Muslims, Jews and Christians in the Dhakhīra by Ibn Bassām of Santarem (d. 1147)
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Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

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In his *Kitāb al-Dhakhira fi Mahāsin Ahl al-Jazīra* (Book of the Treasure about the Good Characteristics of the People of the Iberian Peninsula) – the well-known anthology devoted to Arabic Andalusian poetry of the eleventh century – Ibn Bassām not only describes the development of poetry in the various parts and regions of 11th century Andalus, the period of the so-called petty kings, but his anthology has also an historical dimension.

Ibn Bassām probably compiled his book between 500 and 512 (or 1106-1118) in Seville; the death of his patron in 510 (1110) may have surprised him during the work. The four main parts of the book deal with the poetic production of three parts of eleventh-century al-Andalus (Muslim Spain), that is, Cordoba and the central region (I), the Western regions (II), the Eastern regions (III), and a special chapter dedicated to poets who came from foreign lands, who visited al-Andalus and, poets from the East of the Arabic world, who praised al-Andalus (IV). Among the historical excursions in part I are the killings of several Cordoba notables, among the interesting literary achievements mentioned are the *Risāla* by Ibn Shuhayd and the *maqāma* of the hen by Ibn al-Shahīd, moreover the story of Ibn Zaydūn’s love for Wallāda, the killing of Abū Marwān at-Tubnī, with poems by his granddaughter at-Tubniyya; the deposition of the Banū Jahwar, and the killing of Samuel b. Naghrīla of Granada.


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painted by Ibn Bassām’s *Dhakhira*. This work researched by Ohldorf is characterized by the author as a work motivated principally by literary motives, but nevertheless he poses the question: How much documentary value or evidence do we have about the *taifas* in the *Dhakhira*, how history is explained in Ibn Bassām’s book? This research is directed at historic relevant aspects of the anthology, therefore many poems and epistles were not treated by the author. But the historic content nevertheless is a basic element of the work.

The historical reports by Ibn Hayyān and also descriptions made by Ibn Bassām go through the entire work and represent certainly a substantial component of the Anthology. These excursions are to illuminate the historical background of the time of the quoted literary texts given by Ibn Bassām, however he occasionally takes up a rather insignificant poem, in order to supply the immediate reason for an historical event. This is the central role of the historical excursions in the total concept of the *Dhakhira* in which Ibn Bassām refers to the Almoravids as the savours of the deplorable situation of the Muslims in al-Andalus, when they were asked assistance.

Ibn Bassām used the reports of Ibn Hayyān as his basis. The general trend underlying his account of the *Mulāk al-Ṭawā’if* period is a negative one. Seen from the Almoravid perspective the weakness of the Ṭawā’if must be emphasized and their discord instead of concord.

Among other things Ibn Bassām says about the place of the historical events in his anthology the following in his introduction:3

> I have alternated the letters and the poems of this compilation with the mention of battles and historical facts, which are linked with it, or which are quoted for their purpose. I have treated above all the fifth century of Hijra [the eleventh century of the common era], showing some of its terrible trials explaining the motifs of uprisings which have taken place, and telling in an essential manner the beautiful and awful things which have taken place.

From his introduction we know that Ibn Bassām had suffered from the Christians who expelled him from his hometown. In this paper we will deal with Ibn Bassām’s personal feelings with respect to Christians and Jews and his comments about events connected with them.

So we read in his introduction:

> From his introduction we know that Ibn Bassām had suffered from the Christians who expelled him from his hometown. In this paper we will deal with Ibn Bassām’s personal feelings with respect to Christians and Jews and his comments about events connected with them.

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I have enumerated the causes which led to the armed bands of the Christians making themselves masters of this region. I have indicated the reasons that brought the rulers to the decline and annihilation of their progeny and posterity. I have spoken of most of these things in such a manner as to arouse fear in their hearts, such as to make the herds of goats descend onto the rocky plains of the streams. In the greater part of this work, I have invoked the assistance of the History by Abù Marwân b. Ḥayyân, citing passages of his work and referring to it. Where his words failed, where his continuous and ordered story became less substantial, I have lingered on my old traces and hit my now cold iron, seeking to evoke a now dispersed memory and a now vanished fortune in this world.

