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Published in:
Bibliotheca Orientalis

DOI:
10.2143/BIOR.69.5.2967237

Citation for published version (APA):

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Dutch scholar Geert Jan van Gelder. Specialists such as Thomas Bauer (Münster, Germany), and James Montgomery (Cambridge) have examined this book when it was originally submitted as a thesis, and they have given advices. The book is about the poetry of Dhu r-Rumma (ca. 696 - ca. 735), the most important Bedouin poet of the Umayyad era, the younger contemporary of Jarîr and al-Farazdaq and râwî (transmitter) of ar-Râî an-Numayrî. He stands at the end of the pre-Islamic tribal Bedouin poetic tradition, in line with the saying of the philologist Abû 'Amr b. al-'Alâ' (d. ca. 770-2) that “poetry was closed with Dhu r-Rumma”.

In the introduction of his book the author sketches the plan and subject of his book: desert travel as a form of boasting. Ibn Qutayba’s schematic analysis of the Umayyad qaṣîda (consisting of nasîb ‘love nostalgia’; rubûl ‘camel journey’, and mafrîn ‘praise’) is often wrongly applied to all other kinds of qaṣîda’s. The narration of the poet’s difficult journey to his patron after the nasîb leads to a final, panegyric passage. “Establishing the significance of travelling as a self-praise topic is, then, a step forward in our understanding of the early Arabic ode, both in terms of its themes and of its structure.”

In the first chapter the author deals with the poet and his work (p. 4), and speaks about the person of the poet and gives a concise survey of Dhu r-Rumma’s Diwân, including his love poetry, consisting of nasîb (description of nostalgic love as an introduction of the poem) and ghazal (independent love poems) (p. 8). He deals with other genres such as self-praise (tribal and personal fakhr), eulogies and praise (p. 12), invectives, and riddle-poems (p. 19). A special section (chapter 2) is devoted to “travel fakhr”, travelling as a theme of self-praise (p. 21), fakhr sequences as well as travel fakhr inside the qaṣîda, ethical dimensions, contexts, dreads and perils, qa’dîlîk (brigand poets) and marâtî (elegies) (p. 35). The poem as a travelogue is dealt with (p. 43), followed by a special section on Dhu r-Rumma’s travel fâkhr (p. 49). “Journeying was seen as an overall testing of a man’s character and moral integrity.” This boasting about one’s travels relates to the nasîb and has a special function inside the eulogy (p. 2).

The desert description is the subject of the third chapter: the three thematic axes around which this sort of boasting revolves, are: the inhospitable desert traversed by the poet, and the unpropitious conditions under which the journey was made, with a focus on desert scenery depictions (p. 55), motifs illustrating the desert’s vastness, desolateness and dreadfulness (p. 66). The journey usually takes place at night and at hot summer middays (p. 69). The desert fauna (p. 73) and watering-places are often described in these poems (p. 79). An important theme is the relation of the poet with his travelling-companions already described in early poetry (p. 83) and later dealt with in Dhu r-Rumma’s poetry (p. 94). There are also sections about the poet himself (p. 99) and the night-camp (mu’arrar) (p. 102). The poet’s own camel is described as part of the camel descriptions in Dhu r-Rumma’s poetry (p. 108), with sections on the she-camel (p. 112), the group of camels (p. 120), the male camel (p. 122), the herd (p. 133) with special attention for “motifs of dynamic descriptions” (p. 135), “motifs denoting sprightliness” (p. 138), “motifs denoting endurance” (p. 142), “motifs denoting exhaustion” (p. 145) and “motifs denoting emaciation” (p. 148) (chapter 5). However, the author says here: “As much as they may be related to the camel theme, the animal episodes, i.e. the extended comparisons of the poet’s camel

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The author of this book has a Greek academic background. He mentions several professors from Greece in his acknowledgements, and has done his Ph.D. thesis in Oxford with the
to the onager, the oryx and the ostrich, constitute a separate topic which I do not touch upon in this study. This is because, when fully developed, the animal episodes transcend the boundaries of boasting” (p. 2).

At the end of the book we find a special chapter with the conclusions (p. 151), a bibliography (p. 155), an index of Dhu r-Rumma’s poetry (p. 163), and an index of poets of the early period (p. 168).


The work of Bauer on the onager, and of Ullmann on the poet’s encounter with the wolf, and before that the work of Renate Jacobi, have given us understanding of early Arabic poetry and language. Of course, not all the self-praise topics have yet been thoroughly studied but this study on one of the most interesting themes of boasting, has shed more light on this topic. Much of the items of Classical Arabic poetry, including the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period, were discussed by the Cambridge Symposiumsists who gathered every uneven year in the eighties and beginning of the nineties of the past century, mainly at Pembroke college. Renate Jacobi, Geert Jan van Gelder, James Montgomery and also Thomas Bauer, myself and many others belonged at any time to the participants. The gatherings were encouraged by the late John Mattock of Glasgow University, originally a fellow of Pembroke, Cambridge. Previous books such as Zwettler’s book on the “oral theory” in pre-Islamic times and Bateson’s phonologic analyses of some early mu‘allaqat were discussed. These discussions have promoted Classical Arabic poetry, and many younger participants have now become professors. This book is written by someone of a younger generation, a pupil of Geert Jan van Gelder. The volume is published at Harrassowitz in the series Arabische Studien. Other volumes in this series show that pre-Islamic poetry is still a popular issue.

The book contains many translations by the author preceded by the transcription of the original Arabic poetry fragment. The translated texts are often accompanied by learned footnotes. To give some examples of the nature of the comments, for example on p. 114: depicting a he-camel, the poet likens the skin of his face to silk brocade (Abū Šālīh’s edition no. 41: 24; p. 1256); the she-camel’s shining cheek is compared to the mirror of a foreign woman (ibidem, no. 39: 52; p. 1217); or the passage with the word du’maš (larva) is commented together with several parallel places about a foetus “resembling a larva in a pool almost drained” (ibidem, no. 13: 25; p. 470), and more such particularities which have since long aroused the interest of scholars interested in lexicology such as Manfred Ullmann.

Especially because of these translations and comments and the use of all the previous secondary literature, and the systematic treatment of the themes within a limited space while focussing on the investigation of certain themes of boasting, this study reveals itself of great use for beginning students as well as established scholars. I congratulate the author for this welcome contribution to the study of Classical Arabic poetry.

Amsterdam, 2 July 2012 Arie Schippers