

The Abbasid Construction of the Jahiliyya : Cultural Authority in the Making

Sometime in the mid-sixties of the eighth century CE, an historic event concerning the canonization of classical Arabic poetry took place, which was to substantially affect medieval – and eventually our – knowledge and perception of pre-Islamic poetry. A medieval source recounts that the Caliph al-Manṣūr (reigned 754-775) overheard his son, the Crown Prince al-Mahdi, reciting an ode by the pre-Islamic poet al-Musayyab, in front of his tutor al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī, a celebrated philologist and connoisseur of pre-Islamic poetry (d. ca. 785). He stood there unnoticed until the boy had finished his reciting, then went to one of his chambers and called for the boy and his teacher. The Caliph al-Manṣūr told al-Mufaḍḍal of his appreciation of the boy's recitation of the ode, and added, "if you would select for your pupil the best works of poets whose poetry is rare ⁽¹⁾, you would be performing a great service". And this, concludes our source, is exactly what al-Mufaḍḍal consequently did ⁽²⁾. This account of the origins of the highly regarded anthology of early (mainly pre-

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(1) For the term *sbā'ir muqill* see Arazī, 1989 : 28.

(2) al-Qālī, *Dbayl al-Amālī*, 130-132. Cf. Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 68.

Islamic) poems, called *al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt* after its compiler⁽³⁾, is significant in more than one respect. Why would the Caliph al-Manṣūr, son of a Berber woman – who had spent his youth in the city, and who conspicuously conducted his daily royal routine after the Persian model⁽⁴⁾, take such great pleasure in an ode celebrating the values of a remote, Bedouin lifestyle? What messages were conveyed by pre-Islamic odes that made him so eager to include them in his son's curriculum? Bearing in mind that the Abbasids were notorious for their infatuation with Persian, and especially sedentary, urban culture while condescending to "genuine Arabic" (i.e., nomadic) culture, and that official Islam impugned poetry in general as well as anything that smacked of pre-Islamic values, it seems warranted to inquire into al-Manṣūr's reasons for having ancient Arab poems compiled. Was he perhaps motivated by nostalgia for an idealized "Arabic past"?

The high regard for pre-Islamic poetry reflected in this anecdote indicates the special status accorded to the pre-Islamic past in the Abbasid cultural repertoire of self-images. An increasing preoccupation with pre-Islamic erudition is discernible in eighth century Iraq, especially in its second half after the Abbasids came to power. "Discovering" and processing images of a distant past seem to have become major, though not unique, endeavors in this period. They comprise part of an overall project of constructing "Arab" ethnic identity in the context of the power struggles roiling the contemporary cultural arena. The pre-Islamic past becomes an icon of "Arab" ethnic identity. Pre-Islamic poetry, which in classical Arab literature was long assigned the function of authentically representing the past, becomes a central prop for that icon, and consequently, a focus of literary attention and activity.

One major question that arises here concerns the social framework within which this project emerged: what social groups had vested interests in producing, promoting and advancing this project, and how precisely did they go about it? Other, related questions are: what role did existing images of the past play in that project; what cultural and literary options for the construction of images of the past existed, and how are we to explain the remarkable success of the option which involved the creation and privileging of scholarly bodies of knowledge of the *Jabiliyya*? Who were the cultural agents concerned with constructing

(3) This is the only one version of the origin of the *Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*. Another, told by al-Mufaḍḍal himself, ascribes the creation of this anthology to Ibrāhīm b. 'Abd Allah, brother of Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya, who hid during the uprising against al-Manṣūr in al-Mufaḍḍal's house. Cf. Flügel, *Die grammatische Schulen der Araber*, 144, note 1; al-Iṣbahāni, *Maqātil al-Ṭalibiyyin*, 338-339, 373.

(4) See Sadan 1979. That Persian was already in use in the early days of the Abbasid court is evidenced in an anecdote concerning al-Manṣūr's brother, Abū al-'Abbās al-Saffāh. See Ibn al-Mu'tazz, *Tabaqāt*, 40.

images of the *Jabiliyya* past, and what was the nature of their cultural activity and professional authority? What manipulations were performed on traditional models for the preservation of the past and on existing bodies of knowledge; and were any new bodies of knowledge constructed?

Such questions guide a research project about the *Jabiliyya* which I am conducting at present. It examines the large body of information about the *Jabiliyya* presented in classical Arabic literature from a different perspective than that of the traditional academic concern of fixing "a true historical picture" of pre-Islamic times⁽⁵⁾. Rather, it approaches the collection, formulation, organization and eventually the institutionalization of the knowledge of *Jabiliyya* in classical Arab literature as a cultural preoccupation with it instructive for its own (i.e., eighth century) time and place.

