II

THE SOCIOCULTURAL SETTING

In describing ancient Arabic poetry, Sir Charles James Lyall wrote:

> The form and spirit of ancient Arabian poetry are very distinct, though it is not easy to bring it within the classes known to European criticism. It is not epic, nor even narrative, except in so far as the description of incident serves to heighten the picture of character. Still less is it dramatic, since the only person and measure known to the speaker are himself and his own ideal. . . . The Arabian ode sets forth before us a series of pictures, drawn with confident skill and first-hand knowledge, of the life its maker lived, of the objects among which he moved, of his horse, his camel, the wild creatures of the wilderness, and of the landscape in the midst of which his life and theirs was set, but all, however loosely they seem to be bound together, are subordinate to one dominant idea, which is the poet's unfolding of himself, his admirations and his hates, his prowess and the freedom of his spirit. . . . No poetry better fulfils Mr. Matthew Arnold's definition of "a criticism of life"; no race has more completely succeeded in drawing itself for all time, in its grandeur and its limitations, its best and its worst. It is in this sense that the poetry of the Pagan Arabs is most truly their history. In it the men of old live their very life, and have found for themselves an expression, the power and faithfulness of which those who understand it best are least able to exaggerate. . . . [W]hat a poet said in his rhymes he had experienced himself; what commended him to his hearers, what commends him to us, is the accuracy and truth with which he drew for them that which he and they knew, and joined their mind and life of every day to the choicest words and noblest form of utterance which their speech permitted. (1885:xviii–xix)

This description of classical Arabic poetry can be applied with equal validity to Nabaṭi poetry. Like the poetry of ancient Arabia, the vernacular

poetry of premodern Arabia is a register of social events and a codification of the moral principles and cultural values that made life in the desiccated Arabian wastes, though harsh and weary, meaningful and worthy of pursuit. Nabaṭi poetry is an articulation of the collective sentiment and a cognitive model for the organization of sociocultural realities. When the Nabaṭi poet responds to a given event, whether it is a collective issue or a personal affair, his main concern is not merely to record its concrete manifestation but also, perhaps more importantly, to draw from it general principles which he can relate to the traditional value system of his society. The poet aims at presenting his audience with an emotionally and intellectually satisfying arrangement of the world around them as they traditionally perceive it.

The inner structure and thematic coherence of a Nabaṭi poem are determined by how intelligibly it presents to the audience their physical and social universe. Nabaṭi poetry constantly attempts to order and give meaning to this universe and to bring its various components into harmony with one another. Cognitive and affective bonds are established between these components with similes, images, and metaphors. Appropriate comparisons, apt descriptions, perceptive characterizations, and astute observations are the aesthetic ingredients of an outstanding Nabaṭi poem; these characterizations and observations are blended with moral precepts and maxims of conduct drawn from the life experiences of the poets.

Although it is realistic in outlook and deeply rooted in the life of the people, Nabaṭi poetry is conventional in form and content because it is the product of a traditional society, a society in which the forces of conformity are strong. It is a reflection of a conventional world view and a register of recurring events. Its stock motifs and images are drawn from the social and physical surroundings of those who compose it. In their compositions, Nabaṭi poets try to present their universe using poetic devices which, like any other cultural product of a traditional society, are highly conventionalized. Conformity to convention establishes a continuity between poetry and the cultural tradition of the audience. Moreover, the poet can thus assume a general understanding on the part of his audience based on their full grasp of the cultural and poetic context in which he operates. As his poem unfolds, the poet takes his audience into a poetic ambience created by the connotations and associations of his words and the images and nuances of his verses. By its conventionality and thematic interrelatedness with other poems, each poem reflects back to the members of the audience the whole poetic tradition. Since this poetic tradition mirrors their sociocultural realities, poetic recitation enables the poet and his listeners to come to grips with these realities and gain moral strength to cope with them. The delivery of a poem is in

a sense a ritual enactment; with each performance the participants—poet and audience—strengthen their ties with their society and find further confirmation of its fundamental values.

