leaves and now Pallas will adorn you with her olives.
- Stanza 8: The garland of scholarship entwined with that of the glory of battle. May Holland's youth show how it loves the fatherland and that it wants to honour King and Country in peace and in war time.
- Stanza 9: We see Europe in tears and in blood. Another people shackled in chains, its neck under a tyrant's iron foot. Principles fight principles and the truth fights lies and delusions.²⁰
- Stanza 10: Fortunate is the country in which the people do not fear the ruler and the ruler does not fear the people. Every citizen is safe by law, free from oppression. Honour for the highest and the lowest who deserves it. Order and discipline go hand in hand with rights and freedom.
- Stanza 11: You, brave heroes, stay away from mutiny and false freedom. Follow the path of truth to make humanity perfect.
- Stanza 12: Humanity goes forward against all odds. Perfection is its ultimate ambition.

16 "Aan de vrijwillige Flankeur-Compagnie der Studenten van Groningen en Franeker. (Bij haren uittogt en het aanbieden van een Vaandel)", in: LULOFS (ed. SPANDAW et al.) 1851: 114-5.

17 Ibid., Flankeur-Compagnie (*Bij hare terugkomst*): 116-20.

18 Bishop Bernhard von Galen of Münster (1606-1678). He besieged the city of Groningen in 1672 but failed to capture it.

19 The Roman goddess of war.

20 This might be an allusion to the Russian-Polish war and the fall of Warsaw between September 6th and 8th, 1831.

- Stanza 13: High in heaven there is God who will help his people. Who creates order from chaos and light from darkness. He will be for evermore.
- Stanza 14: Welcome once more, brave heroes. You may show the banner that withstood the fire of war. Let maidens attach bay leaf crowns to it. Long live this group of courageous warriors.
- Stanza 15: You, two colleagues, who exalted scholarship by war's glory, worthy the country where the Douzas²¹ were born. As often as we say your names, we will praise you as scholars and (military) heroes.

The choice for this particular poem is not completely arbitrary: for the purpose of this article we need some parallels to the situation in early Islam that we are going to discuss. These parallel issues are:

- the scale of events is comparable to military campaigns in early Islam;
- when using poetry to report on a military event, we have to at least divide between those who participated and those who did not. B. H. LULOFS clearly belongs to the latter;
- the situation in which the confrontation occurs should be full of tension and ambitions;
- preferably emotions should run high, or there should be much at stake, at least in the hearts and minds of those who were witnesses.

What does this poem contribute to our understanding of history; to what extent does it reveal a historical reality?

First we find a number of historical data like names and places: It mentions a geographical name (Brabant) and the misery that the volunteers went through. It emphasizes the courage of the troops while under attack (if ever they were) and their effort to save Holland's national reputation. The scene of the garlands being bound to the banner is a romantic image that introduces the female element, i.e., the maidens who handle these garlands. It also opens the possibility to refer to the earlier distress that the city of Groningen went through under Van Galen and the important role that the old banner had in those days. The stanzas six to eight emphasize the peculiar theme of combining proud scholarship with proven toughness in battle.

Secondly it refers to contemporary circumstances: The stanzas 9-12 draw a sharp contrast between the misery of the political and social situation in Europe at that time and the enlightened leadership and social equilibrium in Holland.

Thirdly it conveys something of the contemporary state of mind: "Praise be to God" is the theme of stanza 13. Stanza 14 repeats the original theme: welcome to the brave heroes. And finally the poet refers to two of his colleagues who apparently went to war alongside the "flankeurs".

This digression also allows us to construct categories of poets and texts. As for poets we could distinguish four categories:

21 Probably a reference to the family Van der Does from Leiden, famous as scholars and military men.

1. Witness and not biased
2. Witness and biased
3. Non-witness and not biased
4. Non-witness and biased

If we would classify this poem in terms of Arabic genres it would probably be associated with *madīh*. By its very nature the genre *madīh* seems insignificant as a source for historical research: the poet is most of the times not a witness and is certainly biased.

Although we know from other sources that the above mentioned campaign did actually take place, the value of the poem as a historical document is very limited.

1. The poet himself was a witness only to the exit and the return of the troops. He never actually saw their activity on the battlefield nor did he see the enemy.
2. The poet emphasized not only the grand historic connection (Van Galen— present situation) but also the ideology—generally held—that Holland was attacked in spite of its good intentions and its notable position in terms of justice and democracy.
3. The reference to any historical content or situation mainly concerns the ideological motivation to go to war. The poet is obviously not aware of this “battle” belonging to minor skirmishes in the reshaping of Europe whereas the major decisions about it were made on the level of international diplomacy at that time.

It is not only the apparent clumsiness of the whole operation but also the fact that nothing actually happened that makes the poet a non-witness to a non-event.

The story of ‘Abbās b. Mirdās

As a contrast to this poet I chose to discuss a number of poems by (al-)‘Abbās b. Mirdās.²² This poet converted in 628 AD (8 AH) and participated in the battle of Ḥunayn in 630 AD. He died under the caliphate of ‘Uthmān (644-656); it seems safe to assume that he was born around or a little before 600.²³

His career reflects the developments during the early Islamic era: he starts as a bedouin tribal leader of the Sulaym in the Hijaz area and at the end of his life he has become a city dweller in a house either in Basra or in Damascus.

Some of the usual sources do have these data to offer about him:

- Al-Ṭabarī in his *Tārīkh*²⁴ mentions ‘Abbās’s discontent and his complaint to Mohammed about the partition of booty after Ḥunayn. Ṭabarī mentions the decision of the prophet (to allot him more) with the words: “Let him shut up” (*iqṭa‘ū ‘an-nī lisāna-hū*).

22 Whether or not the famous poetess al-Khansā’ was his mother is under debate. See al-‘Abbās b. Mirdās, *Dīwān*: 10-11.

23 For a detailed biography of al-‘Abbās b. Mirdās see “Introduction”, in al-‘Abbās b. Mirdās, *Dīwān*: 7-30.

24 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ii: 174-5.

- In his *Kāmil fī 'l-tārīkh*, Ibn al-Athīr²⁵ is even more concise about the story of the booty and ends with “he (the prophet) gave him until he was satisfied” (*fa-aṣā-hu ḥattā raḍīya*).
- In his *Usd al-ghāba fī ma'rifat al-ṣaḥāba* the same author elaborates a little. He says that 'Abbās offered the army of the prophet 300 horsemen (whereas 'Abbās himself makes it a thousand as we will see). Ibn al-Athīr gives a short version of the booty conflict and cites the prophet: “Go and make him shut up” (*idhhabū fa-'qṭa'ū 'an-nī lisāna-hū*); Ibn al-Athīr mentions 'Abbās's (pre-Islamic) ban on the drinking of wine²⁶ and the biographical note that he built a house in Damascus towards the end of his life. One *ḥadīth* is attributed to his son Kināna.
- Much more attention is devoted to 'Abbās b. Mirdās in the *Sīra*:²⁷ he is mentioned as the poet of a verse praising 'Akk b. 'Adnān (I: 8); 'Amr b. Ma'dīkarib addresses 'Abbās in a verse (II: 200) and in II: 268, n. 4, we find a reference to a verse by 'Abbās; Ibn Hishām mentions a story about an idol (Dīmār) that 'Abbās inherited from his father. The idol starts to speak about a prophet which motivates 'Abbās to convert to Islam. Elsewhere in the *Sīra*²⁸ Ibn Hishām includes nine poems by 'Abbās in his account of the battle of Ḥunayn. All these poems except one are directly connected with this battle.