And furthermore:

God alone knows if this book does not come forth from a breast hurt at the ribs, from a thought, whose intelligence is extinguished, narrow because of a destiny that changes like a chameleon. The reason for this is my involuntary exile from Santarem, in the far West, with my now blunt double-bladed sword, with anguished heart, after my riches, old and recent, had vanished, and with them all other things of mine, visible and hidden, because of the bands of the Christians which continuously persevered in their attacks against us, in the heart of the region. And to think that we were satisfied with our lineage, instead of looking for an ignoble gain. We were satisfied to be able to conserve the necessary, instead of going around in the world without a scope, until the Christians came to break the equilibrium of our situation, for ‘if they had left Santarem in peace at night, we would certainly have remained there’. And when the terror there became unbearable, I departed going away with my family, through deserts where you would have accused your eyes and your ear to lie, whose tribulations would have filled everyone with fear.

He continues with a severe critic of his hosts in Sevilla: he criticizes his own coreligionists who are more interested in money than in defending their own religion.

The name of Ibn Bassâm’s protector cannot be deciphered from the manuscript used by Dozy, but it seems probable that the Dhakhîra was dedicated to Abû Bakr b. ɪbrâhîm (also called Ibn Tifilwit), governor of Saragossa after 1110. This Abû Bakr b. ɪbrâhîm b. Tifilwit (d. 1115) was a cousin of the prince of the Muslims ‘Alî b. Yūsuf and the husband of ‘Alî’s sister. He had made him governor of Murcia – and according to some, also of Granada – and then of Saragossa.

From the historical events dealt with by Ibn Bassâm the passage about the battle of al-Zallaqah is a good illustration of Ibn Bassâm’s po-
The Almoravid troops originally came to help the petty states of the Muslim kings against the Christians, but after a few years the Almoravid leader deposed the Muslim kings because of their debauchery and lack of religious fervour.

Ibn Bassām’s evocation of this battle is dominated by the presence of both al-Mu’tamid – the king of Seville – and Yūsuf b. Tāshufin (Tāshfīn), the leader of the Almoravids on the one side, and by the Christian King Alphonse on the other. We have examined some of the opinions uttered by Ibn Bassām and other authors within his compilation on the characters of this battle, which are perhaps coloured by the fact that he himself came from the village of Santarem, which was conquered by the Christians and accounts for his political and emotional involvement also in other passages where battles against the Christians are concerned, such as the siege of Valencia, the events of Barbastro and his opinions about the inhabitants of Saragossa who were exposed to the raids of the Christians. We find his remarks on the battle of Zallāqa in the section dedicated to Abū Bakr b. al-Qaṣira especially in view of fragments of epistles and poems which relate to the battle of Zallāqa, which are commented upon by Ibn Bassām.

According to Ibn Bassām’s quotations, after the defeat of the battle of al-Zallaqah Alphonse could escape, not because of his courage but because of his cowardliness. In a small passage Ibn Bassām describes the ignominious defeat of Alphonse, following with a passage in prose in which he paints the avidity of the Christians in the following terms:  

The Christian communities, from the time the petty kings [taifas] reigned in our territory, exercised their tyranny in all the provinces. [The Muslims] deceived them and attracted their indulgence by paying them money. They continued to prove their obedience, docility and tractability, whereas the Christians persevered with their tyranny and their obstinacy taking possession of the best of all, whether new or old. They surrounded themselves with an excess of goods internally and externally by their taxes which they imposed even upon their own people, they gave presents and had other expenses which go with a lifestyle like that.

When you read this passage accurately the Christians do not have all the blame but all the more the Muslims who paid them and supported them.


Therefore Ibn Bassām’s comment on these Muslim panegyrics of the Muslim king al-Mu'tamid is biting:6

These are the fallacious praises, lying testimonies, flattering statements of someone who seeks to make profit. It is the treachery of someone who wants to obtain some favour. Alas! Misfortune struck the Muslim communities when the Christians realized the decline of their force. They lanced themselves in the conquest of cities and made flash everywhere the lightning of their fury. Their lances and swords were drenched with the blood of the Muslims. Those who escaped the danger were taken prisoner. To get their aim and to seize the power they desired they made them undergo all kinds of vexations and afflictions.