Like the classical poetry of ancient Arabia, Nabaṭi poetry is neither epic nor legendary, but topical and lyrical and chiefly composed in response to happenings in the real world. In order to appreciate its characteristics, one must be intimately acquainted with the sociocultural realities of premodern Arabia, so as to acquire the relevant orientation and develop the appropriate aesthetic framework that enable the native audience of a Nabaṭi poet to enjoy his composition and respond to its message.

Settlers and Nomads

Subsistence patterns and corresponding ecological niches divide the inhabitants of Arabia into two prototypes: settlers and nomads. The settlers, for the most part, till the land, cultivating mainly cereal grains and palm trees. Agricultural settlements are scattered alongside major wadis. The current of a wadi carries with it fertile soil which is deposited on the surface of its banks, while the water seeps through the porous bed of the wadi to collect below on the subsurface rock or clay. Farmers dig deep wells from which they draw irrigation water using a technique called *sawānī*. This technique involves the use of a waterwheel which is placed on top of the well and held there with wooden props and beams. A long rope around the wheel is joined at one end to a large water bucket and at the other end to the saddle of a harnessed camel whose pulling power turns the wheel, bringing up the buckets of water. The arid Arabian climate, however, limits the practice of agriculture severely. Most of the people are nomads who live in portable tents and constantly roam the desert in search of pasture for their camel herds.

Until the recent establishment of the modern Arabian state and the discovery of oil, life in Arabia was a never-ending struggle for bare subsistence. Food and water were permanently scarce and there was a constant fear of war and famine. The subsistence patterns and yearly activities of the entire population were dependent in one way or another on the extreme fluctuations in rainfall, which was never sufficient. A succession of drought years is dreaded by both pastoralists and cultivators. If for one year Allah does not send the dark, water-laden clouds to pour down His mercy on His anguished people, the annual and perennial plants dry up and the water sinks deeper and deeper in the wells. The livestock suffer, the crops wither, and the people are hard hit.

The scarcity of vital resources and the dire lack of material wealth fostered intense intergroup competition over the available means of

subsistence and precluded the establishment of a viable and enduring central authority. Not long after the era of the Orthodox Caliphs, the center of power of Arab Muslim civilization shifted away from the Arabian Peninsula, and Arabia again suffered a disintegration of its political structure. Agricultural settlements became fortified hamlets and the nomads reverted to their pre-Islamic habits of raiding and plundering. Peace might reign for a short period when a capable amir or sheikh exerted his authority over the neighboring settlements and forced the nomadic tribes to submit to him. He would impose order and coerce his subjects into paying him taxes and sending him levies as tokens of submission. Petty sheikhdoms and small emirates similar to the pre-Islamic Arab kingdoms thus sprang up at different times in various parts of Arabia. Periods of peace, however, were sporadic and of short duration. Each of the many nomadic tribes and each of the many dispersed hamlets and ephemeral principalities has its own story to tell—usually a labyrinthine tale of internecine conflicts and perpetual feuds.

On the scale of social development, the settlers occupy a slightly higher position than the nomads. Their social organization is a bit more complex, with diverse and specialized occupations. Settled life allows for conveniences and amenities that are not available in the desert. Nomadic life is generally harsher and much more difficult, yet the nomad is proud of his mobility and freedom. He is contemptuous of the settlers who, instead of foraging in the open desert and living by the sword, are bound to their mud houses, toiling continually, like slaves. The martial spirit of the nomad always yearns for raid and booty. In contrast, the settlers long for peace and order so that they can till their land and reap their crops. The amir of every settlement tries his hardest to restrain his subjects from engaging in such acts of aggression as may provide an excuse for others to attack the settlement, destroy its crops, and interrupt its agricultural and commercial activities.

