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WAGNER, E. — Abū Nuwās in der Nebenüberlieferung. 

The series Arabische Studien edited by Hartmut Bobzin and Tilman Seidensticker is one of the series about Arabic literature published by Harrassowitz at Wiesbaden, next to the Diskurse der Arabistik, edited by Hartmut Bobzin and Angelika Neuwirth, and the earlier series Studies in Arabic language and literature. Both series edited by Hartmut Bobzin have a green cover and give more or less the impression to be one and the same series. I congratulate the publishing house of both series for having recently published works about early and Classical Arabic poetry. Ewald Wagner made his appearance in the second volume of Arabische Studien and recently also in the seventh volume (Ewald Wagner, Abū Nuwās in Übersetzung: eine Stellensammlung zu Abū Nuwās-Übersetzungen vornehmlich in europäische Sprachen, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 2012, 218 pp.).

The present work is one of Wagner’s studies that are the result of his life long dedication to the work of the famous Abbasid poet Abū Nuwās (756-814). In it he mentions the verses ascribed to Abū Nuwās which he found in secondary literary works. The work comprises 537 fragments of poems, most of them with more than one line, making the total amount of verses some 1500.

In the Introduction Ewald Wagner has 31 preliminary sections (Abschnitte). Many fragments are ascribed to Abū Nuwās by negligence, but there are also cases of deliberate forgeries in the name of Abū Nuwās. In section 5 Wagner says about his collected verses that completion of the Dīwān of Abū Nuwās was not the only objective of the book: he has assembled in his book everything that somewhere was
ascribed to Abu Nuwás according to someone. It is often difficult to determine what was the purpose of an author in ascribing certain poetry lines to Abu Nuwás. Wagner says to have included texts which were very uncertain with respect to the authorship of Abu Nuwás. The most extreme case, according to Wagner, is fragment no. 496, a verse by Suhaym b. Wathil which starts with a fałhr poem. This verse, Ana-bnu jalan wa-tallā'ā –l-thandāyāl matā' ada’ il-humātā ta’ifhānā-ni, was so well-known, that al-Hajjāj placed it at the beginning of his speech. In the secondary literature Wagner could find 32 quotations with Suhaym as the author (next to 17 anonymous quotations). Thus the authorship is clear without any doubt. But Ibn Ma’sūm quotes in his Anwār al-Rabī’ the verse two times, once with Suhaym as the author, and another time after a series of verses in which Abu Nuwás is implied as the author. With all probability, Ibn Ma’sūm did not want to imply that Abu Nuwás was meant with the pronoun suffix in ka-qawli-hi, meaning: “as (the same poet) said”. Although it is highly improbable that Abu Nuwás was really the author of the verse, one cannot exclude that someone at any time concludes that the verse belongs to Abu Nuwás.

In other sections other cases are dealt with: section 17 focuses upon falsifications on purpose: the forgers wanted to save the soul of Abu Nuwás, who on the basis of his poems and his way of life would be a candidate for hellfire. For instance, no. 225 is a poem that saved him, as he communicated to his friend after his death in a dream. We find in Wagner’s remark at no. 225: “Muḥammad Nāfī’ al-Nāṣīk saw Abu Nuwās after his death in a dream. Abu Nuwās declared him that he was now in Paradise because of a poem which lay under his pillow. Muḥammad went to check it and found the above mentioned poem.”

In section 21 the fact is signalized that verses of some contemporary poets were wrongly attributed to Abu Nuwás because of his fame.

In section 24 falsifications are found because of obvious literary historical reasons, they have often a fairy tale background and are originating from later times, evoking the world of 1001 Nights. In some of these stories slave girls and caliphs are involved.

In section 25 the reader is reminded of Emilio García Gomez's pre-Muwashshah, a prefabrication of the strophic genre, which occurs in the Diwān III 332–3. No. 198, a poem from Damūr’s Hayāh I, pp. 16–107, consisting of 12 strophes according to the rhyme scheme izzare/ aaaaat/ bbbeb etc. is discussed here by Wagner who says: “Although a strophic poem by Abu Nuwās is fundamentally possible, I would nevertheless consider the muḳkhammāsa no. 198 as spurious for literary historical and other reasons. The muḳkhammāsa has a girdle rhyme and has therefore reached its complete form. Such poems are only known from the 10th century. Besides, the fact that the poem occurs in a 1001 Nights like frame story which contains a gross anachronism: Abu Nuwās would have recited the poem before the caliph al-Muṣta’in (who reigned 862–866). Finally the poem was only transmitted by the tardy author al-Damūrī (d. 1405).”

In section 26 the author mentions that the bad style of no. 322 makes him think that the warning against women in Naṭfāwi’s Rawd cannot be written by Abu Nuwās.

In section 27 are rejected as non-Abu Nuwāsian the two liners which express love for craftsmen (weavers, tailors, chess players etc.) on the basis of their contents: this kind of poems transmitted by il-İbšīḥī (d. 1446) belong to Mamlūk rather than Abbasid times.

In section 30 the author concludes: “In the preceding pages I have tried to show some of the reasons which have caused the fact that so many poems occur under the name of Abu Nuwās which, with all probability, originate from other authors. Many things may be interpreted otherwise by others. In any case are the many Abu Nuwāsian verses which appeared outside the Diwān in later literature, a proof of the continuing interest in this poet.”

The then following poetry fragments are numbered 1–537 and at each fragment is mentioned its metre, its source, possible variants, attributions or conjectures, and if necessary, some remarks are added. The poetic fragments are arranged according to the alphabetical order of their rhymes which makes it easy to retrieve certain lines (explained in section 7 of the introduction).

The remarks at the poetry fragments are often enlightening, such as at fragments 86 and 148 which says: “In this line the night of the birth of Jesus is addressed, which is considered as especially long”.

Other fragments receive a characterization such as the remark at fragment 139 from al-Hāṭimī’s Hillah which indicates that the two lines constitute a mujān riddle in the form of the beginning of a hunting poem.

Again another fragment (no. 138) contains a two liner from Ibn Manzūr’s Akhbār II 79 with the remark: “Abu Nuwās was alleged to have written these verses on the wall of a tavern in Qatrābūl” [metre: kāmil]:

"Lā yaghḍabannā munādimī in nikū-hū
Innī li-nayki munādimī mu’tadull
Wa-la-qad-alīmū ka-ma akīdu al-ludūl"

(“Let my drinking companion not be angry, when I fuck him/ Because I am accustomed to fuck my drinking companion/ And in the same way I will not blame him when he fucks me/ Because I knew that just like I am a deceiver, I will be deceived.”)

(Transcribed and translated by the reviewer; however, in the book the poems are given in Arabic script, without translation [AS]).

The works in which the fragments from Abu Nuwās are to be found are listed in the “Literatur und Abkürzungsverzeichnis” (Literary Sources and Abbreviations, pp. 221–236).

This is followed by an index comprising Koranic passages (p. 237), personal and tribal names (pp. 237–245), and place names (p. 245).

This volume discusses the poetry ascribed to Abu Nuwās within the Arabic literary traditions outside the Diwān of the poet. Over 200 medieval literary works are taken into account. We learn lots of anecdotes about Abu Nuwās and his contemporaries. This is an excellent book to become aware of the widespread interest in Abu Nuwās in the Middle Ages and to become aware of the authenticity problems inherent of medieval Arabic poetry. We congratulate the author that he has compiled this volume on the basis of his life long experience with poetry and life of Abu Nuwās.

Amsterdam, July 2012
Arie Schippers