Arabic and Hebrew Andalusian war poems: reflections on the poetry of Samuel ha-Nagid

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In this paper I would like to deal with some themes and motifs in Samuel ha-Nagid's war poetry or Shire ham-milhamah. This is, of course, a well known subject, frequently treated in the past; not only by scholars such as Haim (Jefim) Schirmann¹, but also more recently by Israel Levin² and Angel Sáenz Badillos³. On the one hand, Israel Levin has focussed his attention on early Arabic parallels with Samuel ha-Nagid's war poetry, and discovered certain affinities between early Arabic and Hebrew Andalusian poetry in description of mentality (such as the fatalism and the boasting of the combatants) and themes, (descriptions of armies, weaponry, the verbal struggle that precedes the real battles and the horrors of the battle field during the strife, the catastrophe of the defeated enemy, the vengeance on the part of the winner). On the other, Angel Sáenz Badillos has pointed at some Andalusian sources or parallels between Andalusian poetry which was contemporary with Samuel ha-Nagid's works. In the following paper, however, I want to deal with some of the themes of Samuel ha-Nagid's war poetry, especially with regard to their Arabic background.

The Arabic tradition of war poetry is very old, dating from pre-Islamic times. Several early collections of Arabic war poetry show the particular interest the Arabs took in this genre. We know, for example, the important place the Hamâsah chapters had in the collections of the same name by Abu Tammâm and al-Buhturi⁴. We can find many examples of Bedouin war lines in the tenth century work by the Khalidiyyân (the two Ibn Khalid's) called Kitâb al-Asbbâh wa-l-Nâzâ'ir ('Book of Analogue and Matching Verses')⁵. The brothers lived at a time and place where the greatest Arabic poet, al-Mutanabbi wrote his famous Sayfiyyât⁶. This work contains many war description which were to inspire later poets. Al-Mutanabbi's war descriptions differ from earlier examples in the sense that he is concerned with larger battles, and that no tribal courage was involved. All of the virtues associated with warriors are ascribed to his Maecenas or mamdûh, except, however, when they lose, in which case they are described as the warriors who have deserted the king Sayf al-Dawlah⁷.
In pre-Islamic times it was the collectivity of the tribe which normally counted. The reasons of the battle can also be very Bedouin and so differ from those in later times. In Bedouin conflicts clans and tribes which are akin to each other are sometimes obliged by some tribal law to fight with each other. Thus a well known motif is the weeping due to losses a tribe has inflicted on a clan or tribe to which they are very much akin. Victories over the enemies of Islam are celebrated in later war poetry, whether internal sectarians or rebels or outside enemies such as the Byzantines, as in the case of al-Mutanabbi's poetry about the many battles of Sayf al-Dawla.

In Samuel han-Nagid poetry we find many descriptions of mass warfare which is reminiscent of those to be found in al-Mutanabbi's works. On the other hand we sometimes find tribal features where the poet speaks with a collective 'we' instead of the 'he' of the Meacenas or the 'they' of his warriors which we frequently used in al-Mutanabbi's poetry. This detail of tribal poetry can be clearly seen when we examine the Arabic verses by the early poet Rizâh ibn Rabîsâh, the brother of Qusayy quoted in the Sirâh:

3. We sprung to his aid leading our horses,
23. We smote them there with the edge of the sword
24. And with every stroke we deprived them of their wits.

We can also find in the poetry of Samuel ha-Nagid similar representations of a succession of actions performed by a collective 'we', for example, in poem no. 24 (about the battle against Sevilla in the surroundings of Ronda in 438 /1047 /4827):

7. When we arrived in the land of the eneiy, an astute, perverse and bringer of calamities...
9. We marched against him to repay him for his most recent rebellion, after many older ones...
24. Then we marched against the king, exalted of heart; we went through quiet lands.

As we know, the war poems (shîrâh ham-milhamah) of the Hebrew Andalusian poet Samuel ha-Nagid describe twenty war expeditions undertaken by the poet himself between the years 1038-1056 CE. The poet was the commander of the army of the Zirid king of Granada, and identifies the case of the Berbers of Granada with that of the Jews in Spain. Thus the enemies of the Berbers are also considered to be the enemies of the Jewish people.

In one of the first poems he tells how the Berbers were put under pressure from certain Muslim milieus, e.g. Zuhayr the king of Almeria, to exclude the Jews from influential posts. These facts are confirmed by historical writings. As we know, this situation of the Jews of Granada lasted until 458/ 1066/ 4827, when there were riots following the end of the vizirate of Samuel's son, Joseph han-Nagid. These riots may have been inspired by a famous anti-Jewish poem by Ishaq al-Ibiri, which certainly had more success than the above mentioned anti-Jewish pressure put on Badis.
In the following pages we will give an impression of the most important war motifs used by Samuel han-Nagid in comparison with those of the poetry of al-Mutanabbi and other Arab poets. War descriptions are usually part of the polythematic ode (qasidah). The qasidah frequently also contains other passages. For instance, the introductory passage may contain wine and nature descriptions, self praise and, in the case of Samuel han-Nagid and other Hebrew Andalusian poets, sionidas, i.e. passages in which the poet weeps for the loss of Zion. It may be that the sionidas are meant as special Hebrew adaptions of the Arabic al-buki' atal-atlal motif, i.e. the weeping on the remnants of the abode of the beloved's tribe, which we see in many Arabic and Hebrew Andalusian poems.