This difference between settlers and nomads has been attributed to the difference in their subsistence patterns. John Bagot Glubb writes:

> The worldly wealth of the nomads consisted of mobile flocks of animals, that of the cultivators of lands, houses and gardens. A nomad, if threatened by a superior enemy, could elude attack by moving hastily away, driving his flocks with him. Indeed, as long as there was still open desert in front of him, he could escape from his persecutors by seeking entirely new pastures, beyond the reach of his adversaries. The cultivator, however, must needs stand his ground and fight it out. If he fled, he became a penniless refugee, abandoning his land and his buildings to the conqueror. War, therefore, to the nomad was never the same grim struggle for survival

which it represented to the farmer. Indeed to the bedouin, war sometimes seemed little more than a sport, which provided the colour and excitement needed to counteract the monotony of the pastoral life. . . . (1960:30–31)

The following anecdote and poem by Bdāḥ al-ʿIngrī illustrate some aspects of the settler-nomad relationship and show their attitudes toward each other. The nomads have a low opinion of townsmen, thinking them to be misers and cowards, traits which are anathema to a nomad. The hero in the following episode, however, is a villager who surpasses the nomads in gallantry and proves to them that courage is not the monopoly of nomads. Although the incident celebrated took place in the last century, the poem and the narrative associated with it are still very popular in Arabia. Different versions of poem and narrative appear in Ibn Khamīs (1958:146–150, 1978:127–128), Ibn Raddās (n.d.–1976:I, 316–318), and al-Mārik (1963–1965:III, 95–102).

One summer, a certain tribe camped near Tharmida, a principal village in the district of al-Washim in Najd, traditionally governed by the al-ʿIngrī family. Bdāḥ al-ʿIngrī, the son of the then amir, would go to visit the sheikh of the encamped tribe almost daily. Bdāḥ would arm himself and ride his horse, hoping to impress the bedouin ladies, whose hearts were easily won by shows of gallantry. He especially had his eye on the daughter of the sheikh, but she was not at all impressed by him, and whenever he was pointed out to her by her lady friends, she would only say *"xayyal al-ǵrā zēn taṣfīh"* ("the horse-rider from the village is good only for a parade"). Upon hearing what the daughter of the sheikh had to say about him, Bdāḥ wished in his heart that raiders would attack the camp so that he could prove his worth to the maiden. As luck would have it, the camp was surprised one morning by a raiding party from the al-Fḍūl tribe, who stole the herds of the camp after killing several men. Bdāḥ was present in the camp when the raiders launched their surprise attack, but he did not participate in the first round of fighting. He sat on his horse atop a hill watching the action. Only when it became clear that the men of the camp were unable to defend their herds did he spur his mare in hot pursuit of the attackers, who had by now rounded up the herds and driven them off. After knocking down a few of their number, Bdāḥ forced the raiders to abandon the plundered herds and seek safety in flight. He did not capture the mares of the men he had killed, but took only their reins as proof of his deed. The fighting men of the camp noticed that suddenly the battle had turned very much in their favor, but in the confusion of battle they were unable to determine exactly what had happened. They trickled back to the sheikh's tent to refresh themselves and review the situation. A short while later, Bdāḥ walked into the tent,

threw down the reins of the horses, picked up the *ribābīh* (a one-stringed, fiddlelike instrument which hangs on the central pole of the tents of many sheikhs) and sang the poem that follows.

It is a custom among the nomads that when a poet begins to recite or sing the women of the tent stop whatever they are doing and lean against the curtain that separates their section from that of the men so that they may better hear the poem. When Bdāḥ was singing his poem, he knew well that the sheikh's daughter was listening to his words. In the poem he talks to her in an admonishing tone but, as he nears the end, he begins to speak to her the words of love. The bedouins do not allow such familiarity on the part of a man to a lady in public unless the man has performed a heroic act, as Bdāḥ has done. Bdāḥ begins his poem by pointing out to the maiden that he is no less valiant than a nomad, for he is a bold man who rides camels and horses and goes on raids. The maiden cannot ask for a more convincing proof of his valor than what he has just done to her enemies.