Other sources for 'Abbās are mainly from the collection of *ḥadīth* literature and are repetitive as to the information we already have.

In the following lines I would like to focus on 'Abbās, his life and his poetry, during a period which can be called turbulent: between 628 and 631 he has to choose between his loyalty towards either the tribe of Ghaṭafān or Hawāzin—both Qaysī tribes as well as his own tribe, Sulaym—, nonetheless he decides to convert to Islam, as a consequence he is left by his wife, and he takes part in the battle of Ḥunayn against the Hawāzin and is not happy with the resulting booty which brings him into conflict with the Prophet.

The bet

In his Introduction to the *Dīwān* of al-'Abbās b. Mirdās,²⁹ al-JABBŪRĪ mentions a story about a wager between 'Abbās and a certain Ḥuwayṭib b. 'Abd al-'Uzzā, who was on his way with the Muslim army to Khaybar. 'Abbās places a bet that the Jews of Khaybar will prevail against the Prophet, and Ḥuwayṭib in turn puts his bet on the alternative outcome.

25 Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, ii: 183-4.

26 In one of his poems on the occasion of the Ḥunayn battle we find this verse which might shed doubt on this judgement: *humū ra'su 'l-'aduwwi min 'ahli najdin fa-qatluhumū aladhdu mina al-sharābi*— al-'Abbās b. Mirdās, *Dīwān*: 48.

27 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i: 8, 200, 268 n. 4.

28 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, ii: 460-70.

29 al-'Abbās b. Mirdās, *Dīwān*: 18-9.

Al-JABBŪRĪ interprets this as a sign of sympathy from ‘Abbās for the Jewish inhabitants of Khaybar.

The source for this story—not mentioned by al-JABBŪRĪ— might well be the *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* by al-Wāqidi.³⁰ The story runs a bit differently there: Ḥuwayṭib is on his way from the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyya with the Muslim army to Khaybar,³¹ convinced that the Prophet and the new religion will be victorious “over all humanity”. He meets ‘Abbās and the conversation heads towards a wager between the two: ‘Abbās supposes that the Ghatafān (!) will win and Ḥuwayṭib of course places a bet on the Muslim army. The men of Ghatafān were hired by the inhabitants of Khaybar to help and defend them. It must have been *their* abilities in battle and the fact that they outnumbered the Muslims that convinced ‘Abbās and a few others like Ṣafwān b. Umayya and Nawfal b. Mu‘āwiya to place this bet.

A number of others back Ḥuwayṭib and they put in a total of 100 camels.³² The bet is on, but at that very moment there is an uproar in the middle of which Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb cries: *khashītu wa-l-Lāti hayyiza ‘Abbās b. Mirdās*, “By al-Lat, this ‘Abbās and his companions are getting on my nerves”. Ṣafwān angrily replies: *adrakat-ka l-MN’FYT*. I suggest to read this inexplicable word as an error for *munāfaqa*. It would explain Ṣafwān’s astonishment of Abū Sufyān’s mistake to swear by the wrong deity: “Hypocrisy has seized you” or “Now you’re exposing yourself”. Abū Sufyān’s reaction is to turn away in silence (*askata Abū Sufyān*). The details of this sub-story contribute considerably to the human character of this passage.

Because the Muslim army prevailed ‘Abbās in the end lost one hundred camels with this wager.

His conversion to Islam³³

For this subject we have two versions. For narrative reasons I prefer to discuss the first version elsewhere in this contribution. The second version runs like this:

Version 2

From the story of the wager we might conclude that ‘Abbās did not feel as having an alliance with the Muslim community. That means that he probably had not yet converted. But very soon after this he changed his mind and went as far as taking part in the battle of Ḥunayn two years later. So we may assume that the time of his conversion would be somewhere between Khaybar and Ḥunayn. It does not necessarily mean that he took this decision at one point; he may well have taken some time to think it over. This is at least what the following texts suggest:

30 Al-Wāqidi, *K. al-Maghāzī*, ii: 701-2.

31 Also referred to as Khayābir, probably because it consisted of a number of Jewish settlements.

32 In this passage the word *khumas* suggests that they spread the risk over five participants.

33 The story is taken from *Aghānī*, xiv: 302 ff. See also al-‘Abbās b. Mirdās, *Dīwān*: 21 ff.

He went to his camels because he wanted to go and see the prophet. He stayed with his camels overnight and in the morning trusted them to his herdsman. He ordered the herdsman to tell anyone asking about him that he went to Yathrib and not to reckon otherwise than that he wanted to go to and stay with the prophet. He mentions his reasons for doing this:³⁴

- His paths are clear (*fa-inna manāhija sabīli-hī wāḍiḥatun*).
- The signs of the truth that he brings are clear (*a'lāmu ma yajī'u bi-hī min al-ḥaqqi nayyiratun*).
- ‘Abbās is impressed by the military success of the prophet in this passage: I do not see any of the Arabs standing up against him (the prophet) against whom he (the prophet) was not rewarded with a superior victory (probably as a result of Khaybar, G.B.) (*wa-lā arā aḥadan min al-‘Arabi yanṣibu la-hū illā u’īya ‘alay-hi l-ḥafara wa-l-‘uluwwa*).³⁵
- I have come to love him (*wa-arā-nī qad ulqiyat ‘alay-ya mahabbatun la-hū*).
- I would give my life for his to please God (*wa-anā bādhilun nafs-ī dūna nafsi-hī urīdu bi-dhālika riḍā ilāhi l-samā’i wa-l-arḍi*).

Motivating his decision ‘Abbās says the following poem:³⁶

1. Upon my life: on the day that I zealously made Ḍimār accompany the Lord of Eternity³⁷
2. and left the messenger of God while the Aws were around him—they are his helpers and how frightening they are³⁸—
3. I was like someone who leaves the wide open plane in his (needless) want for rugged high ground to follow paths into the unknown
4. So I started to believe in God whose servant I am and I opposed the one who started to want (earthly) kingdoms
5. I turned my face towards the direction of Mecca, and I followed the blessed one between the Akhshab mountains
6. A prophet brought us after Jesus a “source” about the truth; in it is a clear statement about him as well (?)
7. A safe keeper of the Furqān the first mediator and the last one sent who answers the angels
8. The ties of Islam came together after having been broken; he brought them together until he had the rituals set up
9. I saw you, o best of all creation, in the middle of praiseworthy kinship as a ruler³⁹

34 *Aghānī*, xiv: 304.

35 *Aghānī*, xiv: 304.

36 *Aghānī*, xiv: 304-5.

