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Schippers, A.

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Arie Schippers*

Poetry and History in Ibn Bassām’s ِDahīrah

In his Kitāb al-Dahīrah fi maḥāsin Ahl al-Ḡazīrah (Book of Treasure on 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 is very keen to show the contrast between the poetic production of the West and that of the East, and the good style and themes of the Western poems and themes compared with the original Eastern ones. Ibn Bassām wanted to show Eastern scholars that al-Andalus was their equal in poetic activity. In many places narrations of historical events of the eleventh century are inserted. It is my purpose to deal with the relation of those narrations inserted between the chosen pieces of poetry and rhymed prose from secretaries and rulers, and to provide an insight into the political opinions of Ibn Bassām.

Turning to what Ibn Bassām describes in his introduction as the aim of his work, we read in an autobiographical note that when Ibn Bassām came to Seville he was very depressed after he has been forced to leave his home town Santarem when Alphonse V conquered it in 1080. Among other things he says in his introduction1:

“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 Hiğra [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 beauti-

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ful and awful things which have taken place. 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 Abū Marwān ibn Ḥayyān, 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.”

The author explains that he does not consider himself as a poet because he has seldom practised it, but wants to clarify something of the devices of badīʿ [beautiful figures of speech]:

“I do not like to use poetry as a mean of subsistence and I have not chosen it as my livelihood, I did not consider it as my house or as a place where to return to. Only seldom have I practised poetry myself, and if I ever had some interest in it, it was because I wanted to look therein after something well-defined, and not because I found it my exclusive preoccupation. On the contrary, I have tried to resist the pull of writing and I have avoided bringing my passion to the place where poetry dwells: even when its wine was brilliant and its cups went around with enthusiasm, I smelled only its odour, taking part in the banquet of conversation. Whatever do I have in common with poetry, which in most cases is not different from cunning imposture and pretentious cheating? When it is meant to be serious, it is falseness and suggestion; when it is jest, it makes men mad and lose reason, and there is no doubt that real knowledge is more convenient for us than the futilities of discourse in prose and in verse. Notwithstanding, I have proposed again to myself to allude in this compilation to some aspect of badīʿ, and to accept in any case some of its reasons and to clarify a great deal of its terminology. Moreover, when between my hands there happens to occur a successful poetic motif, when I come across an admirable expression, I shall mention who was the first to use this expression, and then allude to whom has taken something from the expression and who has added something to it. But I shall absolutely not say ‘He has taken these from that one’, because the ideas of some can coincide with those of others, such as the marks of the hoofs of horses can be diverse: if the poetry is like a race course, the poets are the race horses.”

About his own miserable conditions he says the following:

“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 others 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:

‘A desert which not even a wolf would have dared to enter, where a raven would not have spread its wings’

Finally I freed myself as the moon in the last night of the month, and I suc­ceeded to draw out like a lot in the arrow play. Then I came to Jímş [Seville] with my extremely reduced spirit, nearly entirely consumed by yearning:

‘The greater part of my soul was gone upon my arrival; I wished I were able to live on what was left of it’

I lived there as a stranger for years, establishing my dwelling in the shadow of the cloud, not able to change position, fearful as a dove. I was always alone, without the consolation of a friend, compelled to satisfy myself with the remainder of what I had carried with me, since literacy [adab] here in Seville is even scarcer than loyalty, and who possesses it is less significant than the moon in winter. The measure of individual prestige is riches, in every region the ignorants are models. Men find it enough that their own riches be in security, even to the detriment of their dign­ity. They are interested in augmenting their silver and gold, even at the cost of see­ing their religion and honour diminished.’

Then he devotes his book to his protector, Sir ibn Abi Bakr or Abi Bakr ibn lbríhím ibn Tifílwít. The poets in his anthology are all members of the ruling class, the kuttab, ‘because they are in the first place between the litterates’, political lead­ers and other mighty men, viziers, lords and judges.

Ibn Bassám 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), and its visitors from the east. In his book Ibn Bassám inserts between the poetry quotations from letters and historical narratives, which he sometimes comments upon himself, especially when bat­
ties with the Christians are concerned. Cordoba and the central region is dealt with in the first part (I). In the second book, about the western regions (II), the Abbadids of Seville are dealt with and here it is told how al-Mu'tamid was dispossessed; moreover, in the section devoted to Ibn Qasīrah many poems on the battle of Zallaqah are dealt with. There is also a short historical episode about Cordoba which was re-taken by al-Mu'tamid from Ibn Dī Nūn.

In the third part, which deals with the eastern regions (III), the conquest of Valencia by El Cid is touched upon, and the return of that city to the Muslims; furthermore, he describes in this part the killing of Ismā'il (son of al-Mu'tamid ibn 'Abbād), the conquest of Barbastro and its later reconquest. The fourth part is devoted to those who visited Al-Andalus and, poets from the east of the Arabic world, who praised Al-Andalus (IV). The fourth part contains many historical anecdotes, such as the conquest of Toledo, the destruction of Qayrawān, and the story of Ibn as-Saqā', the founder of the Banū Jahwar.