Understanding the way in which *Jabiliyya* was conceptualized and shaped in the late Umayyad and early Abbasid period involves, in fact, dealing with several concomitant processes of change: *the changing function of the pre-Islamic past*, which, from its condemnation as an age of wrong belief, dominated by conflicting tribal interests and rivalries, came gradually to be seen as a unified Arab past, in which the "true" values of Arab ethnic identity were manifested, and even emphasized as against Persian values; *a new function of ancient Arabic poetry*, which, relied on as a primary source of information about that past, passed from being a living practice into functioning as a stable archive; *a new image of knowledge*, as reproduction through iterative improvisation was replaced by literal transmission, recording and management by scholarly expertise; and, finally, *a new cultural model for managing knowledge*, whose claim to authority is based on the application of professional expertise founded in scholarly practices.

This last issue, "expertise in poetry" (*al-'ilm bi'l-shi'r*), is the subject of the present discussion. I want to examine the groups of cultural agents who competed for authority over Jahili poetry, and offer some hypotheses as to their vested interests in the subject and how these interests fit into the contemporary cultural field. Finally, I would like to discuss both the strategies for inventing "expertise in poetry" as a legitimate field of learning, and the models of literary activity and practice by which "expert"

(5) Taha Husayn and Margoliouth's famous claim that practically most of pre-Islamic poetry has been forged in Islamic times seems to be but the other face of the same positivistic concern with the "actual historic facts" (Husayn 1925; 1927; Margoliouth 1925). By discrediting the authenticity of Jahili poetry they both seem to be seeking to establish the correct chronology, rather than the context and meaning of the cultural practice they have identified as "forgery".

agents canonized Jahili poetry and, eventually, constructed the accepted body of knowledge about the *Jabiliyya*.

Three groups competed for professional authority in dealing with pre-Islamic poetry : poets, transmitters and scholars. The received premise of most research on them posits a harmonious chronological sequence of the three agencies. The sequence begins with poets who compose the poetry and commit it to memory ; it continues with transmitters, usually tribally affiliated (*ruwāt*), who take custody of the poetry and preserve it likewise by memorization ; and concludes with scholars who gather the poetry from the various tribal transmitters and commit it to writing, editing it into diwans and anthologies. I find this linear description of an automatic succession of stages too neat. A careful reading of the evidence (mostly anecdotal) about the transmission of ancient poetry, strewn among various Arabic sources, indicates a historical process of struggle among the three groups, rather than a harmonious succession. Poets, transmitters and scholars, all claim professional competence for preserving the ancient poetry and authority over its transmission. The debate is actually about authority over the past, since the poetry was the principal vehicle for representing the past. This was one of its central and traditional functions as early as the days of *Jabiliyya*, and a major source of conflict between the Jahili poets and the Prophet Muḥammad.

Let us examine the three groups involved in the preservation of this poetry.

a) The Poets (*al-Shu'arā'*)

Historically, Jahili poets constituted the official institution responsible for transmitting knowledge and images of the past. Poetry was perceived as the medium by which the tribal legacy was perpetuated. It relayed tales of heroic deeds of tribe members and their primeval ancestors, of wanderings in times of economic distress, of their illustrious genealogy. It also disparaged the tribe's enemies as cowardly, inhospitable, and of dubious ancestry. This collective memory was recorded in poetry, which determined the tribe's semiotic assets : honor, reputation, heroism, generosity, etc. These values were inculcated upon the next generation through listening and reciting the odes.

The poets' obligation to describe tribal feats is reflected in the following tradition, in which the poet Ru'ba b. al-'Ajjāj (d. 762) is requested to exalt the valiant deeds in the battle between the Tamim and Azd tribes, and he responds : *yā Bani Tamim, aṭliqū min lisāni* [Oh Sons of Tamim, let

loose my tongue] ⁽⁶⁾, i.e., their victory would enable his speech. The poet attached to a tribe or patron receives from them defense and recompense in exchange for immortalizing their exploits.

On the other hand, what poets say is stamped in the collective memory for generations, and in this respect, poets are also “creators” or “shapers” of reality. The dialectical relation between “reporting on” reality and “creating” reality is the source of the poet’s power ⁽⁷⁾.

Poets had also other roles in the Jahili period, such as diplomatic arbitration, conflict resolution, and intermediating in ransom of hostages. The hierarchy among poets was determined by their comparative wages and the comparative regard for them by seasoned poets. Each learned the profession by mutual instruction or by guidance from the more senior poets of the tribe, and the poet was also a transmitter (*rāwīya*) of the veteran poets’ odes.