1 By God, how often have I raided, and returned from a raid. How often have I ridden a fleet mount.
2 Many a time have I climbed into the saddle! Many a time have I ridden in the late afternoon on my way to a raid!
3 Many a time have I handled the Indian sword! Many a time have I shared in the division of herds, herds plundered from men of tenacity!
4 Why then, oh lady with thick lashes, do you scorn me? You say the horseman from the village is good only for a parade!
5 Know that courage is not found among nomads only! It is equally divided among all noble men.
6 Whether nomads or villagers, God has granted them all stoutness of heart.
7 Remember the day al-Fḏūl attacked your camp! They slaughtered your people like butchers.
8 I fought till I broke my spear; then, I unsheathed my sharp sword. I repulsed the enemy. Horses fled with their heads lowered (in fright).
9 Now, pray tell me your true opinion [of me]! Declare the truth or else I will cry out!
10 I will cry like a bereaved mother, or a camel that has strayed from the herd and lost its calf.
11 You are the perfume of a sweet basil growing by the rain pool; wherever the wind blows, it carries your fragrance.
12 You are sweeter than peaches, pomegranates, figs, apples, and apricots from Basrah.
13 Your fair cheeks shine like polished scrolls in the right hand of a

scribe. Oh, the glances of your dark eyes are fatal to those who seek beauty.

14 You are slender-waisted and graceful, of supple figure, like a willow branch swayed by gentle breezes.

Despite their differences, however, nomads and settlers are not sharply demarcated and clearly bounded sociocultural units that can be easily isolated and separated from each other; rather, these two groups are interlinked at various levels of social and economic organization. The very economic specialization that divides the people of Arabia into cultivators and pastoralists brings them together in a symbiotic relationship which revolves around barter and exchange of goods and services. This relationship is formally renewed every summer when each nomadic tribe gathers around the tribal wells near an agricultural settlement, which is usually an ally of the tribe. The nomads take to the village market their clarified butter, dried milk patties, spun wool, and livestock to barter for grain, dates, salt, coffee, tea, sugar, tobacco, clothes, rope, and so forth. During this time nomads and settlers exchange information and renew their connections.

Furthermore, the settler-nomadic classification that is based on subsistence patterns is superimposed upon another which is based on kinship. The settlers and nomads are related to each other as members of various tribes. Members of every tribe, whether settled or nomadic, are presumably related to each other as *bini ʿamm* who are the descendants of an ancient male ancestor. This kinship puts members of the same tribe, settlers and nomads, under obligation to each other, and the durability of this relationship is maintained through marriage, trade, and political alliance.

In Arabia, settler and nomad are two complementary aspects of the same sociocultural system, although it is dominated by the nomadic outlook. The great majority of settled people can claim nomadic origin. The transformation from pastoralism to cultivation is a continuing process, although it takes place very slowly and in successive stages. Gradually, the settlers develop sedentary habits, which distinguish them from the nomads. They abandon their tribal customs and submit to civil and religious laws. Their tribal loyalties become supplemented by local allegiances. A settler is intensely proud of his tribal affiliation, yet at the same time he is aware of his membership in a local community all members of which are united politically. Nevertheless, the settlers never lose sight of their nomadic past. The nomadic world view persists among the settled people because they continue to live under the same characteristically precarious and turbulent climatic and political conditions.

The constraints and circumstances of settled life make it difficult for

the settlers to live up to the nomadic ideals of their brethren in the desert, but they continue to uphold these ideals. The nomadic outlook is more in harmony with and relevant to desert life, where its physical and political determinants are more immediate and their effects more ubiquitous. This outlook persists, nevertheless, among the settled people, who continue to entertain a sense of affiliation with the open desert and the egalitarian nomadic existence.

The conventional images and stock metaphors of Nabaṭi poetry are drawn mostly from the desert. Desert scenes and nomadic ideals serve as inspiration for the poet and as a source of fascination for the audience. To appeal to the aesthetic and moral sensibilities of his audience, a Nabaṭi poet will infuse his composition with strands and colors of desert life. Whether settled or nomad, the poet will most likely mention in his composition the migrating tribe, the departing lady, the deserted encampment, the desert journey, the camel, the horse, the rain, and the wild animals and aromatic plants of the desert. Boastful and panegyric compositions, which constitute the great bulk of Nabaṭi poetry, revolve around such nomadic values as noble birth, liberal hospitality, valor, gallantry, and forbearance.