37 For the story about Ḍimār see later in this article.

38 The commentary in al-‘Abbās b. Mirdās, *Dīwān*: 120 n. 2: *istifhām lil-ta’zīm wa’l-tahwīl*.

39 On *mālikā* both commentaries, *Aghānī*, xiv: 305 n.2, and al-‘Abbās b. Mirdās, *Dīwān*: 121 n. 2, refer to Mālik b. al-Naḍr b. Kināna b. Khuzayma b. Mudrika b. Ilyās b. Muḍar b. Nizār, the 11th *jidd* of the

10. You surpassed them in glory, generosity and lofty deeds, and to the furthest limit, where hoofs cannot reach
11. You are the pure one of Quraysh when the *sayyids* are together in high ranks, desiring exclusive deeds of heroes, without distraction by women⁴⁰

This story seems credible: it states a sequence of events and a clear motivation for ‘Abbās’s choice to convert to Islam. The poem is in line with his statements mentioned earlier:

- He admits that he made a mistake by not following the prophet;
- he interprets this as a personal error (especially because he did not notice the strength of the Aws);
- he converts to Islam (apparently with the extra incentive that Islam in a way continues the preaching by Jesus);
- and he concludes his poem with *madīh* of the prophet.

The poem nonetheless raises a few points that are probably of interest for the study of early Islam:

- In vss. 2 and 4 ‘Abbās refers to God as “Allāh”; in vs. 1 however it is “rabb al-‘ālamīn”;
- vs. 8 seems to suggest that in ‘Abbās’s perception “Islām” already existed; what needed to be done was “re-assemble the ties and get the rituals straight again”

The follow-up

All of a sudden the tone of the narrative becomes factual: ‘Abbās offered the Prophet to go ahead of him to Medina (from) where he wanted to go to Mekka in the year of its capture. He made an appointment with the prophet at Qudayd and he (the prophet) said: “You and your people, meet me in Qudayd”. When the prophet went marching to Qudayd he met ‘Abbās amidst a thousand of the tribe of Sulaym. About this ‘Abbās b. Mirdās says:⁴¹

1. Who will tell the people that Mohammed the prophet of God, is rightly guided wherever he goes
2. He called on his God and asked Him as the only one for help so he was fully assisted and bestowed upon
3. We travelled by night because we had an appointment with Mohammed at Qudayd, he leads us to a cause that is justified by God

prophet. Of course Mālik is a prominent name in the *jāhiliyya*, but it also occurs as “master”: *qad bittu mālika-hā wa-shāriiba riyyatin qabla l-ṣabāhi karīmatin bi-sibā’i-hā* (al-Muraqqish al-Akbar, *Dīwān*: 84) “I stayed the night as her ‘master’ and drinking to my fill before the morning, a lush drinking in her captivity” (but see the commentary on *sibā’*, 84, n. 2).

40 Following the commentary in *Aghānī*, iv: 305, n. 4.

41 al-‘Abbās b. Mirdās, *Dīwān*: 141-3.

4. They were complaining among us in the early morning until with the morning light, they made out young heroes and a forest of upright spears
5. on our horses with our coats of mail tight and footmen like a surging stream, sturdy
6. The leaders of the tribe—if you would ask them—are Sulaym and some among them trace their ancestry directly to Sulaym
7. An army of Anṣār, they will not forsake him, they are obedient, not disobeying whatever he says
8. If you have chosen Khālīd (b. al-Walīd) to be the commander and made him the leader, then he will certainly lead us
9. in an army that is guided by God; you, its commander, will strike with it in truth the one who has sinned
10. I have sworn a solemn oath to Mohammed and I fulfilled it: a thousand bridled horses
11. The prophet of the believers said: “Go forward (attack!)” And we were eager to do so
12. We spent the night in Nahy al-Mustadīr; we felt no fear but just awe and firmness
13. We will obey you until all humanity has converted to Islam and until we have all together become people of Yalamlam⁴²
14. The black and white and also chestnut brown horse will get lost in the middle of it (i.e. the crowd there) and the shaykh will not feel at ease until it is marked
15. We went to attack them like sandgrouses in a row in the morning and we noticed that each one of them was oblivious about his brother
16. From the morning until we left Ḥunayn in the evening; by that time its waters were streaming with blood
17. If you wanted you could see from all sides a quick horse and its rider crashing down, his spear broken
18. The Hawāzin were protecting their herd against us; they always liked to see us failing and deprived
19. We hit Quraysh, their lean and their fat ones, those who do well to keep silent and those who speak (i.e. all of them)⁴³
20. What we experience from them is something I witnessed before and I assisted in it the one who was more cautious
21. How many days did the best of us meet at Mūsā⁴⁴ with tribes of Naṣr and a group of Ibn Aslam
22. How much vengeance did our swords take, not to mention the spears with which we made blood flow copiously

42 Following the commentary of al-JABBŪRĪ’s edition it is a mountain where the *hajj* passes on the way from Yemen.

43 I suggest to read: *wa-an‘ama ḥifẓan bāla-hum fa-takallama* and interpret it as a parallel to the *ghayth* and *samīn* opposition. But it is a difficult passage.

44 According to the commentary in al-JABBŪRĪ’s edition this is a trench of the Banū Rabī‘a.

In terms of Arabic “genres” this poem constitutes a mixture of *khobar* and a short *madīh* (of the prophet) at the beginning and halfway; towards the end it turns into *fakhr*. How can we classify this poem in terms of its value as a historic source?

- The poet is part and witness of the action.
- He is not impartial.
- The poem refers to persons and places, which allows us to even date it to the year 630 A.D. when the battle of Ḥunayn took place (vs. 16).
- A number of participants in the action are named and their role does not contradict historic data (Muḥammad, Khālid b. al-Walīd, Hawāzin and Quraysh)

If we assess the position and role of the individuals and groups participating in this battle the following image emerges:

- ‘Abbās has become a straightforward follower of the new religion and his relationship with the prophet is one of request and deliver: an army of a thousand men from the tribe of Sulaym in full armour.
- Because the reinforcement army of Sulaym arrived in the dark, some of the other Anṣār began to complain, but they were satisfied when they saw the number of troops in daylight.
- For ‘Abbās God is to a certain extent a participant: he guides the army that is led by Mohammed, while Khālid b. al-Walīd acts as a military commander.
- The Anṣār were well motivated for their ultimate goal (Islamizing the world) and courageous because they believed in their cause; they just felt awe before the battle, no fear.
- The battle plan is structured: fighters took position in a row.
- A certain amount of rancour motivates at least Sulaym: the Hawāzin had apparently not been the nicest of neighbours.
- And ‘Abbās also has a grudge against Quraysh, so he willingly assists one of the Quraysh, i.e. Mohammed, whom he expects to treat Sulaym better.
- The battle of Ḥunayn was a bloody affair.