The passage about the battle of al-Zallaqah is a good illustration of Ibn Bassām's political opinions. From the historical point of view, the battle took place under the reign of the Aftasids whose power then extended over a great deal of Portugal. The battle was of crucial importance for the course of the history of Al-Andalus, not so much because of the defeat of Alphonse, but because the arrival of Yūsuf ibn Taṣūfīn's troops at the Iberian peninsula marked the advent of the Almoravids and their political intervention in the peninsula's affairs. 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 ibn Taṣūfīn, the leader of the Almoravids on the one side, and by the Christian King Alphonse on the other. We will examine some of the opinions uttered by Ibn Bassām 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 Zallaqah in the section dedicated to Abī Bakr ibn al-Qasīrah especially in view of fragments of epistles and poems which relate to the battle of Zallaqah, which are commented upon by Ibn Bassām.

In the section about Ibn Qasīrah a text by Ibn 'Ubadah d'Almeria is trans-
mitten by Ibn Bassām, in which is said that al-Mu'tamid had not hurt his hand, as Ibn Qāṣīrah had mentioned, but that his enemies are wounded, and that the hands of al-Mu'tamid are more generous than ever, and that Yūsuf ibn Taṣufin considers him of great help. Al-Mu'tamid's connections with Yūsuf are illustrated by verses in a poem by 'Abd al-Ḡallīb ibn Wabān (d. 1090) in which he speaks about an in-dissoluble tie between the Ḥimyarite Yūsuf and the Lahmīd al-Mu'tamīd:

"They were like the prophets Yūsuf and his brother Benjamin."

Alphonse could escape not because of his courage but because of his cowardliness. The mass of unbelievers is described in the best traditions of war poetry, which we know from other poetry by Ibn Ḥaḏīghah. In a small passage Ibn Bassām describes the ignominious defeat of Alphonse, and Ibn Wabān, in his poem, addresses himself to King Alphonse saying: "Schoolboy, have you left the place reserved for adults, wives will ask where their husbands are, not the men themselves because they are dead. Be wary of them, because they make descend on you their thunder."

Ibn Wabān continues to address himself to King Alphonse VI. He alludes to Alphonse's frequent demands for tributes in gold and silver, by saying that he has received his silver in the form of the white Arab warriors who are descendants of Sem, and gold in the form of the black soldiers of Mauritania who are descendants of Ham. Alphonse is painted as hiding in the dark after the pernicious outcome of the battle. According to Ibn Bassām, the motif of the defeated king who is hiding in shame under the veil of darkness as a servant of Mani is taken from the oriental poets Ibn al-Mutanabba (915-65), Abū Tammaḥ (805-45) and al-Mawardi (973-1058). Ibn Bassām follows this up 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 [ta'ifas] 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. The poetry of that time is proof of it. Ḥassān ibn al-Massīṣi praises al-Mu'tamid, speaking about his generosity [towards the Christians]:

10 Schippers, op. cit., pp. 96-97; 106; Leiden MS. Or. 14.056 32b-34a.
You take from the Muslims from a treasure which makes pale the greatest riches only in order to exercise charity.

You intercede to set free the war prisoners, and by making a treaty with the infidels you try to free the Muslims.

You hardly belong to those who are stingy with their money and their courage, piling up their dinars and planting their lances in the ground instead of fighting.

You send the Yellows [Christians] solid gold and if they betray their word you oppose them with your cutting sword.

Then Ibn Bassām quotes another panegyric by Abū Bakr al-Dānī:

— By the glory of religion! Heaven may decide that this glory ever persists! You betray the Christians, leaving for them what you want to get rid of.

— You offer them goods hiding a feeling of vengeance which in the end will be harmful for those who wanted to profit.

— The abundance of food and drink does not give the bodies protection against all evil.

— People are not wrong to ask you favours in case of difficulty, because you know exactly what to do and what not to do in case of difficulty.

Ibn Bassām’s comment on these panegyrics on al-Mu’tamid is biting:

“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 landed 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.

The cities of Coria and Zorita were the first to fall into the hands of the enemy, with a number of fortresses and fortified, inaccessible citadels. The intrigues, discords and disagreements spread such that misery soon overcame them when their fate was sealed by misfortune the city of Toledo falling into the hands of the Christians in the year 478 (1085), the town which represents for the [Iberian] peninsula the very centre of a circle, the most precious pearl of a necklace, the crossroad accessible from all directions. The blows inflicted on this town had repercussions upon those who lived near and those who lived far away. One of the poets of the time said on this subject:

— Incite your mules not to tread anymore on the land of al-Andalus, because your stay in al-Andalus would be an error.

— Normally every cloth becomes frayed at the borders, but that of the Peninsula got worn out from the centre.”

It is evident that Mu’tamid with praise clever, but saw their block the plans of Christians by their hands of the Christian pre-Islamic poets verses in Arabic poetry withdrawal.

In the last part of the battle Bassām:

“In their distress Tašufin, may God have compassion on the men: cavalry advanced glorious made perish the walls of the cities and the Spaniards wounded. The victory he writes in the Last Judgement.

Normal every cloth becomes frayed at the borders, but that of the Peninsula got worn out from the centre.”