As far as the position of the Jews was concerned, Ibn Bassām criticised also the poets who praised the Jewish viziers who were supported by Muslim Berber kings such as the Zirids. Learnedness in poetry and Arabic sciences in the case of the Grenadian vizier Samuel ha-Nagid attracted Arabic laudatory poems. Samuel ha-Nagid was not only a good courtier and poet, but also the object of the praises of an Arabic courtly poet, namely Abū Ahmad ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Khayrah al-Qurtubi, who is better known as al-Munfatil, an Arab who apparently had secretly converted to Judaism.7

His poetry is amply dealt with in Ibn Bassām’s Dhakhira and is perhaps useful in connection with the genres of poetry Samuel ha-Nagid also dealt with, such as descriptions of young boys in the wine scene, sometimes even a mildly humorous poem with Biblical allusions such as:8

By my father! A gazelle visited me and healed me from the lovesickness of my heart.
I embraced him as though I were Jacob embracing Joseph.

It is easy to understand how these short poems in the amorous sphere are primarily humorous puns, and only secondarily love themes.

In a letter and panegyric on Samuel ha-Nagid, al-Munfatil tells how he left his homeland for ever in order to go to the famous vizier Samuel. Apparently, times were not very favourable for him in his home land, and he was compelled by circumstances to leave it and seek his luck at the court of Samuel, who is praised extensively and compared to all

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kinds of pre-Islamic Arabic heroes. It is interesting that Ibn Bassām, who mentions this letter in his anthology, probably failed to make a distinction between Samuel and his son Yosef. After the piece on al-Munfatīl, Ibn Bassām tells us how Samuel was killed after having taken part in a conspiracy. The one who was killed, however, must have been his son Yosef. The one who figures in al-Munfatīl’s poetry must be Samuel. Ibn Bassām tells us that al-Munfatīl had an epistle which he directed to Ibn al-Naghrīlī al-Isrā’īlī (i.e. Samuel), saying:

Whosoever understands Time and His habits and drags in His new and His worn out clothes, and knows that He uproots everything as long as He continues on his way, and breaks all that He can divide, does not bother any more when His weapons strike, and does not expect that there will come a time of compensation from damage. When Time made me choke on my saliva and urged me into a narrow place – leaving sorrow behind and loosening its knot immediately after, and scattering the pearls right after having strung the necklace – I saw the impossibility of the situation. I saw the poverty among the families and my grandfather who had been respectable and had come with those who participated in high society, and then was among the stumbled and the poor.

So I prepared a beast for riding and furniture, and left my dear homeland for ever, and I said by myself: either I am in existence so that I appear, or I am dead so that I am free from blame. How many a free woman uncovered from veil, bewailed me at the hour of farewell, weeping on the day of departure, like a dove bewails her young. I rendered myself to the darkness of the nightly travel on four legs as arrows of cypress wood, attaching myself to the hills as an opponent in a lawsuit to the sentences, and they [the hills] attached themselves to the riding beasts, as orphans attach themselves to the executor of the testament, until I moistened the orbits of my eye with tears and the hearts reached the throats and I asked the four legs to seek refuge by means of the windings of a valley and I made myself widen for them [the four legs] the desires, and I said: You [the four legs of the mount] will forget this place, when you put yourselves into contact with Ismā’il ibn Yūsuf, a generous knight, noble from mother’s and father’s side, who explains what was riddlesome and concealed of the glory, Quss [b. Sā‘idah] in eloquence and Ka‘b [b. Zuhayr] in magnanimity, and a Luqmān of knowledge and an al-Āhnaf [b. Quṣays] in patience, and more noble in ambitions than Hummām and greater in compliance than Bishām [b. Qays]; when he speaks to someone, he likes brevity; when he wins, he refrains from imposing himself; when he is excellent, he makes other things excellent; when he promises something good, he repeats it; he

commands and purveys, he rewards and punishes, he is the refuge of mildness and generosity, the travel in winter and summer, the defender of family honour, his racetrack is wide, he does not punish unjustly a miserable man, and does not disappoint a poor man, and perseveres attentively in giving presents, and controls himself to his own benediction, and longs for spending generously, like a stranger longs nostalgically for his family:

“He united excellent habits with benefits [...]”