In the Umayyad era, in the first half of the eighth century, it seems that at least some of the poets – those about whom there is more or less detailed information in the Arab sources, such as about al-Farazdaq – disengaged from the tribal framework, and served in official capacities for governing authorities such as kings, governors, and scribes. The poets participated in local politics, utilizing their tribal affiliations in their odes and civic activities. It appears, however, that both poets and rulers manipulated the poets’ tribal credentials to promote their own personal political agendas over tribal interests, though the poets translate their agendas in their poetry into the *language* of tribal membership. On the other hand, the frameworks of tribe and patron already offer them less protection than before ⁽⁸⁾. In fact, they are now dependent on rulers and are vulnerable to punishment by them, for crimes such as excessively lampooning rival poets and other personages and for unethical behavior. Apparently, rulers grew weary of the inter-poet feuds ⁽⁹⁾, for the use of poetic satire (*bijā*) was quite prevalent, and this mockery bordering on threat became a virtually unchecked privilege, which governing authorities naturally found disquieting ⁽¹⁰⁾. The overuse of *bijā* testifies to a decline in the poet’s status (we will see this clearly in the story of Dhū al-Rumma which follows). One may say with caution that the poets’ original function is fading, for the role of transmitting the past is no longer in their hands, and their tribal sponsorship is lapsing with their transition

(6) al-Nahshali, *Ikhtiyār al-Mumtī*, 1 : 76, with further material.

(7) Cf. Quranic exegesis on *sūrat al-shu‘arā*, 222-224, which condemns the poet on exactly the same grounds, of not being faithful to reality by exaggerating in their description. E.g. al-Tabari, *Majma‘ al-Bayān*, 19 : 191-192 (Būlaq 19 : 77-80); Ibn Kathir, *Tafsīr*, 5 : 217-218; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jamī*, 13 : 145-152; Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, 7 : 49.

(8) E.g. al-Jumāḥī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1 : 339.

(9) E.g. al-Jumāḥī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1 : 434.

(10) E.g. al-Jumāḥī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1 : 236.

to the new urban administrative centers. The poets' new functions, meanwhile, have yet to be established.

The deterioration of their authority as experts on odes of the past is evinced by an anecdote about the Umayyad Caliph Yazīd b. 'Abd al-Mālik (reigned 720-724). He was curious to know who composed the ode sung him by his beloved mistress Ḥubāba. Rather than send for a poet, he calls for al-Zuhrī, a scholar of *ḥadīth*, in order to identify the ode's author. Al-Zuhrī, indeed, is able to name the author of the ode as al-Aḥwaṣ (11).

The poets active in the new urban centers of culture are well-acquainted with Jahili poetry given their education, but no longer seem to possess the authority to transmit these poems. They are part of the tribal heritage, and tribal transmitters (*ruwāt*) are now entrusted with this task, perhaps since they are not involved in extra-tribal politics like the poets. Al-Farazdaq, for instance, was considered expert in the poetry of Imru' al-Qays, the famous pre-Islamic poet, because of a blood-tie between them (12), but this expertise was not the reason for his fame (13).

Or take the case of Dhū al-Rumma, a Bedouin poet visiting Basra, whose authority to assess the correctness of a verse of poetry was rejected. Bilāl b. Abī Burda, the governor of Basra, "a transmitter, a man of eloquence and a literateur [*rāwiyatan faṣīḥan adīban*]" we are informed, was reciting a verse from the Jahili poet Ḥātim of the Ṭāy tribe. Dhū al-Rumma challenged a word, but the governor rebutted, "this is how I received it from the transmitters of Ṭāy". Appealing to the transmitters of the Ṭāy tribe to which the Jahili poet belongs, he prefers their testimony as to the authenticity of a text over that of a poet. Dhū al-Rumma's observation of the error, deriving from his practical acquaintance with the way the word is used in similar contexts, counts less than the simple avowal of duly constituted transmitters. When the scholar Abū 'Amr b. al-'Alā' entered and was asked to offer an opinion, he corroborated the governor's position, and dismissed the poet's reliability. The poet Dhū al-Rumma expressed his frustration by resorting to lampoons and even threats against the scholar (14).

(11) E.g. al-Jumāḥī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2: 657-658.

(12) al-Anbārī, *Sharḥ al-Mu'allaqāt*, 13; Ibn Qutayba, *Shi'r*, 48; *Iqd*, 6: 397.

(13) So is the case with the Abbasid poets Abū Nuwās (cf. Ibn al-Mu'tazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, 201) and Salm al-Khāsir (*ibid.*, 105).

(14) Ibn Sallām, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2: 569-570. However, despite this, Ḥammād al-Rāwīya recognized the expertise of Dhū al-Rumma before Bilāl, and remarks that "he was able to distinguish the diction of Jahiliyya from the diction of Islam [*arafa kalām abl al-jāhiliyya min kalām abl al-islām*]" (Wakī', *Akbbār al-Qudāt*, 2: 32, al-Isbahānī, *Aghānī*, 6: 88).

b) Transmitters (*ruwāt*)

