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WAGNER, E. — Abu Nuwas in der Nebenübersetzung.


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, Abu Nuwas in Übersetzung: eine Stellungssammlung zu Abu Nuwas-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 lifelong dedication to the work of the famous Abbasid poet Abu Nuwas (756-814). In it he mentions the verses ascribed to Abu Nuwas 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 Abu Nuwas by negligence, but there are also cases of deliberate forgeries in the name of Abu Nuwas. In section 5 Wagner says about his collected verses that completion of the Dīwān of Abu Nuwas was not the only objective of the book: he has assembled in his book everything that somewhere was
ascribed to Abū Nuwās according to someone. It is often difficult to determine what was the purpose of an author in ascribing certain poetry lines to Abū Nuwās. Wagner says to have included texts which were very uncertain with respect to the authorship of Abū Nuwās. The most extreme case, according to Wagner, is fragment no. 496, a verse by Suhaym b. Watthal which starts with a fākhr poem. This verse, Ana-bnu jalan wa-tallā'u -l-thanāyāl matā' ada' il-'ināmata ta'rjāna-nī, 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'sūm1) quotes in his Anwār al-Rabī' the verse twice, once with Suhaym as the author, and another time after a series of verses in which Abū Nuwās is implied as the author. With all probability, Ibn Ma'sūm did not want to imply that Abū Nuwās was meant with the pronoun suffix in qa-qawli-hi, meaning: “as (the same poet) said”. Although it is highly improbable that Abū Nuwās was really the author of the verse, one cannot exclude that someone at any time concludes that the verse belongs to Abū Nuwās.

In other sections other cases are dealt with: section 17 focuses upon falsifications on purpose: the forgers wanted to save the soul of Abū Nuwās, 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: “Muhammad Nāfi' al-Nāsik saw Abū Nuwās after his death in a dream. Abū Nuwās declared him that he was now in Paradise because of a poem which lay under his pillow. Muhammad 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 Abū Nuwās 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 prefiguration of the strophic genre, which occurs in the Diwān III 332-3. No. 198, a poem from Damūn’s Ḥayāḥ I, pp. 16-107, consisting of 12 strophes according to the rhyme scheme izziezi/ aaaaaz/ bbbazz/ etc. is discussed here by Wagner who says: “Although a strophic poem by Abū Nuwās is fundamentally possible, I would nevertheless consider the muhakama as no. 198 as spurious for literary historical and other reasons. The muhakama 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: Abū Nuwās would have recited the poem before the caliph al-Mustā’in (who reigned 862-866). Finally the poem was only transmitted by the tardy author ad-Damūn (d. 1405).”

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

In section 27 are rejected as non-Abū 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 al-Iṣbāḥi (d. 1446) belong to Mamluk 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 Abū Nuwās which, with all probability, originate from other authors. Many things may be interpreted otherwise by others. In any case are the many Abū 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 every fragment is mentioned its metre, its sources, 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-Hātimi’s Hītah which indicates that the two lines constitute a muqān niddle 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: “Abū Nuwās was alleged to have written these verses on the wall of a tavern in Qatrabbil” [metre: kāmil]:

1) For sources mentioned in this review see Wagner’s chapter “Literatur und Abkürzungsverzeichnis”.

Amsterdam, July 2012

Arie Schippers