The settlers' romantic and nostalgic view of nomadic life is reflected in the compositions of settled Nabaṭi poets, some of whom dedicated the major share of their poetry to describing the ways of the nomads and their patterns of migration. The best representative of this school is ʿAbdallah al-Ḥmūd Ibn Sbayyil, whose work is worth noting here.

Ibn Sbayyil died in 1938, at over eighty years of age. His *dīwān* (collection of poetry) was first published in 1952 by Kh. al-Faraj with excellent commentaries. Al-Faraj wrote, "The poetry of Ibn Sbayyil is a register of bedouin life. It contains valuable information concerning the conditions of the nomads in peace and war, their manners and customs and patterns of migration." He went on to say of Ibn Sbayyil's poetry: "Its form is polished, its depictions are realistic and accurate, and its expressions are succinct and harmonious. Therefore, he surpassed many of the ancient and modern [Nabaṭi] poets and his fame spread throughout the desert and the sown" (1952:I, 195).

Ibn Sbayyil was the amir of Nifi, a small village in upper Najd which was also the summer campground of ʿTēbih, a tribe famous for its gallant men and beautiful women. The presence in the village market of throngs of fully armed men and gaily dressed women of ʿTēbih added color and excitement to the otherwise dreary life of the settled folk in Nifi. It was not unusual for the men of the settlement to go out to the nearby bedouin camp to talk to the men of the tribe and to catch glimpses of the bedouin damsels who were freer and more open than the settled women in their interaction with men. Ibn Sbayyil would spend most of the summer in

the tents of the desert chiefs and heroes, witnessing their chivalry and lavish hospitality and listening to them relate stories of their forays and bold adventures. This nomadic setting, with all its beauty and romance, inspired Ibn Sbayyil. His poetry is an expression of his fascination with the nomads and their way of life. By the end of the summer, the nomads would pack up and move into the interior of the desert, leaving Ibn Sbayyil behind, like a bird with clipped wings, to lament their departure and to pine for their return in the coming summer.

Al-Faraj rightly points out that Ibn Sbayyil was nomadic in sentiment and outlook, even though he was a settler (ibid., I:194). The treatment of nomadic life in his poetry is generally interwoven with the theme of chaste and unfulfilled love. The object of his love is a beautiful bedouin lass who, though she talks to him sweetly, shuns his advances. In addition to his amorous poems, Ibn Sbayyil exchanged poetic correspondence with some bedouin friends—Ḏᶜār Ibn Mišārī Ibn Rbēᶜān, the chief of ᶜTēbih, and Fēḥān Ibn Zirībān, a famous warrior from the tribe of Mṭēr, among others.

In the following poem, Ibn Sbayyil traces the cycle of nomadic migration. By the end of the summer and the beginning of the rainy season, the nomads become restless and begin preparations to leave their summer camp and move into the interior of the desert. For Ibn Sbayyil, this is the worst time of the year. Therefore, he curses it and prays Allah to strike it with drought. After they settle all their business accounts with the settlers, the nomads disperse into the desert and wander in small groups in search of pasture for their camel herds. Each group goes in a different direction and they lose touch with one another. In their eagerness to reach fresh pasture before it is trodden and consumed by the herds of other tribesmen, the nomads may spend days on the march without pitching camp. In his poem, Ibn Sbayyil does not dwell on this part of the nomadic cycle, but quickly turns to his favorite season, the time when the nomads return to the settled country. He describes how they converge on the water wells, driving away those weaker nomads who raise only sheep. They throng the village market and go to visit old friends in the settlement. At the end of three months, the star Canopus appears in the east at dawn, ushering in the beginning of the rainy season. Riders who had been sent out earlier to scout the desert for pasture come back to tell their tribesmen where the rain has fallen and where herbage is most abundant. This is also the time of the date harvest, so the nomads buy their supply of dates and leave for the interior. After all the hustle and bustle, their camp is now deserted, with naught but wolves howling.

1 May God strike with drought the bustling final days of summer,
when the nomads pry loose the last payment for their butter.