The second group involved in passing on ancient Arabic poetry is that of the transmitters (*ruwāt*) which evolved as a distinct profession alongside the poets. Unfortunately, the Arab sources do not furnish us with much information about them, usually referring to them as anonymous coterie conveying tribal knowledge – “the transmitters of the tribe Ṭay’”, (*ruwāt Ṭay’*) for example, or just “the Arab or Bedouin transmitters” (*ruwāt al-‘arab*)⁽¹⁵⁾. Occasionally, some names of Bedouin transmitters are preserved, but with scant biographical data. From the little which can be gleaned from Arab sources, it seems that sometime in the early Umayyad era, they received their own professional designation – *ruwāt* – which differentiated them from poets. There are no clear occupational frontiers dividing the poets from the tribal transmitters, and many of the transmitters were poets themselves, or at least they were fully competent to compose odes. This is a very important point for comprehending their vocation. They memorized odes and transmitted them orally, thus serving as a “living archive” of ancient Arabic poetry. In addition, they revised old versions, completed or interpolated poems, and identified authors of individual verses or complete odes. Their mnemonic methods were based on *ma‘āni*, topoi, ideas and metaphoric images, as has been claimed in recent research⁽¹⁶⁾, rather than on memorizing entire texts word-for-word and faithfully reproducing them as if their precise contents were fixed. Collective memory provided the guide as to what was to be recalled, and it set the boundaries of permissible adjustments, deviations and even reworking of the poems. Such tampering was not just a neutral by-product of organizing and preserving the literary material; it was also motivated by economic and political interests as well as matters of prestige. It was acceptable, though not fully legitimate, to compose or rework poems in order to prove claims involving genealogy, which was essential for establishing economic and other rights. Khalaf al-Aḥmar, a transmitter of a later generation whom I will soon discuss, remarked, “even in antiquity, the transmitters revised the poetry of poets”⁽¹⁷⁾.

(15) See al-Iṣbahānī, *Aghānī*, 6 : 93.

(16) Cf. Arazī, Albert. « De la voix au calame, ou la naissance du classicisme en poésie ». *Arabica* (forthcoming); al-Shilqānī, 1977 : 179-258.

(17) *waqad kānati l-ruwāt qadīman tuṣlibu min asb‘ari l-qudama’*. He says this while quarreling with his student al-Aṣma‘ī regarding three verses of the poet Jarīr. Khalaf believes that their transmission, as found in Abū ‘Amr b. al-‘Alā’, is erroneous, but he agrees that it will find its way into circulation, since “the transmitters made a habit, even in antiquity, of revising the poetry”. Al-Marzubānī, *al-Muwashshab*, 198-199.

The transmitter's attitude towards ancient poetry is illustrated by the following anecdote. Ibn Daud, son of the highly-praised Jahili poet Mutammim b. Nuwayra, arrived in Basra "for the same reasons a Bedouin would come there: to trade some livestock and food". The Basrian scholars were favourable with such Bedouins whom they regarded as excellent informants of pristine Arabic and repositories of fine poetry. Two scholars accosted Ibn Daud in order to hear his father's poems. After receiving remuneration, Ibn Daud recited his father's poems, and upon exhausting them, he began improvizing his own poems in his father's style, mentioning the same places and battles referred to in his father's poems. Only after he had gone on for some time, did the scholars realize that he was, in fact, contriving the poems himself⁽¹⁸⁾.

Around the mid-eighth century, certain transmitters of an unusual professional profile became prominent. They belonged to a new breed of *ruwāt*, still occupied with the transmission of poetry, but in a manner unlike the tribal transmitters. They constitute an intermediate generation between the tribal transmitters and the scholars, whom I will discuss later. The most representative and, indeed, famous, of this group are Ḥammād al-Rāwiya (Kufian, 694-772) and Khalaf al-Aḥmar (Basrian, 733-796). They differ from the tribal Arab transmitters in that they are urbanized, second generation of Iranian converts to Islam (*mawālī*), and thus derived from a cultural background utterly unlike that of the tribal Arab transmitters. Clearly, their transmission of poetry was not an inherited family occupation, and they chose this profession as a way to integrate themselves into the emerging Islamic society: to achieve a certain status and be accepted at the courts of rulers, especially that of the Caliph, who surrounded himself with experts in assorted fields of learning as a type of upscale entertainment. (I will expand on this in the section on scholars). Ḥammād, for example, became a transmitter rather by accident. As told in his biography in *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, he joined up with a band of highwaymen in his youth, and one night found among his plunder a "volume of the Anṣār poems" (*juz' min shi'r al-anṣār*). Ḥammād read it, became infatuated, and learned it by heart. Consequently, he continued to learn poetry as well as ancient Arab history, until he became an expert⁽¹⁹⁾. He is portrayed as an opportunist, a bohemian fond of wine and suspected of apostasy, preferring the company of poets to that of scholars, and who gained access to the Umayyad court by exploiting his erudition on ancient Arab poetry. The Umayyads thoroughly enjoyed his companionship, often requesting that he recite poems or recount the glories of Arab wars and their lore (*ayyām al-'arab wa-'ulūmubā*), rewarding him generously

(18) al-Jumāhī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1 : 47-48.