Some elements are missing:

- ‘Abbās is proud of his achievement to get 1000 men and horses together, proud to be part of the Anṣār, but he leaves the bloody result of the battle uncommented. He might well have expressed pride over the result, but he does not do so.
- He presents his motivation to join the Anṣār and to rally his tribe to do the same as an overnight decision. In his autobiographical notes in prose,⁴⁵ though, he mentions his past as a polytheist and to a certain extent tries to convey the image of his struggle to become a monotheist. Therefore we can safely assume that his conversion from polytheism to monotheism (Islam) must have been “cooking” for a while.

45 The conversion stories 1 and 2 elsewhere in this article.

- He mentions no other options for his future; we might therefore conclude that he is glad to have joined the early Islamic community.

The separation

Apparently ‘Abbās’s decision to join the Muslim forces in battle was a bridge too far for his wife. Ḥabība or Ṣafīyya bt. al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Sufyān al-Sulamī decides to leave him, she breaks up her tent and moves back to her family. This is what she has to say about her decision:⁴⁶

1. Did it not reach ‘Abbās b. Mirdās that I saw that the people are destined for disasters?
2. Every hero of the Anṣār has joined them, every hero of his own tribe, defending it in adversity
3. (when), together with everyone who drops the sword fiercely, the heads of lean, intelligent horses lead him (the hero)/it (the tribe) to death
4. [By my life if you follow the din of Muhammed and leave the faithful ones and the benefactors]⁴⁷
5. Then you have proudly changed this spirit for lowness on the day when the sharp blades of the swords hit against each other
6. People who are in front during the battle, intelligent people among us and people of gifts (= generous)
7. Their swords are power over the humble one and their horses are arrows for the enemy in difficult circumstances

Vss. 4 and 5 have also been translated by GOLDZIEHER.⁴⁸ These verses are critical, not only in the context of this poem but also with regard to the general subject of this contribution, because they contain Ṣafīyya’s (or Ḥabība’s) motivation for her decision.

*la-‘amr-i la-in tāba‘ta dīna Muḥammadin wa-faraqta ikhwāna l-ṣafā wa-l-ṣanā‘i
la-... tilka l-nafs... dhillan bi-‘izzatin ghadāta khtilāfi l-murhafāti l-qawāti‘i*

GOLDZIEHER’s translation of line 5 is:

This soul has exchanged lowness for pride on the day when the sharp blades of the swords hit against each other

This translation poses two problems, one technical and one concerning content:

- He chose the wrong subject for the verb *BDLT* with which line 5 starts: the metre (*tawīl*) does not allow to read *baddalat*, but it should be *baddalta/i/u*, which means

46 *Aghānī*, xiv: 306-7.

47 GOLDZIEHER 1966: 18, n. 1 argues extensively why the *ikhwān al-ṣafā* are not to be identified as the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*.

48 *Ibid.*

that *al-nafs* cannot be the subject of this verb. The text in *al-Aghānī* reads *al-nafsa*. It is then followed by a second object, *dhillan*. The phrase *bi-‘izzatin* would then have to be a third (indirect) object (Lisān al-‘Arab: *baddaltu l-khātima bi-l-ḥalqati*, “I replaced the signet-ring with the simple ring”).

- In line with the context I prefer to assume that the verse is constructed like this phrase: *fa-ulā’ika yubaddilu llāhu sayyi’āti-him ḥasanātin* (Q 25:70) (“those, God will change their evil deeds into good deeds”).⁴⁹

‘Abbās reacts to the break up of his marriage

‘Abbās takes the opportunity of the successful battle of Ḥunayn and the courage he showed in that battle to address the break up and to comment on Ṣafīyya’s words of blame:⁵⁰

1. What remained of the relationship with Umm Mu’ammal has in a headstrong way been cut off and she changed the intention to an unfulfilled promise
2. She had sworn by God that she would not break the ties, but she did not live up to it and did not fulfil her promise
3. A woman of the (tribe of) Khufāf, the wadi of al-‘Aqīq was her resort in summer and among the Bedouins she would live in Wajra and ‘Urf
4. If Umm Mu’ammal follows the unbelievers she makes my heart even more sad apart from her remoteness (from me)
5. The messenger will tell her that we did not consent and only asked our Lord for an alliance
6. and that we lived up to our promise to the leader, the prophet Muḥammad of a thousand (men) whereas no other group completed that number
7. With outright heroes from Sulaym, the greatest, they obey and do not disobey one letter away from his command
8. Khufāf, Dhakwān and ‘Awf, you see them like male camels, black, following the she-camel⁵¹
9. As though our reddish-white mail and helmets, like lions who meet in their dens with hanging ears⁵²
10. In us is the strength of God’s *dīn* without undue claims and we doubled the force of those who were already with him
11. in Mecca when we came to it as if our banner were an eagle that—after it had circled over them—wanted to grab

49 ARBERRY 1964: 368.

50 al-‘Abbās b. Mirdās, *Dīwān*: 114-6; Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, ii: 464-6. I chose to partially not use Guillaume’s translation in *The Life of Muhammad* (GUILLAUME 1978, repr.): 580-1, because it is presented outside of its communicative context, the dialogue, so to say.

51 A simile to represent the adherence to their leader.

52 An image of the flaps of their helmets. So GUILLAUME 1978 (repr.): 580.

12. those with their watchful eyes; when it hovers over their pastures you would think that there is unrest among them⁵³
13. In the morning when we trampled down the polytheists because we did not find any compensation or regret for the cause of God's messenger
14. On a battlefield in the middle of which no one heard a whisper from us except inciting yells and the cracking of heads
15. With white swords that make the heads fly from their necks (lit.: fixing points) and with which we cut the necks of warriors
16. Many a creature did we leave behind, slain, cut into pieces and also widows, cursing their husbands in grief
17. It's God's satisfaction that we have in mind, not that of humans do we crave, because to God belongs all that is apparent and all that is hidden

His wife's accusation that 'Abbās became submissive under the new religion certainly kicked in: he does his utmost to avoid to be seen as a coward. First he states that only *what was left* of the relationship was cut off. Then he starts blaming her for not keeping her vow, although she belongs to the tribal elite. 'Abbās deplores her choice to opt for paganism. He seems to distance himself from his decision and points out to his wife that initially he only wanted a (profitable) alliance, but then he stresses *his* stable allegiance to God and to the leader, Mohammed. In vs. 13 'Abbās expresses the reason for the revenge on Quraysh: they never cared about the message of the prophet. He pictures himself as someone who takes a task on his shoulders and gets things done. Finally the description of the bloody battle against Quraysh is straightforward *fakhr*.

Contesting the spoils

As mentioned earlier, a number of versions of this story circulate but the essence of the story is that 'Abbās was not satisfied with the part of the spoils that he received from the Prophet after the battle of Ḥunayn. He was displeased and addressed the Prophet:⁵⁴

1. It was spoils that I found through my attack on the horse(s) in the plain land
2. and through my waking over my tribesmen so that they could go to sleep; when the people lay asleep, I did not
3. But my spoils and that of (my horse) al-'Ubayd became (divided) between 'Uyayna and al-Aqra'
4. I was fearless in the war but was not given anything; I should not have been deprived (?)
5. except young camels that I was given, to the number of their four legs!⁵⁵

53 GUILLAUME 1978 (repr.): ... on ist prey (riding) on horses which gazed upwards. You would think when they gallop in their bits there is a sound of *jinn* among them.