2 This is the time when people in love go different ways, each taking a separate road, following the camel herds.
3 If you should inquire about the whereabouts of anyone, no one could give you an answer. Even camel riders traveling desert roads could not give you a sound report.
4 The tribal chiefs are restless like stud camels in the rutting season, constantly foraging in the desert. A whole week passes in travel, no time to pitch a tent.
5 Each strives to reach the pasture before the other herds arrive and trample it; there they will let graze their camels heavy with sweet milk.
6 Blessed are the summer days, when the nomads crave water, when clouds disappear from the skies and moisture sinks deeper in the ground,
7 When the hot wind begins to blow and the green stalks wither, when milk no longer allays the thirst of the herders.
8 Then the nomads come back to their summer camps, their camel herds covering the hills. The loaded camels are couched, and the pitched tents
9 Are lined up like a chain of black hills. The sheep herders yield up the water wells.
10 The nomads fill the vast plain around the wells of fresh cool water.
11 Some head for the village market to buy and sell; others go to visit old friends.
12 They remain by the wells for ninety days and there is no mention of moving camp.
13 But the cool winds of the rainy season begin to blow and Canopus appears in the east shortly before the morning twilight.
14 And scouts come from the east riding fast camels; they come at the time of the date harvest.
15 Tribesmen swarm in the afternoon market, having made up their minds to move the next day.
16 The next morning the ladies roll up the tents, and the camel herds are watered before they are driven off.
17 The herds spread out in the countryside on their way to a pasture which the scouts have recommended.
18 The camp is left desolate; it has reverted to wilderness, with wolves howling about.
19 I am sad to see the friendly neighbors leave; they have carried my heart off with them.
20 They ride their swift mares. With their spears they have slain many a bold adversary among the nomads.

21 With the season of rain they return to the desert; they follow their leader wherever he takes them.
22 Hardly has this man returned from a raid, when they are off raiding again. Part of the booty they sell and part they brand and add to their herds.
23 After they have bought all they need, without regret they quit the settled country. They go wherever the rain falls.

Nomadic Migration

The nomads are organized into tribes; each tribe has its own territory (*dīrih*) with water wells and pasture areas. The tribe is divided into clans, and every clan has its own sheikh, but these sheikhs are subordinates who answer to the paramount sheikh of the whole tribe. The various clans of the tribe disperse themselves into scattered camps which fluctuate in size according to the time of year. The yearly cycle of the nomadic camp begins when Canopus appears in the east at dawn in September. This is the beginning of the rainy season (*al-wasim*) and the time of the *najᶜih* (when the nomads begin to trickle back to the heart of the desert). Each tribe breaks up its summer camp and splits up into small groups that are continually separating and regrouping as they forage in their tribal territory. Because of the scantness of herbage, these groups are never large and they never linger in one spot for more than a week or ten days.

The disappearance (*al-ćannih*) of the Pleiades (*aṯ-ṯrayyā*) from the night skies signals the beginning of the summer. The hot wind (*al-hēf*) begins to blow, the herbage withers, and the natural water reservoirs dry up. This is the time of *ṭaggt al-ᶜūd* (when the twigs are so dry they crack). The desert becomes gray (*šhaba*) and ash-colored (*misinyih*) with naught but dust (*ġbār*), whirlwinds (*ᶜajāj*), and dazzling mirages (*lāl*). Now the bedouins cannot quench their thirst by drinking camel's milk but must have water every day, and their camels must have it every third day. During this time, the tribes converge around their tribal wells, which are usually located in a low basin (*jaww*) near an agricultural settlement. This summer camp is called *giṭīn, migṭān*. The symbiotic relationship of economic exchange (*msābilih*) between nomads and settlers is reenacted every year at this time.