(19) al-Isbahānī, *Aghānī*, 6 : 87.

for his services⁽²⁰⁾. He seems to have used the paradigm of traditional tribal transmitter to guide him, but expanded it to the point of exaggeration. Instead of displaying the tribal transmitter's wonted expertise in the poetry of one poet or the poetry of a certain tribe, Ḥammād exhibited phenomenal erudition, even megalomaniacal. The Umayyad Caliph al-Walid b. Yazid (reigned 743-744) asked Ḥammād, "What made you worthy of the title *rāwīya*?" and Ḥammād replied, "That I can recite the poems of every poet you know or have heard of, as well as the poems of many you do not know nor have heard of; in addition to which, I can distinguish ancient from new poetry". Al-Walid retorted, "That is indeed a vast store of learning! What quantity of poems lies in the treasury of your memory?" Ḥammād answers, "Enormous. For every letter in the dictionary, I can recite before you one hundred odes, besides short poems, and all this just from Jahili poetry, before I take into account the poems of Islam". Al-Walid tests him, and Ḥammād recites thousands of pre-Islamic poems⁽²¹⁾.

Ḥammād introduces us to a type of transmitter independent of the tribal transmitting parameters, one who ignores the traditional partition of knowledge among tribes. He is autonomous, claiming authority over *all* Arabic poetry, and not just that of a specific tribe or time. In this respect, he operates like a scholar. He also makes a scholarly distinction between poetic eras: we encounter for the first time the classification of poetry into pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, and the first conception of Jahili poetry as a separate category. On the other hand, he arrogates to himself the liberty of the tribal transmitter to revise, refine, and retool poems as befits the occasion, and even to invent his own poetry which he attributes to known poets. It appears that Umayyad rulers did not care if he did so (Bilāl b. Abī Burda knows that Ḥammād himself composed verses of poetry about Bilāl's father, Abu Mūsā al-Ash'arī, that he attributes to the poet al-Ḥuṭay'a, but says, "let [the poems] go and circulate among people until they are renowned (*walākin da'bā tadbbahu fī al-nās wasayyirbā ḥattā tashtabira. Ibid.*, 89). Ḥammād's two-fold approach for preserving ancient poetry is also evident in his employment of two methods of preservation, written and oral transmission. On the one hand, he poses as an "oral transmitter", flaunting his prodigious memory, as we have seen; on the other hand, unlike most tribal transmitters, he supplements his memory by recourse to written texts, the real basis of his expertise, but which he stages as oral aptitude. Ḥammād himself admits how once when the Umayyad Caliph al-Walid b. Yazid sent for him, and he assumed that he would be asked about the poems

(20) al-Iṣbahāni, *Aghāni*, 6: 70.

(21) al-Iṣbahāni, *Aghāni*, 6: 71; see also *ibid.*, 91-92, 93.

of the Thaqif and Quraysh tribes, he consulted “the books of Thaqif and Quraysh” to prepare for the Caliph’s questions (22).

Khalaf al-Aḥmar (ca. 733-796), disciple of Ḥammād al-Rāwiya, basically transformed the knowledge of Ḥammād into scholarly knowledge by teaching it at a mosque. He approached Ḥammād in Kufa, learned under him (although not with Ḥammād’s full cooperation (23)), and later moved to Basra where he taught his own disciples (24). He worked both as a scholarly transmitter of ancient poetry and as a poet-transmitter, himself composing poems (25), and found it a simple matter to copy the styles of many poets, both ancient and contemporary (26).

c) *Scholars* (‘*ulamā*’)

The third group of cultural agents involved in transmitting the ancient poetry was that of the scholars. Scholarship as a cultural profession existed alongside the others described above, the poets and transmitters. Scholarship comprised all branches of “the Arab sciences”: determining the proper version and interpretation of the Quran, ḥadīth, lexicography and syntax of the Arabic language, Arab history, and, of course, poetry. In the eighth century, scholars were usually competent in all these areas. However, by approximately the last quarter of the eighth century, scholars of poetry emerge as a group claiming independent professional authority in ancient Arab poetry. They endeavor to establish this niche of authority by contrasting their professional identity from scholars of ḥadīth or language, on the one hand, and from the groups competing for professional authority specifically in poetry, i.e., the poets and transmitters, on the other hand.

Many of the scholars were *mawālī*, that is, the offspring of non-Arab families who had converted to Islam. In this respect they were part of a general phenomenon characteristic of the contemporary culture, for the non-Arab *mawālī* were the ones who actually constructed Arab identity for the Arab community through a colossal effort of collecting and organizing knowledge belonging to “the Arab (and Islamic) sciences”. Like

(22) al-Iṣbahānī, *Aghānī*, 6: 94.