54 al-'Abbās b. Mirdās, *Dīwān*: 110-2.

55 GUILLAUME's translation (1978 repr.: 595).

6. There was no stronghold nor confining wall better than (Ibn) Mirdās in the whole crowd
7. I was not less of a man than both of them (sc. ‘Uyayna and al-Aqra’); the one that you humiliate today will not be lifted up

The end of vs. 7 sounds like a threat: if I am being humiliated, do not count on me anymore for help or military support. The prophet said: “Bring him away and cut his tongue off away from me”. The bystanders appreciated the true meaning of these words, drawing ‘Abbās aside and just silencing him by offering a larger part of the spoils. No wonder that this extra part was precisely 100 camels. Compare the story about the wager.

Again in terms of Arabic “genres” we are looking at *fakhr* in the second part of the poem. In the first three lines we read a monologue, addressed to the Prophet and the crowd of victorious but seemingly greedy warriors.

Du‘mūṣ and laqāḥ

The focus of the enmity between ‘Abbās and his wife is the change of ‘Abbās’s attitude towards power; from a tradition in which power is bestowed on the best of the tribe without hereditary succession he moves to a point where he accepts the legitimacy of power attributed to someone who does *not* belong to his own tribe, nor can this leader be regarded as a tribal leader in the normal sense of the word. Safiyya probably felt that the young Muslim community could hardly be considered a “tribe” or Mohammed a *sayyid*.

One of the things we can observe is that apparently the emergence of the Prophet’s message caused some strain in society, probably both on a personal and on a tribal level. The underlying causes of this strain and ensuing conflicts might lie in the transition from a tribal to—in some ways—a “modern” society. Morals and values, traditional dependencies, started to shift. This process may well have started earlier— we might even interpret the emergence of Islam partly as a result of the tension between sedentary or urban and nomadic Arabs in which the former were on the winning side.

Women felt most worried about their position: I suggested some time ago that the motivation for the poetess al-Khansā’ (maybe the mother of ‘Abbās b. Mirdās) to compose a large number of *marāthī* for her two brothers Ṣakhr and Mu‘āwiya and to recite them at the market of ‘Ukāz may well have been an attempt to glorify the *jāhili* concept of *murū‘a* as opposed to moral standards as they developed within the circles of well-to-do tradesmen who populated small towns and travelled around a lot as businessmen.⁵⁶

From the poem by Ḥabība/Ṣafīyya bt. al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Sufyān al-Sulamī we might infer that what women of their status would reject was the acceptance by men of an authority outside the *jāhili* tradition, i.e. someone else than was chosen by the clan or tribe to be the *sayyid*, a rejection of any form of hereditary legitimation of power. A *sayyid* that would have been chosen by the clan would possess courage, loyalty and endurance and would be

56 BORG 1997: 214-5.

willing and able to protect the needy, in *marāthī* usually referred to as the widows and orphans (*al-arāmil wa-l-yatāmā*).

One would not need much more than a verse by ‘Abbās like

*aṭa‘nā-ka ḥattā aslama l-nāsu kullu-hum*⁵⁷

“we will obey you (Mohammed) until all mankind has converted to Islam”

to infuriate his wife who probably disapproved of any outside authority and expects her husband to be a true and independent *sayyid*.

The aversion of kingship among pre-Islamic Arabs is expressed in the word *laqāḥ*, for instance in the expression *ḥayyun laqāḥun*, “a tribe that does not submit to kings”. ‘Abīd b. al-Abras says:

*abaw dīna l-mulūki fa-hum laqāḥun idā nudibū ilā ḥarbin ajābū*⁵⁸

“they refuse to serve kings because they are *laqāḥ* (but) when they are incited to war, they will answer”

The opposite of this expression—appreciation of kingship—is the metaphor of the *du‘mūš*, identified by ULLMANN as “larva”.⁵⁹ According to more recent sources the word refers to the *Triops cancriformis* (= tadpole shrimp) or the *Triops granarius*,⁶⁰ both common in the Middle East. They are considered surviving fossils and live in temporary pools in desert-like areas. Because of their habitat their life cycle is short. Eggs are left in the temporary pool and can survive up to ten years of drought after which a new generation of triops simply re-appears.

This typical feature must be the reason behind the metaphor. The word *du‘mūš* was used for someone who keeps popping up at the courts of kings.⁶¹ ULLMANN mentions a number of *Belege* but this specific use of the metaphor seems to be limited to *ḥanīf*-poetry. There are two very similar instances, in both cases by *ḥanīf*-poets, who seem to be proud that they or their tribesmen are regular visitors of kings:

In a poem in which he explains his behaviour as an inquisitive man Zayd b. ‘Amr b. Nufayl says of himself:

du‘mūšu abwābi l-mulū- ki wa-jā‘ibun li-l-kharqi nābu-h

“popping up at the gates of kings, and his camel crossing the desert” (G.B.)⁶²

57 *Aghānī*, xiv: 306.

58 *Dīwān ‘Abīd b. al-Abras*, 29.

59 ULLMANN 1995: 145-60. It is difficult to identify the *du‘mūš*. Based on elaborate work on a variety of sources Ullmann argues that the most probable meaning is ‘larva’.

60 See for instance <<http://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/دعموص>> and <<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Triops>>.

61 See for instance al-Zamakhsharī, *Mustaqṣā*, I: 118: ...*du‘mūš wa-huwa al-rajul al-dakḥkhāl fī ‘l-umūr al-zawwār lil-mulūk* “... the *du‘mūš*, a meddlesome man, a frequent visitor of kings”.

62 IBN HISHĀM, *Sīra*, I, 229. IN GUILLAUME’S translation, *Life of Mohammad*, 102: A man who persistently frequents the gates of kings / Whose camel crosses the desert.

And Umayya b. Abī l-Ṣalt says in his *marthiya* on the victims of Badr:

du‘mūṣi abwābi l-mulū- ki wa-jā‘ibin li-l-kharqi fātih
 “popping up at the gates of kings (G.B.), crossing the desert, victorious”⁶³

‘Abbās’s conversion, version 1

This version of the circumstances in which ‘Abbās converted to Islam is not important in itself or in the parenthesis to the other story, referred to before as version 2, but within the framework of the chapter about ‘Abbās in the *K. al-Aghānī* as such. Until now I had to deviate from the narrative order of this chapter: ‘Abbās’s poem with his reaction to the separation and his bragging about his heroic deeds in the battle of Ḥunayn is missing in Abū l-Faraj’s account. It seemed logical to add it to the first separation fragment here.

Another story missing from the *Aghānī* is the wager between ‘Abbās and Ḥuwaytib. Because this wager took place immediately before Khaybar and obviously before ‘Abbās’s conversion it had to be placed before both accounts.

