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The author of this book on the poetry of the Hudhaylite poet Abū Sahr (seventh century CE) has a Russian, USA and German academic background: he lists several Russian studies in his bibliography, and mentions in his acknowledgements Wadad al-Qadi, professor of Arabic at Chicago University at that time, who stimulated him to begin this research in 2002, while having submitted his dissertation in Germany (Freie Universität Berlin) with Renate Jacob in 2005/2006. Other professors from Germany were helpful to him such as Angelika Neuwirth, Tilman Seidensticker, and Rotraud Wieland.

The book contains the text of the poems by Abū Sahr with Arabic text, and translation into German with remarks, preceded by a thematic analysis of their contents. The older editions were from long ago such as J. Wellhausen's Letzter Teil der Lieder der Hudhailiten, Berlin 1884, and ZDMG 39, pp. 411-480, and the Neue Hudailiten-Diwane by J. Hell (Hannover 1926; Leipzig 1936). The author uses for his study A.A. Farrā and M.M. Shāki, Sharh asšar 'ār al-Hudhail-iyyin, Cairo 1965, vol. 2, pp. 915-976 (p. 29). I wonder what the relation is between this edition and the Diwan al-Hudhaliyyin, also edited in Cairo 1965 in two volumes.

The book starts (Chapter One: Introduction, pp. 11 ff.) with a scholarly literary sketch of the characteristics of old Arabic poetry, in which conventionality played an important role, and where we have to distinguish the more individualistic authorship from the collective poets. Important is also to distinguish between reality and fiction. In this sketch the life and works of Abū Sahr al-Hudhali are considered. The author is of the opinion that early Islamic poetry has a transitional character, one finds in it conventional as well as innovative themes, and ancient Arabic as well as Islamic ideas. This poetry would be a product of cultural change and would be visible in the overlaps of ancient and Islamic world views in it (pp. 26-27). Partly these world views intermingle, partly they stand next to each other. One has to take into account the motivation of the poet and his psychology, and to try continuously to throw a glance 'behind the coulisses'. This can be done by looking at the artistic form as such and with the help of a factual content analysis.

The changes of the structure and motives in the poetry of Abū Sahr are considered in the second chapter according to the schemes and methods of Renate Jacob's works (p. 35). After some preliminary remarks the nasīb in old Arabic poetry is discussed, focusing on its structure in Abū Sahr's poetry. It starts of course with the atīlāl motives and especially how they developed within Abū Sahr's poetry, nasīb as well as ghazal. Other clusters of motives belonging to nasīb or ghazal comprise the morning of separation, and the tafs al-khaydāl (the appearance of the phantom of the beloved). There are also nasībs without special frame motives, but with only reflections of the poet. The contents of a nasīb consists often of the lover's grief, his complaints about the deceit of the beloved, and the lover who realizes that he is becoming older. The description of the beloved is almost lacking in Abū Sahr's poetry, there remain only short indications.

The author goes deeply into the difference between nasīb (love introduction of the ode) and the new emerging genre of ghazal (independent love poetry). The transition between nasīb and madīth (laudatory part) in the qasidas is amply discussed, including the relationship between madīth and elegiac poetry. On p. 82 the author says about the contents of the madīth: "Abū Sahr does not manifest himself as an ancient Arabic tribal poet and is even prepared to deny his ties with the tribe in favor of his political loyalty" (cf. poem XIII, 14-16). From this appears the new social conscience in early Islamic society which correlates immediately with a changed consciousness of the Arabs of the time. Ancient tribal ties are loosened not only from outside by new political leagues, but also from inside, by the changing consciousness of the individual. A confirmation for this is the fact that the overcoming of the old tribal ethics is brought to expression not only in the politically motivated laudatory poetry, but also in the love poetry of the Umayyad period, whose characteristics are very personal. He gives some examples of love poetry in which the affairs of the beloved are placed above tribal affairs (cf. poem XII: 1; and poem XVII: 24-25). Now follow chapters on the individual (pp. 82 ff.), Fate (pp. 105 ff.) and Time (pp. 129 ff.), because these three subjects have undergone a change from pre-Islamic society into Islamic society which entails also a change of consciousness. The author speaks of "a crisis of identity of the Arabs in early Islamic society, which led to a deepening of the consciousness of the individual." (p. 87).

In the chapter on the individual the ethnic and cultural social development are considered, in connection with the tribal society in Central and North Arabia, and also the early Islamic state is discussed. "The new heroes do not try any more to respond at the expectations of the collectivity, but go their own way." (p. 88).

