

Reading Five

The history of Arab (5)

The history and legends of the pagan Arabs

Muslims include the whole period of Arabian history from the earliest times down to the establishment of Islam in the term *al-Jahiliyya*, which was used by Muhammad in four passages of the Koran and is generally translated 'the state of ignorance' or simply 'the Ignorance.' Goldziher, however, has shown conclusively that the meaning attached to *jahl* (whence *Jahiliyya* is derived) by the Pre-Islamic poets is not so much 'ignorance' as 'wildness,' 'savagery,' and that its true antithesis is not '*ilm* (knowledge), but rather *hilm*, which denotes¹ the moral reasonableness of a civilised man. "When Muslims say that Islam put an end to the manners and customs of the *Jahiliyya*, they have in view those barbarous practices, that savage temper, by which Arabian heathendom is distinguished² from Islam and by the abolition of which Muhammad sought to work a moral reformation in his countrymen: the haughty spirit of the *Jahiliyya* (*hamiyyatu 'I-Jahiliyya*), the tribal pride and the endless tribal feuds, the cult of revenge, the implacability and all the other pagan characteristics which Islam was destined to overcome.

Sources of information concerning the Jahiliyya

Our sources of information regarding this period may be classified as follows:

(1) *Poems and fragments of verse*: which though not written down at the time were preserved by oral tradition and committed to writing, for the most part, two or three hundred years afterwards. The importance of this, virtually the sole contemporary record of Pre-Islamic history, is recognized in the well-known³ saying, "Poetry is the public register of the Arabs (*alshi'ru diwanu 'I-'Arab*); thereby genealogies are kept in mind and famous actions are made familiar."

(2) *Proverbs*: These are of less value, as they seldom explain themselves, while the commentary attached to them is the work of scholars bent on explaining them at all costs, though in many cases their true meaning could only be conjectured and the circumstances of their origin had been entirely⁴ forgotten. Although this very pardonable excess of zeal, we could ill afford to lose the celebrated collections of Mufaddal b. Salama (t. circa 900 A.D.) and Mayda'ni (t. 1124 A.D.), which contain so much curious information throwing light on every aspect of Pre-Islamic life.

(3) *Traditions and legends*: Since the art of writing was neither understood nor practised by the heathen Arabs in general, it was impossible that Prose, as a literary form, should exist among them. The germ of Arabic Prose, however, may be traced back to the

¹ means; indicates

² known; recognized

³ famous; celebrated

⁴ completely; totally

Jahiliyya. Besides the proverb (*mathal*) and the oration (*khutab*) we find elements of history and romance in the prose narratives used by the rhapsodists to introduce and set forth plainly⁵ the matter of their songs, and in the legends which recounted the glorious deeds⁶ of tribes and individuals.

The Book of songs

The Kitabu l-aghani (the book of songs) by Abu 'l-Faraj of Isfahan (t 967 A.D.), an invaluable compilation based on the researches of the great Humanists as they have been well named by Sir Charles Lyall, of the second and third centuries after the Hijra. The original writings of these early critics and scholars have perished almost without exception, and beyond the copious citations in the *Aghani* we possess hardly any specimens⁷ of their work. The *Book of Songs*," says Ibn Khaldun, is the Register of the Arabs. It comprises all that they had achieved in the past of excellence in every kind of poetry, history, music, et cetera. So far as I am aware, no other book can be put on a level with it in this respect. It is the final resource of the student of belles-letters⁸, and leaves him nothing further⁹ to desire."

⁵ clearly; obviously

⁶ actions; activities; behavior

⁷ examples

⁸ writings about subjects related to literature

⁹ more; to a greater degree

Reading Six

Pre-Islamic poetry, manners and religion (1)

When there appeared a poet in a family of the Arabs, the other tribes round about would gather together to that family and wish them joy of their good luck.

Feasts would be got ready, the women of the tribe would join together in bans, playing upon lutes, as they were wont to do at bridals, and the men and boys would congratulate one another; for a poet was a defence to the honor of them all, a weapon to ward off insult from their good name and a means of perpetuating their glorious deeds and of establishing their fame for ever. And they used not to wish one another joy but for three things - the birth of a boy, the coming to light of a poet, and the foaling of a noble mare.

As far as extant literature is concerned and at this time there was only a spoken literature, which was preserved by oral tradition, and first committed to writing long afterwards the *Jahiliyya* or Pre-islamic Age covers scarcely¹⁰ more than a century, from about 500 A.D. .When the oldest poems of which we have any record were composed, to the year of Muhammads flight to Medina (622 A.D.), which is the starting-point of a new era in Arabian history. The influence of these hundred and twenty years was great and lasting. They saw the rise and incipient¹¹ decline of a poetry which most Arabic-speaking Moslems have always regarded as a model of unapproachable excellence; a poetry rooted in the life of the people, that insensibly moulded¹² their minds and fixed their character and made them morally and spiritually a nation long before Muhammad welded¹³ the various¹⁴ conflicting groups into a single organism, animated, for some time at least, by a common purpose. In those days, poetry was no luxury for the cultured few, but the sole¹⁵ medium of literary expression. Every tribe had its poets, who freely uttered¹⁶ what they felt and thought.