When they heard his description which was the forerunner of his good taste, they believed in his glory and took leave from me with congratulations, and I left them waiting.

One of al-Munfatil’s madhíhs on Samuel ha-Nagid is particularly famous for the poet’s exaggerated praise for Samuel, and for Ibn Bassâm’s fierce reaction to it. In the following I will give a translation and explanation of the poem. Al-Munfatil’s qaṣida – whose first amatory introduction line commences with ‘I ask you to solve the riddle whether they were heading for lotus tree and acacia: while my heart which was their purpose refused to stay in my breast’ – was severely criticized by Ibn Bassâm, not for its nice nasìb, but for the laudatory part at the end, in which the poet is far too hyperbolic in his praise for the famous Jewish vizier at the Granadian Zirid court. However, I suppose that Ibn Bassâm must have had a certain predilection for the beginning of the poem, from which otherwise he had not quoted so extensively in his famous anthology.

In the main part of the poem as reported by Ibn Bassâm, the Ibn Naghrilâhs – the family of Samuel ha-Nagid – are compared to full moons because of their brightness and to rains because of their generosity. They are contrasted with the other kings on earth (or the other kings of al-Andalus) who lack these qualifications.

Then Ibn Bassâm says he will not include the next part of the poem because he finds it awfully exaggerated, but some years later he changed his mind and reinserted the hyperbolic passage (ghulûw). In this later part of al-Munfatil’s poem, Samuel ha-Nagid is referred to in the singular and is compared with Moses. His people would have to kiss his hands.12

23- They would have to kiss both your hands out of dignity as though they were the cornerstone of the Ka’ba, because your right hand is made for prosper-

12 The following lines are also translated by Henri Pérès, op. cit., pp. 269-270.
ty and your left hand is made for rich gifts.
24- Thanks to you I have won this world and I have satisfied my wishes, and
thanks to you I long to meet the same gain in the other world.
25- I profess openly the religion of Saturday when I stand before you, and when
I am among my compatriots I believe in that religion secretly.
26- Moses was afraid, prudent and poor, and I am safe from fear and poverty.

In this last part, al-Munfatil professes his Jewishness. Ibn Bassâm’s
comment on this poem was not very favourable, as might be expected
from a refugee whose native town – Santarem – had been taken by the
Christians and was committed to strong Islamic domination. Through
his Dhakhira we hear of his hatred for the Christians in the descriptions
of the many battles involving Christians and Muslims. Now he is very
surprised that a non-Muslim like the Jew Samuel ha-Nagid could rise to
such a position at the Zirid court of Granada. Full of anger, he writes:13

May God make this [kind of poems] abominable as a profit, and may He
discard [Samuel’s] religion as a religion, to which he [al-Munfatil] at-
tached himself with a close relationship. I do not know any of the circum-
stances of this ostentatious sinner, and hazardous offender of his Lord, I
wonder whether it is because of the fact he really prefers this weak-
minded Jew above all prophets and messengers [of God], or because
[Samuel] gave him power over religious and worldly affairs. May God as-
semble him under His banner, and not let him enter Paradise except by His
special care.

At the end of the passage Ibn Bassâm describes how Samuel alias Yosef
conspired with Ibn Šumâdîh of Almeria against the Zirids: he ‘impris-
oned his master between earthen wine jug and cup’, that is, he used to
make him so drunk that he was not aware of any conspiracy.14

As he said in his introduction, Ibn Bassâm does not make many
comments in his Dhakhira: he does not explain poems, but anthologizes
the eleventh century in which much poetry and also prose works – like
those by Ibn Shuhayd, Ibn al-Shahîd, Ibn Gharcia and others – are con-
served. His comments sometimes refer to so-called Oriental models for
themes and motives in poetry, and sometimes to political affairs; and
sometimes there are almost no comments at all. In the rest of his work
he in fact is able to keep the distance which he announced in his intro-
duction. However, when it comes to politics and where the battles
with the Christians or the Jews are concerned, and the weak Muslims
who secretly support Christian as well as Jews, we suddenly see his

14 Ibidem.
involvement, and the one who was chased away from his hometown – Santarem – by the Christians is then no longer able to keep his distance. Therefore all those political passages about struggle with the Christians in the eleventh century give an extra personal flavour to his politico-poetic anthology.