The author dwells upon the place of ghazal in this society and the change of the idea of love. Love is analyzed as an individual relationship. "The possibility to make love poems without the description of the beloved is a proof that love is not reduced anymore to the pleasure of the woman's outer appearance. [...] Love is felt as subjective and thematised as a personal feeling (p. 92)." The time perspective moves sometimes from past, the usual tense of the nasīb, to present: "The new individualistic understanding of love and the acquired freedom to utter it make it subsequently possible to speak about love in the present. In the place of the turning away from the love memories comes the affirmation of the love feelings and the virtue of faithfulness in love. In more than one poem Abū Sahr speaks explicitly about his present love feelings which also in future will not diminish" (p. 96). In his love poetry Abū Sahr has hardly any motif in common with the 'Udhrite love legend in which the lover dies of love (p. 99). Abū Sahr's love poems are also dedicated to more than one woman (p. 100).

In the chapter on Fate (pp. 105-128) the ancient Arabic notion of Fate is discussed: Fate as Death, as Time and as Destiny, and how people looked at Fate. In the old imagination the author recognizes two notions of Fate, the Fate of the individual based on the experience of death, and the Fate which goes beyond reality or stands on the threshold of it (p. 107). The different terminology for Fate of Death (al-manān,
himān), Fate as Time (dahr, zamān) and Fate as Destiny (qadar) is mentioned. The hero has a supernatural power subduing Fate, but every man is inseparably connected with his Fate and subjected to it. He manifests himself as a hero when countering the blows of Fate without fear, although Death is inescapable and unavoidable (p. 113).

The ancient Arabic conception of Fate is seen as connected with the concrete experience of daily life. However, between man and Fate remains an impersonal relationship (p. 115).

The notions of Fate in pre-Islamic times remain in the poetry of Abū Khirāsh, Sā'īda ibn Ju'ayya and Abū Dhu'ayb, but “the motif at times gets new forms which underline that the relation with Fate is more and more felt as a personal experience”. Perhaps also the position of the poet has changed by “the removal of the criteria of the ancient Arabic poetic collectivity” (p. 122). The theme of Fate can also be more prominent because of the unquiet epoch.

Finally, the author deals with how we find this notion in the poetry of Abū Ṣakhr al-Hudhāli: “By means of the poetry of Abū Ṣakhr can be observed that the change of the imagination of Fate in Umayyad times and the individualizing tendency in the observation of Fate, which was already discernible in the poetry of the mukhadramūn (the poets from the transitional period between pre-Islam and Islam), is also supported by the influence of new religious ideas of Islam. The Islamic concept of godly predestination is given priority and the blows of Fate are understood as the power of God. For this development is indicative that existing beliefs are perceived in new religious categories and are adapted to the system of Islamic dogmatics” (p. 127). “Essential functions of ancient Arabic Fate are transferred to God” (p. 128).

In the chapter on Time (pp. 129-148) a study of the notion of Time is made with a discussion of the following aspects: Time in archaic thought, Time and Space, Time and Individual, the literary Time of ancient Arabic poetry, discontinuity, the cyclic character of the literary Time, gradations of Time, e.g. the dominance of the past in love passages instead of the future, and the change of literary Time. Also a special passage is devoted to the notion of Time in Islam, and finally the literary Time in Abū Ṣakhr’s qaṣīdaq is dealt with. To sketch the notion of Time in early Islamic poetry Lyons’ remark is still valuable: “Time still represents the remote past and illustrates the inevitability of change and, in particular, the transition from life to death” (quoted on p. 140). The author adds: “In the works of the Umayyad period religious contents increase, including eschatological representations”.

“The Islamic idea of eternity and the notion of Time connected with it were certainly an innovation in ancient Arabic culture, although the distinction between ancient and new time imagination is not as radical”, or with the words quoted from Massignon (on p. 140): “for the Muslim theologian time is not a continuous ‘duration’, but a constellation, a ‘galaxy’ of instants”.

One of the concluding sentences of this chapter is that “the observation of Time in early Islamic culture can be seen in connection with the increasing consciousness of the individual”. Here also eschatological expectations play a role (p. 147).

The sixth chapter (pp. 149-156) contains the conclusions about the relation between Islam and the change of the image of mankind in Arabic poetry. However, the author declares explicitly (p. 150): “In the context of the literary history the influence of Islam upon Arabic poetry of the early Islamic period must be considered as little. The new religion is hardly to be recognized in language and ideas of its works.” Also the following and final remark (p. 155) should be taken into account: “The present research is restricted to the poetic heritage of Abū Ṣakhr. The results can only under certain conditions be transferred to his whole period. However, they show some tendencies in the development of Arabic culture of the early Islamic period which have overall importance for its understanding. The literary and philological material and the methodological elaborations will achieve a contribution for further studies in this field.”

The seventh chapter (pp. 157-277) mentions all of Abū Ṣakhr al-Hudhāli’s poems: texts, translations and notes. Then follows a Bibliography (pp. 278-289), and Indices (pp. 290-349), consisting of vocabulary, geographical names, proper names and names of tribes, rhyme and metrical indices, and an index of names and subjects.

I congratulate the author with this book, which is very useful to get an insight in the poetry of Abū Ṣakhr and his time. I am also grateful because of the fact that he published again the whole text of his poems and I appreciate his valuable translations into German.

Amsterdam, July 2012

Arie Schippers