It is evident that Ibn Bassām was not one of those who overwhelmed King al-Mu'tamid with praise. He did not consider al-Mu'tamid's manoeuvre politically clever, but saw therein a sign of his cowardice. All his gifts were not enough to block the plans of King Alphonse, and did not prevent Toledo from falling into the hands of the Christians. At this point Ibn Bassām quotes some lines of the illustrious pre-Islamic poet from the Arab peninsula, Imru'ul-Qays (d. 550), as the first verses in Arabic poetry to justify the flight and celebrate the benedictions of military withdrawal.

In the last part of his article, Ibn Bassām continues his story and evokes the result of the battle by means of a poem by Ibn Wahbūn, introduced by prose by Ibn Bassām:14

"In their distress they ask help from the Commander of the Muslims Yūsuf ibn Taṣūfīn, may God have his soul! This man quickly crossed the sea to go to the Iberian peninsula at the beginning of the year (479/1086). He marched accompanied by his men: cavalry and foot-soldiers charged with light and heavy weaponry. They advanced gloriously to the victory which took place on a Friday of this year. God made perish the warriors of the tyrant who instead of a fortune of thousands of dinars was confronted by courageous [Muslim] knights whose value was double their weight in gold."

The qasidah by ‘Abd al-Galil ibn Wahbūn demonstrates that the Christians in the beginning may not have understood that the Arabs with their white swords and brown lances were their masters. In their ingratitude for the money, they again received golden heroes versed in warfare. The Christians have to fear the commander of the Muslims, Yūsuf ibn Taṣūfīn, who makes their night continue without being followed by daybreak. According to Ibn Bassām the theme of gold in counterbalance with courageous warriors was inspired by the oriental poet al-Mutanabbi (915-65) and he profits from it to quote some lines from the work of this poet.

What is the importance of Ibn Bassām's mention of the battle of al-Zallaqah? Not only does the description of this episode in the history of al-Andalus have documentary value, but it is also a didactic and moral experience of the author. The shameful defeat of King Alphonse would be the just punishment for his immense arrogance. As far as the Muslim petty kings (such as al-Mu'tamid of Seville) are concerned, they are only interested in their own happy life and debauchery, and they fail to honourably defend their territory. Therefore their fortune is not much better than that of the Christian king. Only Yūsuf ibn Taṣūfīn, the leader of the Almoravids, is meritorious enough to be honoured for his grandeur, generosity and clemency. The victory he won was a just victory. Contrary to other sources where the description of the battle of Zallāqah has an apocalyptic character which evokes the Last Judgement, Ibn Bassām amuses himself with some typical exaggerations of

Arabic poetry, focusing upon mentioning concrete details which have a direct link with the battle and its prologue. For instance, he mentions the delay in the payment of tribute to King Alphonse, the cowardice and weakness of al-Mu'tamid, the description of the many Christian victims during the battle, and the defeat of King Alphonse.

There are many other passages in the Dhahirah in which the Christians are involved. As said, there were incidents at for instance Barbastro and Paterna, and Ibn Bassâm is especially interested in the incidents with the Christians since they reflect the incidents with the Christians in his own life which compelled him to leave Santarem and made him go into exile in Seville. His exile reminds us of another involuntary exile, that of Ibn 'Ammâr, who was compelled to leave Seville by al-Mu'tâdîd and emigrated to Saragossa (1058-1068), near the Christian border, and complains in a poem about the rude manners of the Saragossians:

22 [Saragossa], where the inhabitants are people whose natures are not polished by encounters with the educated or the witticisms of the learned.

23. They are the brigands who roam through the desert, and are dressed in armour of skins of vipers beneath the eggs of ostriches.

24. Boon companions, but my only real friends [my blossoms] among them are the swords and only sheaths are my petals.

25. What is the condition of someone whom the soil of the Arabs has fostered, but whom Fate has thrown among the Barbarians?

The poet wants to return to Seville, but Time does not allow it. The rest of the poem is a long panegyric on al-Mu'tamid and his father, which is partly inspired by an earlier poem composed by Ibn Zaydûn. Ibn 'Ammâr's poem is embellished with figures of speech and contains many unusual images which, according to Ibn Bassâm, poets will continue to borrow from him so that they will become clichés\(^{16}\), but Ibn 'Ammâr insults the Saragossians so much that Ibn Bassâm in his Dhahirah criticises his attitude, defending the Saragossians, people who had so much to endure from the Christians in the north whose frontiers were very near to them, suffering very much from the Christian raids and having members of their family killed or taken prisoner.

As he said in his introduction, Ibn Bassâm does not make many comments in his Dhahirah: he does not explain poems, but anthologizes the eleventh century in which much poetry and also prose works - like those by Ibn Šuhâyd, Ibn al-Šâhid, Ibn Garcia\(^{17}\) and others - are conserved. 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 his pages-long selection from the poetry of Ibn 'Hafajah we can find only some comment about his life.

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\(^{16}\) Ibn Bassâm, op. cit., II: I, pp. 374-77.

in the beginning. In the rest of his work he in fact is able to keep the distance which he announced in his introduction. However, when it comes to politics and where the battles with the Christians are concerned, we suddenly see his 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.