Version 1 of ‘Abbās’s conversion is a different case: it precedes version 2 in the *Aghānī*, which in itself is peculiar because both show some common factual ground, but version 1 is of a completely different nature. It runs like this:

‘Abbās inherited an idol from his father named Ḍimār. He committed himself to build a shrine (?) (*bayt*) around it and went to it each day and night. When the message of the Prophet appeared the deity spoke to him in verse:⁶⁴

1. Tell all the tribes of Sulaym: the friend has died; long live the people of the mosque (*masjid*)
2. The one from Quraysh who inherited prophethood and guidance after the Son of Maryam is well guided
3. Ḍimār has perished; it was once worshipped before the book (came) to the prophet Mohammed⁶⁵

Later on ‘Abbās has an apparition of the prophet when he falls asleep on his camel, after which he decides to acknowledge the Prophet as his leader, convert to Islam and return to his home country to burn the deity Ḍimār.

In this story miraculous things happen—a talkative piece of wood, an apparition in a dream—but it all ends well.⁶⁶ The story has a high “grandpa-tell-us-a-story” quality. The

63 *Dīwān Umayya b. Abī al-Ṣalt*, 25; in GUILLAUME’s translation (1978 repr.: 354): “Constantly at the gate of kings / Crossing the desert, victorious”.

64 *Aghānī*, xiv: 303.

65 I chose to translate the perfect tenses as optatives.

66 Al-JABBŪRĪ, in his commentary, calls it a story with a lot of fiction (*tazayyud, ifti‘āl*) but considers it indicative for ‘Abbās’s personality and background—al-‘Abbās b. Mirdās, *Dīwān*: 21.

poem cited in this story as the words of the speaking deity hardly qualifies as being of any historic or referential value. Indeed one might for instance wonder if there were any *masājid* at the time of ‘Abbās’ conversion. The last verse is a bit clumsy lacking a verb for “reached”. It seems that this poem deserves a different approach from than the other poems.

Hilary KILPATRICK distinguishes five kinds of story-telling in the *K. al-Aghānī*.⁶⁷ Two of the types qualify as applicable in the case of the chapter in the *Aghānī* about al-‘Abbās b. Mirdās:

- chronological organization
- alternation of themes

The chronology of episodes is the strongest organizational principle in the *akhbār* about ‘Abbās, but here and there we can sense a slight tendency towards the second kind of organization, defined by KILPATRICK as follows: “Such articles are reminiscent of those mediaeval paintings or icons in which the subject’s portrait, his essence, as it were, is surrounded by little scenes depicting characteristic incidents from his life.” In the story of ‘Abbās, Abū l-Faraj seems to mingle the two organization principles. So this might be an example of the “mixed form” that KILPATRICK pre-supposes.

The ‘Abbās chapter starts with the almost ubiquitous exposé of his lineage and a short hint at the “spoils” theme, probably to indicate his closeness to the Prophet. But as soon as the storyteller takes over, ‘Abbās’s conversion is the start of it all. It is at this point that Abū l-Faraj may have decided to mention both versions, just to be complete. But I think we have to bear in mind that narration time is not necessarily identical with narrated time. In that sense version 1 of ‘Abbās’s conversion to Islam may well be a fictional representation in hindsight towards the end of his life.

Conclusion

It would be hard to argue that it is *not* ‘Abbās b. Mirdās or his wife who are talking: their words fit their situation and the changes inside and outside their relationship. ‘Abbās becomes a fervent supporter of the prophet and the new religion, although he is keen to see his personal ambitions and profit fulfilled. His wife however sees things differently, distances herself from this modernism and wishes to cling to traditional values.⁶⁸

If we accept this position, if we see these poems as personal statements, they convey the image of a society in which Islam was met with enthusiasm, but it is also clear that it caused considerable stress and anxiety: traditional alliances between clans were breaking up, traditional relationships did not hold under this cultural-ideological strain, and aspirations in life were suddenly re-defined. These poems illustrate how drastic the preaching of this new religion was and the impact it had on early Islamic history.

67 KILPATRICK 1996: 242-58. For this distinction see 250-2.

68 Ironically Ḥabība’s (or Ṣafīyya’s) conclusion would be more in line with modern behavioural patterns than those that are—rightly or wrongly—associated with Islam.

The continuity and discontinuity of tradition and innovation that went along with this emergence of Islam characterizes “par excellence” a period of such upheaval, putting long lived values and convictions under stress.

‘Abbās witnessed the turbulent years between 628 and 630 AD. He had to make choices, both superficial and principal. But considering the loss and gain of 100 camels it also seems that his “career change” is not completely void of some opportunism.

Two methodological principles are prominent in the discussion about the historical value of early Arabic poetry:

1. The poems can best be interpreted as historical sources in chronological order; sometimes this order has to be reconstructed on the basis of the content of these poems.
2. The poetic material cannot provide us with answers to every kind of questions.

Ad 1: These poems can only be studied and interpreted as interdependent texts in their chronological order. This intertextual approach has proved to be fruitful and can open new horizons in our understanding of (early) Arab culture as Thomas BAUER’s *Altarabische Dichtkunst*⁶⁹ shows: Arab poets actually knew each others’ works and poets reacted to these texts, always trying to improve earlier poems. In doing this BAUER addresses a number of problematic items in early Arabic poetry at once: the creative technique, the historic links between these poets and the authenticity of the poetic material itself.

Another example of intertextual relationship in early Arabic poetry was my attempt to reconstruct the human aspects involved in the run-up to the Ḥarb Basūs: interdependent poems that revealed the drama of recklessness, anger, shame and distress in a very complicated relational situation.⁷⁰

Ad 2: It is hardly fruitful to look for factual data in poetry. Where ‘Abbās claims to lead a thousand warriors to Ḥunayn, this number must be questioned or interpreted as *mubālagha* and/or *fakhr*. Three hundred would probably be a more appropriate estimation. A final methodological question is whether or not the findings in this poetical material can be generalized. We have to realize that—maybe apart from the *luṣūṣ*—we are discussing works of poets who belonged to or were associated with the elite of pre- Islamic society. One might argue that their feelings, considerations and conclusions were not only personal but more widely felt within their own families and tribes. But in a tribal society that was breaking up along religious lines and in which religious groups were forming, this is not necessarily true and has to be verified with other data. One could imagine that the process to do so would have three steps:

- The construction of (parts of) biographies on the basis of poetry and the small stories that go with it.
- Comparison of these data with other sources like *ḥadīth*, *sīra* and *maghāzī*-literature, the result of which can be threefold: poetry would corroborate these

69 BAUER 1992.

70 BORG 1997: 185-94.

sources, clarify them or contradict them, in which case the result would at least be a definable problem of interpretation.

- Extrapolation of the result to a story that would at least have a reasonable claim to being historical.

And it would be interesting to see if and how the developments we can trace resulted in a shift in the role of poets as spokesmen for their tribe to spokesmen for religious and political groups. And how the role of poets changed with an elite that started as gentry, became chivalry in the era of Islamic expansion and ended as nobility at the Arab-Islamic courts.