(23) *wakāna ḍanīman biadabibi*. Ibn al-Anbārī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Uḍabā*’, 53.

(24) The Arab sources indicate that he was the first to turn this kind of knowledge into knowledge passed by way of formally established instruction: *awwal man aḥḍatba al-sammā*’. He is said to be the teacher of al-Aṣma’ī (*Marātib al-Naḥwiyyīn*, 80; *Ṭabaqāt al-Uḍabā*’, 53; *Ṭabaqāt al-Shu’arā*’, 148).

(25) *Marātib al-Naḥwiyyīn*, 80; *Ṭabaqāt al-Uḍabā*’, 53; *Ṭabaqāt al-Shu’arā*’, 148, 201; Ibn Qutayba, *Shi’r*, 496; Abū Nuwās transmitted his *Diwān*. *Marātib al-Naḥwiyyīn*, 81.

(26) *Marātib al-Naḥwiyyīn*, 80; *Ṭabaqāt al-Shu’arā*’, 163; *Ṭabaqāt al-Uḍabā*’, 53.

the poets, or at least the leading group among them, they were affiliated with the royal courts, and were regular guests at the palaces of rulers in their capacity as “edifying entertainers”. Their relations with the rulers were based on their rendering of intellectual services, insofar as they placed their professional learning in the various disciplines at the disposal of the ruler, who would pick and choose among those topics in which he was interested. Most of the anecdotes from which one can infer the nature of relations between scholar and ruler reveal that, at least in the domain of literature, dialogue was held, in which the ruler posed a question relevant to the scholar’s specialization, and the scholar’s reply “instructively” entertained the ruler. The model of the “inquiring” ruler, educated by a wise retainer, a counselor proficient in all areas, is a model familiar from Persian literature of the era. The classic example is *Kalila wa Dimna*, structured as a series of dialogues between the “student” king and the “instructor” philosopher, in which the king asks and the philosopher answers. It does not seem to me unreasonable to assume that this was the pattern of actual behavior in the relations between Arab rulers and scholars, and not just a literary fiction.

It is difficult to know what engendered the rulers’ thirst for knowledge and prompted them to engage the services of the scholar. However, some of these scholars had worked as tutors to the royal families, molding their spiritual world and turning them into consumers of the knowledge that they provided. Moreover, the Arab past and ancient Arab poetry were topics of special interest, particularly for the Umayyad rulers, since they regarded the tribal Arab legacy as their patrimony. The cultivation of Arab-Bedouin culture seemed to them like a familial duty.

The *mawālī* scholars, progeny of non-Arab converts of the previous one or two generations, were well-versed in the well-established cultures recently annexed to Islamic learning. The cultural vocation of “scholarship” which was familiar from their own heritage, was an expedient means to assimilate into the new Muslim society. The rulers’ Arab sentiments, amplified in reaction to the Persian and Byzantine cultures of their subject peoples, were indulged by the scholars, who drew on that cultural model of “scholarship” ostensibly available in their backgrounds. They gathered a corpus of knowledge that had been preserved in tribal and local frameworks, reorganized it, and presented it as “the body of authorized knowledge” on the Arab past. The new Arab rulers adopted patterns of royal demeanor from the conquered cultures, which included the cultivation of wisdom and scholarship. Non-Arab intellectuals thus came to realize that the new cultural game was the “invention of knowledge” via scholarship, and that one could succeed in the royal court by tendering some body of knowledge or other, especially the Arab-Islamic. They worked accordingly, fabricating Arab-Islamic learning as called for, and in this fashion placed Arabism and Islam on the cultural map of the era.

Strategies of Defining “Expertise in Poetry” as a Scholarly Field in the Context of the Struggle for Cultural Authority

I would like to devote the final part of my paper to a discussion of strategies by which the profession of “scholarship in poetry” (*al-ilm bi'l-shi'r*) was invented as an autonomous occupation among the other scholarly disciplines around the beginning of the ninth century, and by which its professional authority was manufactured. I base my discussion on an analysis of the introduction to the work *Ṭabaqāt Fuhūl al-Shu'arā'* by the Basrian (and later Baghdadian) scholar Ibn Sallām al-Jumāhī (756-845). This book is a miscellany of biographical notes and anecdotes, as well as verses of poetry, all relating to two groups of poets, one pre-Islamic and the other Islamic, each arranged in ten classes of four poets, who together comprise the two elite rollcalls of early Arabic poets. The book does not pretend to encompass all knowledge of ancient Arab and early Islamic poetry. It explicitly intends only to present a select group, the forty best poets of the two eras. The book has a fascinating introduction, which presents the ideological program of the profession. As is conventional for writing in this era, the introduction does not draft well-structured claims, but rather freely draws upon tradition, and arranges statements whose connections one to the other seems at times to be quite associative.