Their unwritten words "flew across" the desert faster than arrows," and came home to the hearts and bosoms of all who heard them. Thus, in the midst of outward strife¹⁷ and disintegration a unifying principle was at work. Poetry gave life and currency to an ideal of Arabian virtue (*muruwwa*) which, though based on tribal community of blood and insisting that only ties of blood were sacred, nevertheless became an invisible bond between different clans¹⁸, and formed, whether consciously or not, the basis of a national community of sentiment.

¹⁰hardly; almost not

¹¹beginning

¹²shaped; formed; made

¹³united; joined

¹⁴different; several

¹⁵only

¹⁶said; expressed

¹⁷trouble between two or more people or tribes; conflict

¹⁸tribes; races; families

Reading Seven

Pre-ISLAMIC POETRY (2)

Origins of Arabian poetry

By the ancient Arabs the poet (*sha'ri*, plural, *shu'ra*), as his name shows, was a person gifted with supernatural knowledge, a wizard¹⁹ in league with spirits (*jinn*) or satans (*shayatin*) and dependent on them for the magical powers which he displayed. This view of his personality, as well as the influential position which he occupied, are curiously indicated²⁰ by the story of a certain youth who was refused the hand of his beloved on the ground that he was neither a poet nor a soothsayer nor a water-diviner. The idea of poetry as an art was developed afterwards; the pagan *shair* is the oracle of his tribe, their guide in peace and their champion in war. It was to him they turned for counsel when they sought²¹ new pastures, only at his word would they pitch or strike their houses of hair,' and when the tired and thirsty wanderers found a well and drank of its water and washed themselves, led by him they may have raised their voices together and sung.

Satire

Besides fountain-songs, war-songs, and hymns to idols, other kinds of poetry must have existed in the earliest times- e.g., the love-song and the dirge. The powers of the *sh`air*, however, were chiefly²² exhibited in Satire (*hija*), which in the oldest known form introduces²³ and accompanies the tribal feud, and is an element of war just as important as the actual fighting. The menaces which he hurled against the foe were believed to be inevitably fatal. His rhymes, often compared to arrows, had all the effect of a solemn curse spoken by a divinely inspired prophet or priest, and their pronunciation was attended with peculiar ceremonies of a symbolic character, such as anointing the hair on one side of the head, letting the mantle hang down loosely, and wearing only one sandal.

Saj`

Thus it may be taken for certain that the oldest form of poetical speech in Arabia was rhyme without metre (*Saj'*), or, as we should say, 'rhymed prose,' although the fact of Muhammad's adversaries²⁴ calling him a poet because he used it in the Koran shows the light in which it was regarded even after the invention and elaboration of metre. Later on, as we shall see, *Saj'* became a merely rhetorical ornament, the distinguishing mark of all eloquence²⁵ whether spoken or written, but originally it had a deeper, almost religious,

¹⁹ a man who has magic power; magician

²⁰ showed; demonstrated

²¹ looked for; searched out; tried to find

²² mainly; largely; mostly

²³ begins; starts

²⁴ enemies; opponents; foes

²⁵ الفصاحة

significance as the special form adopted by poets, soothsayers, and the like in their supernatural revelations and for conveying to the vulgar every kind of mysterious and esoteric lore.

Rajaz

Out of *Saj'* was evolved the most ancient of the Arabian metres, which is known by the name of *Rajaz*, and it is a peculiarity of *Raj'az*, marking its affinity²⁶ to *Saj'*, that all the lines rhyme with each other, whereas in the more artificial metres only the opening verse is doubly rhymed.

A further characteristic of *Rajaz* is that it should be uttered extempore²⁷, a few verses at a time—commonly verses expressing some personal feeling, emotion, or experience, like those of the aged warrior Durayd b. Zayd b. Nahd when he lay dying :-

"The house of death is builded for Durayd to-day.

Could Time be worn out, sure had I worn Time away.

No single foe but I had faced and brought to bay.

The spoils I gathered in, how excellent were they!

The women that I loved. How fine was their array!"

Other meters

Here would have been the proper place to give an account of the principal Arabian meters - The 'perfect' (*kamil*), the 'ample' (*wafir*), the 'Long' (*Tawil*), the 'Wide' (*Basit*), the 'Light' (*Khafif*), and several more.

All the metres are quantitative, as in Greek and Latin. Their names and laws were unknown to the Pre-islamic bards: the rules of prosody²⁸ were first deduced from the ancient poems and systematised by the grammarian, Khalil b. Ahmad (t 791 A.D.), to whom the idea is said to have occurred as he watched a coppersmith beating time on the anvil with his hammer.