An introduction which suitably fits the war descriptions is the gnomic introduction, which is connected in some way with the outcome of the war. Two particularly famous beginning verses of this type can be found in Abu Tammâm's ode on the battle of Amorium in 222/838, and others by al-Mutanabbi. Samuel han-Nagid also has some famous gnomic introductory lines, for example, poem no. 39 (on the occasion of the return after the battle in the mountains near Sevilla in 447/1055/4815):

1. Right things appear clearly without tiara or high mitre: the word justice is on the faces like a head-dress.
2. The truth needs no cloth. There is to-day no truth on whose face are veils, which cover what is not there.

Main themes of used in Arabic war poetry are: a description of the army on the march; a description of weaponry, and a description of the defeat of the enemy. Let us give some examples from some of these elements which are taken from Hebrew Andalusian poetry and some of their antecedents in Arabic poetry or quotations from contemporary Arabic Andalusian poetry or other sources which contain similar motifs.

1. Descriptions of the army on the march.

Armies on the march are often described as earthquakes; the drone of horse hoofs and the feet of masses of people, and the clouds of dust that are thrown up. All are images which speak to the imagination. A suitable quotation comes from the Rawd al-MlatAr (on the battle of al-Zallâqah/ Sagrajas in 479/1086):

'The ground trembled under the hoofs of their cavalry, whereas the day was obscured by clouds of dust. The cavalry bathed in streams of blood. Both sides stood firm with great tenacity.'

And from the diwan of Ibn Khafâjah in the rhymed prose which precedes poem no. 371 (32b):

'It was (such) a number (of horsemen and warriors) that - if allowed to drink - (they) would have left the seas behind as small waters. If they
moved, they raised mountains to the ground, they stirred up mountains of
dust. The army moved its flanks towards us as a raven agitates its wings.'

In another poem, Ibn Khafajah describes the army on the march during
the reconquest of Valencia by the Muslims. He gives a vivid description of
the dust, the trembling of the earth, and the many horses with 'lions' on
their backs (no. 154):^:

3. The dust of the army was stirred up, rising and becoming turbid, while the face of victory rose
and appeared gladly;
4. An army which shook the earth of the enemy like a trampling terror upon it;
5. What is in the midst of the wind of a launched attack could be called intrepid horses and
ferocious lions which people call heroes;
6. Because of their dark black jilabbs you would think that they borrowed the cloth of the night and
wrapped themselves in it.
7. And many a bright coloured horse whose sirbal is coloured deep red, flaming, went around kindling
the fire of war so that it flared up;
20. They attacked again in black cuirasses; you could imagine that they were a sea, striking a
mountain with its shoulders;
22. They pushed aside the dust so as to cleave its garment and they knocked against Death so that He
fell during the argument;

Elements from these descriptions are based on earlier poetry such as the
poems of al-Mutanabbi, which include similar imagery^:

43. An army, which doubles every hill (=makes it twice as high) and that crashes as a gust of wind
against the humid branches;
44. As if the stars of the night fear his expeditions, because they spread over the impenetrable
curtain of dust;

Elements such as the earthquake and the quantity of dust are also to be
found in the poetry of Samuel han-Nagid. He describes the marching army
as follows (poem no. 9: 20; poem no. 2: 55-59):^:

20. During the day the heavens were tumultuous because of the noise of the horses, whereas the earth
was convulsed and trembled at their movements;
55. The earth shook in its foundations and was turned upside down at the time of the destruction
of Sodorrah.
58. And the noise of the multitude was like the voice of the Almighty, like the surf of the sea and
its breaking waves during a raging gale.
59. When the sun rose, the earth loosened itself from its foundations, as if it was drunk.

The element of the earthquake and storm are used in these lines in
connection with the preceding quotations from Arabic poems. The concept of
multitudes can also be found in Samuel han-Nagid's poetry, i.e., where there
was not enough water for all the horses (poem no. 24):

10. We marched against him to repay him for his recent rebellion;
11. With horses equal to the quantity of water of the springs, but there are not enough springs to
quench all these horses;
12. And with foot soldiers, in whose pots was not enough food for their mouths, whereas in the pots of the enemy had been prepared food enough for their mouths.

Again, the dust raised by the wind of their chariots is described in Samuel han-Nagid's poetry (poem no. 25):

38. Because of the dust of their chariots raised by the wind, their eyes are filled with a darkness without stars.

Both Al-Mutanabbi and Samuel han-Nagid compare the swift trot of the horses with gliding snakes. Al-Mutanabbi uses the following image (no. 226):

16. They approached you, dragging with them their steel, as if they travelled at night on horses which had no legs;
32. When they slipped, they were forced to continue on their bellies, like snakes sliding forward over the surface of the earth.