In any event, some claims are raised which indicate certain strategies on the ideological plane regarding the “invention” of a field of learning. I would like to direct attention to some of these claims. “The knowledge of ancient poetry” is enunciated as a field of expertise, whose professionals are qualified to distinguish “original” from “fabricated” poetry, and hence to amass the authentic corpus of ancient poetry. This is an area of exclusivist professional proficiency, quite detached from branches of related, competing learning. Ibn Sallām harshly criticizes methods of work in rival scholarly fields such as belong to the general discipline of hadith (*ilm al-ḥadīth*), and traditions of Arab antiquity (*ilm al-akbbār*), and he declares that their methods are particularly unsuitable for handling ancient poetry. Ibn Sallām condemns those who “collect and transmit everything”, all literary material that reaches them, without any selection, writing it down and thus promoting its unsupervised dissemination. He singles out for special censure the historian and compiler of ancient traditions Ibn Ishāq (d. 767), whose collected materials constituted the basis for writing the earliest biography of Muḥammad⁽²⁷⁾. Ibn Ishāq is upbraided for incorporating in his books every poem that he came across, including poems ascribed to individuals who never wrote any poetry, as well as poems by women (!), and poems ascribed to the two mythologi-

(27) Cf. al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rikh Baghdād*, 1 : 221.

cal Arab tribes 'Ād and Thamūd. Ibn Ishāq is not even ashamed to admit, contends Ibn Sallām, and even states expressly : " I possess no knowledge of poetry ; whatever has reached me, I pass on ! " (28) In Ibn Sallām's critique of Ibn Ishāq, he is able to distinguish between the historical past and the mythological past of Arab history, and he describes Ibn Ishāq's serious treatment of poems supposedly deriving from the legendary 'Ād and Thamūd tribes as ludicrous ; further, he attacks Ibn Ishāq's work as irresponsible, since by virtue of his professional authority, people accept literary materials he relays as authentic without question. Most interesting among Ibn Sallām's claims is that while he aspires to separate the true from the false like scholars of ḥadīth, he offers rational historical, analytical criteria for such discrimination which would have been unacceptable to scholars of ḥadīth, since they determined the reliability of a text by the reliability of its transmitters, rather than by " objective " criteria. Ibn Ishāq, whom we customarily see today as the premier historian of the era, is described by Ibn Sallām as a kind of archivist or undiscerning compiler of folklore.

If Ibn Ishāq does not pass muster, then what *is* the method for the expert in poetry to distinguish the genuine from the counterfeit, and even the good from the bad, which Ibn Sallām hints at without stating explicitly ? What are the professional criteria for the expert in poetry ? Here the curious reader who expects enlightenment will be disappointed. Nowhere does Ibn Sallām define the rules of the profession in a clear and express manner. He speaks of the profession as an almost instinctual practice, without spelling out its principles, as if there is an intuitive facility among the experts, a sort of " sixth sense ". Ibn Sallām, who was so sharp in his analytical critique of Ibn Ishāq, turns completely obtuse when trying to render a positive definition of expertise in poetry : " In poetry there is a kind of professional knowledge (*ṣinā'a*, skill, techné as in Greek philosophy), which only its possessors recognize, just as is the case with other types of knowledge and in other professions, like occupations which require keenness of the eye, the ear, the hand or the tongue " (29). He chooses examples of a practical nature, drawn from outside the ambit of scholarship, mostly from commerce : the recognition of precious gems which is the expertise of the dealer in stones, the realization of valuable coins in the profession of the money-changer, or the trained discrimination among strains of dates, marketable goods, or slavegirls and livestock. Ibn Sallām argues that verbal descriptions of slavegirls or livestock do not reveal grounds for differentiating the more from the less valuable : only the expert eye does ; similarly, only an expert in music can recognize the different qualities in two singers singing the same melody. This profes-

(28) al-Jumāḥī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1 : 8.

(29) al-Jumāḥī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 1 : 5-7.

sional wisdom is delicate and complex, and beyond the capacity of mere words to express. It cannot be analytically described ; it simply is present. “ And such is the case in poetry ”, Ibn Sallām quite tautologically concludes, “ those who know poetry are those who have expertise in it ” (30).