²⁶ a close similarity or relationship

²⁷ mainly, principally

²⁸ علم العروض

Reading Eight

Pre-ISLAMIC POETRY (3)

The oldest extant poems

Between these highly developed productions and the rude doggerel of *saj`or rajaz* there lies an interval, the length of which it is impossible even to conjecture.

The first poets are already consummate masters of the craft. "The number and complexity of the measures which they use, their established laws of quantity and rhyme, and the uniform manner in which they introduce the subject of their poems, **notwithstanding** the distance which often separated one composer from another, all point to a long previous study and cultivation of the art of expression and the capacities of their language, a study of which no record now remains."

It is not improbable that the dawn²⁹ of the Golden Age of Arabian Poetry coincided with³⁰ the first decade of the sixth century after Christ. About that time the War of Basus, the chronicle of which has preserved a considerable amount of contemporary verse, was in full blaze; and the first Arabian ode was composed, according to tradition, by Muhallil b. Rabi`a the Taghlibite on the death of his brother, the chieftain Kulayb, which caused war to break out between Bakr and Taghlib. At any rate³¹, during the next hundred years in almost every part of the peninsula we meet with a brilliant succession of singers, all using the same poetical dialect and strictly³² adhering to the same rules of composition. The fashion which they set maintained³³ itself virtually unaltered³⁴ down to the end of the Umayyad period (750 A.D.), and though challenged by some daring spirits under the 'Abbasid Caliphate, speedily reached its supremacy³⁵, which at the present day is almost as absolute as ever.

This fashion centres in the *Qasida*, or Ode, the only form, or rather the only finished type of poetry that existed in what, for want of a better word, may be called the classical period of Arabic literature.

The qasida

The verses (*abyat*, singular *bayt*) of which it is built vary in number, but are seldom less than twenty-five or more than a hundred and the arrangement of the rhymes is such that, while the two halves of the first verse rhyme together, the same rhyme is repeated once in the second, third, and every following verse to the end of the poem. Blank-verse³⁶ is alien³⁷ to the Arabs who regard rhyme not as a pleasing ornament or a troublesome bondage," but as a vital³⁸ organ of poetry.

²⁹the birth of; the beginning of

³⁰happened at the same time with

³¹anyhow; anyway; however

³²exactly; completely

³³d; kept; saved; preserved

³⁴not having changed; unchanged

³⁵preference

³⁶free verse: الشعر الحر

³⁷not familiar; strange

³⁸extremely important; necessary

With respect to metre, the poet may' choose any except *Rajaz*; which is deemed beneath the dignity of the Ode, but his liberty does not extend either to the choice of subjects or to the method of handling them: on the contrary, the course of his ideas is determined by rigid conventions which he durst not overstep.

Ibn qutayba's account of the contents and divisions of the ode

"I have heard," says Ibn Qutayba, "from a man of learning that the composer of Odes began by mentioning the deserted dwelling. Places and the relics and traces of habitation. Then he wept and complained and addressed the desolate encampment³⁹, and begged⁴⁰ his companion to make a halt, in order that he might have occasion to speak of those who had once lived there and afterwards departed⁴¹; for the dwellers in tents⁴² were different from townsmen or villagers in respect of coming and going, because they moved from one water-spring to another, seeking pasture and searching out the places where rain had fallen. Then to this he linked the erotic prelude (*nasib*), and bewailed the violence of his love and the anguish of separation from his mistress and the extremity of his passion and desire, so as to win the hearts of his hearers and divert their eyes towards him and invite their ears to listen to him, since the song of love touches men's souls and takes hold of their hearts, God having put it in the constitution of His creatures to love dalliance and the society of women, in such wise that we find very few but are attached thereto by some tie or have some share therein, whether lawful or unpermitted, Now, when the poet had assured himself of an attentive hearing, he set forth his claim: thus⁴³ he went on⁴⁴ to complain of fatigue and want of sleep and travelling by night and of the noonday⁴⁵ heat, and how his camel had been reduced to leanness. And when, after representing all the discomfort⁴⁶ and danger of his journey, he knew that he had fully justified⁴⁷ his hope and expectation of receiving his due meed from the person to whom the poem was addressed, he entered upon the panegyric (*madih*), and incited him to reward, and kindled his generosity by exalting him above his peers⁴⁸ and pronouncing the greatest dignity, in comparison with his, to be little."

³⁹

الأطلال و الدمن

⁴⁰ asked; requested; demanded

⁴¹ left; went away

⁴² the persons who live in tents

⁴³ therefore; so; as a result

⁴⁴ continued; kept on

³

منتصف النهار

⁴⁶ bad feeling; slight pain

⁴⁷ accepteded

⁴⁸ the persons who are equal with him