And Samuel han-Nagid took over Al-Mutanabbi's images or made a partly similar comparison of his own (poem no. 2):

60. And the horses were going swiftly and came back like snakes, which were drawn from their caves;

2. Descriptions of the weaponry.

Israel Levin (see above) has already treated in great detail descriptions of weaponry in early Arabic poetry and its parallels with Samuel han-Nagid's poetry, I want to focus in this section on later Arabic poetry which in general tends to incorporate more stylistic puns. The swords and the spear-heads are often contrasted with the dust of the struggle: swords are like flashing lights in the darkness of dust. A well known example of this type is the line by the blind poet Bashshar ibn Burd on this motif 22:

, It is as if the dust raised by the wind above our heads and our swords is a night of which the stars fall down one after another,

The contrast sword-dust/ white-black, together with the redness of the blood, also occurs in a poem by al-Buhturi where he says 23:

42. The face of the sun had become black and red were the edges of the splendid white swords, while the warriors were firmly determined,
43. So that the dust was a night and the swords were stars which broke to pieces on the skulls of the enemies,

The contrast between dark and light is also meant in the following line by Samuel han-Nagid, where he describes flying spears and the sword (no. 2):

61. The flying spears like lightnings filled the air with light,
64. The sword upon their head was like a torch whose light was dimmed as it fell.

The torch which was dimmed is a beautiful parallel with Basshar's falling star (see above).

In the poetry of al-Mutanabbi (no. 236), the spear-heads are compared with writing pens:

45. Spear-heads write on the armour, but do not prick through it, as if these spear-heads are a pen, which is writing.

Samuel han-Nagid has a similar image (poem no. 24):

44. We hastened and wrote on their skin with a pen of iron true writings (i.e., heavy blows).

Arrows are often compared in Arabic poetry with water and rain clouds, and sometimes with young birds or swarms of bees (the latter image was probably used because of the buzzing sound they produce). Al-Mutanabbi speaks about 'a rain of arrows which does not drench the trees' (no. 236: line 46). The Andalusian poet Ali ibn Abi-l-Husayn has a similar image:

1. Arrows were wept at them from their broad points like swarms of bees or splashing showers of rain.

Samuel han-Nagid compares his arrows with rain drops and swarms of bees in a more original manner (poem no. 2: line 62-63; no. 25: line 29):

52. And the arrows were like drops of rain and the bucklers like sieves.
53. The bows were used like serpents and each spit out a bee from his mouth.
29. They shot with the bees of their arrows and brought about what bees usually do not bring about.

Sometimes we see another kind of elaboration in the poetry of Samuel han-Nagid (no. 24):

45. We filled them with our arrows [or swords], as if their bodies were quivers [or sheaths].

We can find similar expressions in connection with lances in the poetry of al-Mutanabbi. He mentions 'hostile horses, which we filled with our lance heads' (no. 188: 7,8) or 'bodies of horses which are the watering places of the lances' (no. 212: 41) or 'fox-holes in the breasts of the warriors, made by the lances' (no. 229: 22).

Since we only have twenty minutes at our disposal, we cannot go into the third subject, i.e., descriptions of the defeat of the enemy, which is of course of great importance within both Arabic and Hebrew Andalusian poems. It is not only the description of burning towns and fortresses and the blood which is of interest, but it is also the comparison of the burned citadel or town with a desperate widow. This personification can often provoke fictitious dialogues. There are also fictitious dialogues with the enemy who was so haughty, and who is now reduced to a
humiliating position. All of these features, plus various other ones, can be found in al-Mutanabbi's poetry as well as Samuel han-Nagid's poetry.

Looking at the structure of war descriptions and the way in which the various topics are handled is both relevant to Arabic and Hebrew Andalusian poetry and even perhaps for Persian and Turkish literature which is known to have been influenced at times by the Arabic descriptonal genres. Hitherto studies about war poetry have often been devoted to the basically political circumstances referred to in the poems, for example, the study by al-Mahasini ('On war poetry in Arabic literature')28. In contrast, my contribution to this subject - like those of Israel Levin and Angel Sáenz Badillos earlier -is intended to be an analysis of the succession of themes in Arabic and Hebrew war poetry, and has attempted to show which Arabic elements, both from Bedouin tradition as well as the later Islamic tradition of laudatory poetry, have entered Samuel han-Nagid 's shire ham-milhamah28.
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Notes:

1) Haim [Jefiel] Schirmann, 'Samuel Hannagid, the Man, the Soldier, the Politician', *Jewish Social Studies* 13, 99-126.
2) Israel Levin, 'Shire ha-Milhamah shel Shemu'el han-Magid', *Sifrut* 1, 2 (1968), 343-367.
5) Id. pp. 76-77, 627.
6) Id. pp. 484-497.
11) The years are mentioned according to the Muslim, Christian and Jewish era. Poems quoted from Samuel han-Nagid's *Diwan* are according to Dov Yarden's edition (Jerusalem 5726/1966).
26) part of this is dealt with in my dissertation; Arie Schippers, *Arabic Tradition & Hebrew innovation. Hebrew Themes in Hebrew Andalusian Poetry*, University of Amsterdam 1988, pp. 257-290.