“ Expertise in poetry ”, invented as a legitimate field of learning, emerged out of the appropriation of professional authority for ancient poetry from the two other professional groups which dealt with such poetry and who had been considered the keepers of this knowledge : the poets and transmitters. Apparently, the poets themselves no longer pose a credible threat to the scholars in this era, since their social functions no longer include any clear-cut role in preserving ancient poetry. We know of poets who were eminent experts in ancient Arabic poetry, like Abū Nuwās, yet who made their names in fields other than preserving that poetry. Therefore, a deligitimizing campaign was directed primarily against the transmitters, particularly the last generation, who, as we have seen, operated as both “ transmitters ” and “ scholars ”. The main targets were Hammād al-Rāwiya and Khalaf al-Aḥmar, whom we discussed earlier. They were accused of introducing fabrications into the ancient anthology, presenting their own poems as if composed by celebrated ancient poets, as well as modifying the versions of ancient poems. In short, they were denounced as unreliable in their transmitting. This claim resurfaces often, and its piquant flavor spurred its wide circulation, both then and in current research. Thus when cited today, it is accepted as a self-evident description of the historical situation. In my opinion, it must be approached first and foremost in terms of its function in the struggle over professional authority to which we are witnesses here. The claim was enlisted to stress that the scholars use a different model than the transmitters in their work. The customary flexibility in the transmitters’ methods for preserving ancient poetry had been successfully challenged by the scholars’ paradigm of conserving ancient poetry as an archive of texts with fixed contents, in which the task of preserving the “ correct ” version is paramount.

Biographies of scholars who dealt with ancient poetry mention that the scholars lacked talent for poetic composition (31). Yet the purpose of such negative evaluations is not to deprecate the scholars, but rather to defend them from potential charges that they tamper with the versions of the poems, revising or restructuring them, that is to say, to defend their professionalism according to the scholarly criteria.

In conclusion, I would like to return for a moment to two of the figures with whom I opened the paper : the tutor al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbi, and the

(30) *fakaadbālīka l-shi’ru ya’lamuhu ablu l-’ilmi bibi. Ibid.*, 7.

(31) al-Marzubāni, *al-Muwashshah*, 558 ; Ibn Qutayba, *Shi’r*, 10-11.

ode-reciting boy, the Crown Prince al-Mahdī, now Caliph. In Ḥammād al-Rāwīya's biography, the following story appears :

A group of transmitters and scholars expert in the history of the Arabs, their wars, their poems and their language, gathered in the palace of the Caliph al-Mahdī. One of the chamberlains appeared and called for al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī to enter. After a while, the secretary re-emerged with al-Mufaḍḍal and Ḥammād. The face of Ḥammād was downcast and lugubrious, the face of al-Mufaḍḍal radiant and jubilant. The secretary declared before those assembled : "The Caliph informs you that he has bestowed upon *the poet* Ḥammād twenty-thousand dirham as a reward for his fine poem, and has annulled Ḥammād's status as transmitter, since he added to the poems he was transmitting something which had not been in them ; and the Caliph bestows upon al-Mufaḍḍal fifty-thousand dirham as a reward for the accuracy of his transmission. He who wishes to hear fine poetry shall listen to Ḥammād, and he who is interested in a faithful transmission shall receive it from al-Mufaḍḍal ! Those in attendance inquired into the meaning of the matter, and were told : 'the Caliph al-Mahdī asked al-Mufaḍḍal, " Why did Zuhayr Ibn Abī Sulmā, the Jahili poet, open a certain poem of his in the middle of an issue [in contravention of the poetic norm] ? What caused him to neglect the proper version for opening the poem ? " al-Mufaḍḍal replied, " No information on this has been conveyed to me, but I assume that he deliberated as to what to recite, or perhaps he intended to declaim some other poem, and changed his mind suddenly, and simply said 'Let's move on to another topic...' [which is the first line of the poem in question], that is, he abandoned his thoughts and began to recite about al-Harim [the personality about whom the poem was composed], and thus it came about that the poem seems abrupt in its opening ". Then the Caliph called to Ḥammād and asked him the same question. Ḥammād rejoined, " Zuhayr did not speak thusly, but rather thusly " and then Ḥammād quoted three lines as if they were the supposedly missing opening of the poem. [The Caliph] al-Mahdī fell silent, considered his response, and then compelled Ḥammād to answer under oath what the truth was regarding those lines, and who added them to the poem of Zuhayr. Ḥammād had no choice but to confess that he had composed those lines, and therefore al-Mahdī payed him as he did ⁽³²⁾.

This story clearly illustrates, in my opinion, who emerged victorious in the struggle for authority in transmitting ancient poetry. For the Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdī, schooled by al-Mufaḍḍal in the new model of expertise in poetry, Ḥammād's model of transmission, which had made him a favorite among the Umayyad caliphs, is already ineffective. Al-Mahdī regards Ḥammād's professional competence to be at most that of a poet, and by no means that of a " faithful transmitter ", i.e., a scholar, who, unlike traditional tribal transmitters, does not dare tinker with the original version of the poem. He regards it as a definitive and final text, whose unusual aspects may be rationalized, but not revised, which is precisely

(32) al-Iṣbahānī, *Aghānī*, 6 : 89-91. Cf. also al-Ṣabī, *Hafawat*, 393-395.

the course of action al-Mufaḍḍal took. From a living tradition, perpetually reconstituting ancient works in light of the exigencies of the present, the texts of ancient poetry became like archival documents, representing the tableau of a distant past.

Rina DRORY
(Department of Arabic Language
and Literature, Tel Aviv University)

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