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Appendix: The Texts

a) 'Abbās' conversion, see above pp. 146-147

- | | | |
|--|--|----|
| ضِمَارًا لِرَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ مُشَارِكَا | لَعَمْرِي إِنِّي يَوْمَ أَجْعَلُ جَاهِدًا | ١- |
| أُولَئِكَ أَنْصَارٌ لَهُ مَا أُولَئِكََا | وَتَرَكِي رَسُولَ اللَّهِ وَالْأَوْسُ حَوْلَهُ | ٢- |
| لَيْسَلُكَ فِي غَيْبِ الْأُمُورِ الْمَسَالِكَا | كَتَارِكِ سَهْلِ الْأَرْضِ وَالْحَزْنَ يَتَغِي | ٣- |
| وَنَخَالَفْتُ مَنْ أَمْسَى يُرِيدُ الْمَمَالِكَا | فَأَمَنْتُ بِاللَّهِ الَّذِي أَنَا عَبْدُهُ | ٤- |
| وَتَابَعْتُ بَيْنَ الْأَخْشَبِينَ الْمَبَارِكَا | وَوَجَّهْتُ وَجْهِي نَحْوَ مَكَّةَ قَاصِدًا | ٥- |
| مَنْ الْحَقُّ فِيهِ الْفَصْلُ مِنْهُ كَذَلِكََا | نَبِيُّ أَتَانَا بَعْدَ عَيْسَى بِنَاطِقٍ | ٦- |

- ٧- أَمِيناً عَلَى الْقُرْآنِ أَوَّلَ شَافِعٍ
 ٨- تَلَانِي عُرَى الْإِسْلَامِ بَعْدَ انْفِصَامِهَا
 ٩- رَأَيْتُكَ يَا خَيْرَ الْبَرِيَّةِ كُلِّهَا
 ١٠- سَبَقْتَهُمْ بِالْمَجْدِ وَالْجُودِ وَالْعُلَا
 ١١- فَأَنْتَ الْمُصَفَّى مِنْ قُرَيْشٍ إِذَا سَمَتْ
 وَأَخِرَ مَبْعُوثٍ يُجِيبُ الْمَلَائِكَا
 فَأَحْكَمَهَا حَتَّى أَقَامَ الْمَنَاسِكَا
 تَوَسَّطَتْ فِي الْقُرْبَى مِنَ الْمَجْدِ مَالِكَا
 وَبِالْغَايَةِ الْقُصُوى تَفُوتُ السَّنَابِكَا
 غَلَاصِمُهَا تَبْغِي الْقُرُومَ الْفَوَارِكَا

b) 'Abbās explains his conversion, see above pp. 147-148. *Dīwān 'Abbās*, 141-143.

- ١- مَنْ مَبْلِغُ الْأَقْوَامِ أَنْ مُحَمَّدًا
 ٢- دَعَا رَبَّهُ وَاسْتَنْصَرَ اللَّهَ وَحَدَّهُ
 ٣- سَرِينَا وَوَاعَدْنَا فُذَيْدًا مُحَمَّدًا
 ٤- تَمَارَوْا بِنَا فِي الْفَجْرِ حَتَّى تَبَيَّنُوا
 ٥- عَلَى الْخَيْلِ مَشْدُودًا عَلَيْنَا دُرُوعُنَا
 ٦- فَإِنَّ سِرَاهُ الْحَيِّ إِنْ كُنْتَ سَائِلًا
 ٧- وَجُنْدٌ مِنَ الْأَنْصَارِ لَا يَخْذُلُونَهُ
 ٨- فَإِنْ تَكُ قَدْ أَمَرْتَ فِي الْقَوْمِ خَالِدًا
 ٩- بِجُنْدٍ هَدَاهُ اللَّهُ أَنْتَ أَمِيرُهُ
 ١٠- حَلَفْتُ يَمِينًا بَرَّةً لِمُحَمَّدٍ
 ١١- وَقَالَ نَجِيُّ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ تَقَدَّمُوا
 ١٢- وَبُنَا بِنَهْيِ الْمُسْتَدِيرِ وَلَمْ يَكُنْ
 ١٣- أَطْعَمَاكَ حَتَّى أَسْلَمَ النَّاسُ كُلُّهُمْ
 رَسُولَ الْإِلَهِ رَاشِدٌ حَيْثُ يَمَّا
 فَأَصْبَحَ قَدْ وَفَى إِلَيْهِ وَأَنْعَمَا
 يَوْمٌ بِنَا أَمْرًا مِنَ اللَّهِ مُحْكَمَا
 مَعَ الْفَجْرِ فِتْيَانًا وَغَابًا مُقَوَّمَا
 وَرَجَلًا كَدُّقَاعِ الْأَيْ عَرَمَرَمَا
 سُلَيْمٌ وَفِيهِمْ مِنْهُمْ مَنْ تَسَلَّمَا
 أَطَاعُوا فَمَا يَعْصُونَهُ مَا تَكَلَّمَا
 وَقَدَّمْتَهُ فَإِنَّهُ قَدْ تَقَدَّمَا
 تُصِيبُ بِهِ فِي الْحَقِّ مَنْ كَانَ أَظْلَمَا
 فَأَكْمَلْتُهَا أَلْفًا مِنَ الْخَيْلِ مُلْجَمَا
 وَحُبِّ إِيْنَا أَنْ نَكُونَ الْمُقَدَّمَا
 بِنَا الْخَوْفُ إِلَّا رَعْبَةً وَتَحَزَّمَا
 وَحَتَّى صَبَحْنَا الْجَمْعَ أَهْلَ يَلْمَلَمَا

- ١٤- يَضِلُّ الحِصَانُ الأَبْلَقُ الوَرْدُ وَسَطُهُ وَلَا يَطْمَعُنُّ الشَّيْخُ حَتَّى يُسَوِّمًا
 ١٥- سَمَوْنَا هُمْ وَرَدَ القَطَا زَفَهُ ضَحَى وَكُلُّ نَرَاهُ عَن أَخِيهِ قَد أَحَجَمَا
 ١٦- لَدُنْ عُذْوَةٌ حَتَّى تَرَكَنَا عَشِيَّةً حُنِينًا وَقَد سَالَتْ مَدَامِعُهُ دَمَا
 ١٧- إِذَا شِئْتَ مِن كُؤَلٍ رَأَيْتَ طِمْرَةً وَفَارِسَهَا يَهْوِي وَرُحْمًا مُحْطَمًا
 ١٨- وَقَد أَحْرَزْتَ مِنَّا هَوَازِنُ سَرَّهَا وَحُبَّ إِلَيْهَا أَنْ نُحِيبَ وَنُحْرَمَا
 ١٩- أَصَبْنَا قُرَيْشًا عَثَّهَا وَسَمِينَهَا وَأَنْعَمَ حِفْظًا بِالْهَمِّ فَتَكَلَّمَا
 ٢٠- فَمَا كَانَ مِنْهَا كَانَ أَمْرًا شَهِيدُهُ وَسَاعَدْتُ فِيهِ بِالَّذِي كَانَ أَحْرَمَا
 ٢١- وَيَوْمَ إِلَى مُوسَى تَلَاقَتْ جِيادُنَا وَقَبَائِلَ مِنْ نَصْرٍ وَرَهْطِ ابْنِ أَسْلَمَا
 ٢٢- فَمَا أَدْرَكَ الأَوْتَارَ إِلا سِيوفُنَا وَإِلا رِمَاحًا نَسْتَدِيرُ بِهَا الدِّمَا

c) 'Abbās's wife reacts, see above p. 150. *Aghānī*, 195.

- ١- أَلَمْ يَنَّهُ عَبَّاسُ بْنُ مِرْدَاسٍ أَنِّي رَأَيْتَ الوَرَى مَخْصُوصَةً بِالْفَجَائِعِ
 ٢- أَتَاهُمْ مِنَ الأَنْصَارِ كُلِّ سَمِيذِعٍ مِنَ القَوْمِ يَحْمِي قَوْمَهُ فِي الوَقَائِعِ
 ٣- بِكُلِّ شَدِيدِ الوُقْعِ عَضْبٍ ، يَقُودُهُ إِلَى المَوْتِ هَامُ المُقْرِبَاتِ البَرَائِعِ
 ٤- لَعَمْرِي لئن تَابَعْتَ دِينَ مُحَمَّدٍ وَفَارَقْتَ إِخْوَانَ الصِّفَا والصَّنَائِعِ
 ٥- لَبَدَلْتَ تَلْكَ النَفْسَ ذَلًّا بِعِزَّةٍ غَدَاةً اخْتِلافِ المُرَهْفَاتِ القَوَاطِعِ
 ٦- وَقَوْمِ هَمِّ الرُّأْسِ المُقَدَّمِ فِي الوَعْيِ وَأَهْلِ الحِجَا فِينَا وَأَهْلِ الدَّسَائِعِ
 ٧- سِيوفُهُمْ عَزُّ الذَّلِيلِ وَخَيْلُهُمْ سِهَامِ الأَعَادِي فِي الأُمُورِ الفِطَائِعِ

d) 'Abbās reacts to his wife's poem, see above pp. 151-152. *Dīwān 'Abbās*, 114-116.

- ١- تَقَطَّعَ بَاقِي وَضَلِ أُمُّ مُؤَمَّلٍ
٢- وَقَدْ حَلَفْتُ بِاللَّهِ لَا تَقْطَعُ الْقَوَى
٣- خُفَافِيَّةٌ بَطْنُ الْعَقِيقِ مَصِيْفُهَا
٤- فَإِنْ تَتَّبِعِ الْكُفَّارَ أُمُّ مُؤَمَّلٍ
٥- وَسَوْفَ يُنَبِّئُهَا الْحَبِيرُ بِأَنَّنَا
٦- وَأَنَا مَعَ الْهَادِي النَّبِيِّ مُحَمَّدٍ
٧- بِفَتْيَانِ صِدْقٍ مِنْ سُلَيْمِ أَعَزَّةٍ
٨- خُفَافٌ وَذَكْوَانٌ وَعَوْفٌ نَخَاهُمْ
٩- كَأَنَّ نَسِيجَ الشُّهْبِ وَالْبَيْضِ مُلْبَسٌ
١٠- بِنَا عَزَّ دِينَ اللَّهِ غَيْرَ تَنْحُلٍ
١١- بِمَكَّةَ إِذْ جِئْنَا كَأَنَّ لِيَاءَنَا
١٢- عَلَى شُخْصِ الْأَبْصَارِ تَحْسِبُ بَيْنَهَا
١٣- غَدَاةَ وَطِفْنَا الْمُشْرِكِينَ وَلَمْ بَجِدْ
١٤- بِمُعْتَرِكٍ لَا يَسْمَعُ الْقَوْمُ وَسَطَهُ
١٥- بِيَيْضٍ تُطِيرُ الْهَامَ عَنْ مُسْتَقَرِّهَا
١٦- فَكَائِنَ تَرَكْنَا مِنْ قَتِيلٍ مَلْحَبٍ
١٧- رِضَا اللَّهِ نَنُوي لَا رِضَا النَّاسِ نَبْنَعِي
- بِعَاقِبَةٍ وَاسْتَبَدَّلْتُ نَيْتَهُ خُلْفَا
فَمَا صَدَقْتُ فِيهِ وَلَا بَرَّتِ الْحُلْفَا
وَتَحْتَلُّ فِي الْبَادِيْنَ وَجَرَّةَ فَالْعُرْفَا
فَقَدْ رُوِّدَتْ قَلْبِي عَلَى نَائِيهَا شَعْفَا
أَبِينَا وَلَمْ نَطْلُبْ سِوَى رَبِّنَا حِلْفَا
وَفِينَا وَلَمْ يَسْتَوْفِيهَا مَعْشَرُ أَلْفَا
أَطَاعُوا فَمَا يَعْصُونَ مِنْ أَمْرِهِ حَرْفَا
مَصَاعِبَ زَافَتْ فِي طَرَوْقَتِهَا كُلْفَا
أَسْوَدًا تَلَاقَتْ فِي مَرَاصِدِهَا عُضْفَا
وَرِذْنَا عَلَى الْحَيِّ الَّذِي مَعَهُ ضِعْفَا
عُقَابٌ أَرَادَتْ بَعْدَ تَخْلِيْقِهَا خَطْفَا
إِذَا هِيَ جَالَتْ فِي مَرَاوِدِهَا عَرْفَا
لِأَمْرِ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ عَدْلًا وَلَا صَرْفَا
لَنَا رَجْمَةٌ إِلَّا التَّذَامُرُ وَالنَّفْفَا
وَنَقَطِيفُ أَعْنَاقِ الْكُمَاةِ بِهَا فَطْفَا
وَأَزْمَلَةٌ تَدْعُو عَلَى بَعْلِهَا هَلْفَا
وَلِلَّهِ مَا يَبْدُو جَمِيعًا وَمَا يَخْفَى

e) **Contesting the spoils**, see above pp. 152-153. *Dīwān ‘Abbās*, 111-112.

- ١- وكانت نهابا تلافيتها بكري على المهر في الأجرع
 ٢- وإيقاظي القوم أن يرقدوا إذا هجع الناس لم أهجع
 ٣- فأصبح نهي ونهب العبيد بد بين عيننة والأقرع
 ٤- وقد كنت في الحرب ذا تدرأ فلم أعط شيئا ولم أمنع
 ٥- إلا أفائل أعطيتها عديد قوائمها الأزرع
 ٦- وما كان حصن ولا حابس يفوقان مرداس في مجمع
 ٧- وما كنت دون امرئ منهما ومن تضع اليوم لا يرفع

f) **‘Abbās’s conversion 1**, see above p. 155. *Aghānī*, 192.

- ١- قل للقبائل من سليم كلها هلك الأنيس وعاش أهل المسجد
 ٢- إن الذي ورث النبوة وأهدى بعد ابن مريم من قريش مهتدي
 ٣- هلك الضمار وكان يعبد مرة قبل الكتاب إلى النبي محمد