The moving of camp and the choice of camping ground is decided by the sheikh, who consults with the men of the tribe after receiving the reports of the scouts (*ᶜsūs*) whom he sends to examine the country for pasture, water, and enemies. When the tribe decides to move to new grazing areas, the women strike the tents, roll them up, and load them,

along with furniture and provisions, on pack camels (*zamil*). The moving camp is led by the *salaf,* a reconnoitering detachment of daring and experienced warriors who ride ahead of the main party in order to flush out any enemies or raiders who might try to lead away the migrating camel herds. These warriors ride their camel mounts and lead their mares, leaping on them in case of alarm. They carry their long lances on their shoulders and hang their swords and matchlocks behind them on the saddle. The *salaf* is followed by the pack camels and the rest of the tribe. The camel herds are behind, moving at a leisurely pace so they can graze on the march. The moving of one camp is described by Doughty as follows.

> Somewhat more brave is the desert march of the Moahîb than the ráhla of the Fejîr; for these sheykhly housewives ride gaily mounted in saddle-frames *múksir,* with some caparisons of coloured carpets. The creaking múksirs are basket-frames of withy rods, firmly knit and compacted with steeped camel neck-sinews, (which dry, are of an ivory whiteness and hardness,) and with thongs of raw leather. The most are square crates, in which a wife may sit cross-legged, and her young children with her; and overhead is a bowed cross-rod or two, upon which she may cast her mantle, for a tilt, to house them in from the flaming sun. Another litter they have in these parts, and it is perhaps of the Arabian antiquity, for such I have seen in a ráhla of nomads in the little Algerian *Sáhara.* That is a long fantastic wicker frame, like nothing so much as a wind-mill sail, laid overthwart the camel's chine; into this straight cage the maiden creeps, and the swagging creaky arms of her litter, bouncing against tree and cliff, and thrusting upon nigh riders in the ráhla, make it a very uneasy carriage. I have asked how, being in their minds, they could use such faulty furnitures. 'For ornament, Khalîl! and the young women would ride gallantly.' The hareem hang crimson shreds about their litter-frames, and upon the saddle-tree they put a housing with long fluttering tails of leather. So their women's riding makes a brave show, in the fantasy of the Aarab, in their wandering processions. The men pass forth riding, with only their arms, upon the stalking thelûls. In the heat, they mostly march in silence, to speak were to open the mouth to the droughty flaming air which brings thirst: they ride breathing through their kerchiefs, *thorrîb,* of which a lap is drawn up under the girdle of the head (*meyhsub,* or *maasub, ʿagâl*), so that of such a masked visage little more is seen than the two robber-like black eyes. (1921:I, 483–484)

Bedouin women and children are tucked in their shady litters, which

are mounted on strong male camels. The litters are covered with gazelle skins, colored trappings, and crests of ostrich plumes. They are also studded with shells and mirrors of various shapes and colors which glitter in the distance as the camels rock the litters. Such a tribal procession is described in a famous poem by Rākān Ibn Hiṯlēn, which is worth translating here. The poem is published in al-Ḥātam (1968:II, 198), al-Kamālī (1964:367–360), and al-Firdaws (n.d.:175–176). For the life and poetry of Rākān, see al-Firdaws (ibid., 158–190).

Rākān Ibn Falāḥ Ibn Hiṯlēn (d. 1893) was the paramount chief of al-ʿIjmān tribe. The Ottoman authorities, after occupying the Eastern Province of Arabia in 1870, captured Rākān by a ruse, put him in chains, and sent him to Turkey, where he spent seven years in prison. He was released and sent back home after distinguishing himself in the war between Turkey and Russia.

While in prison, Rākān composed many poems lamenting his fate and expressing his longing for his people and the desert, as in the following poem which is addressed to his friend Saʿūd Ibn Fayṣal Ibn Tirkī al-Saʿūd, nicknamed Abu Halā ("the father of welcome") because of his graciousness and princely hospitality. In the poem, Rākān names several places, all of which are part of his tribal territory. Then he goes on to describe the moving of camp. The second half of the poem describes an imaginary battle between the migrating tribe and some raiders who try to plunder the moving herds. As the migrating tribe decides to pitch camp in the late afternoon, a group of raiders intercepts the moving herds and tries to drive them off. As depicted in lines 18–19, the raiders divide themselves into two groups, one driving off the herds at a fast trot, and the other hiding as *čimīn* to ambush the tribesmen trying to rescue the camels. The raiders hope to elude the rescuers and hide in the darkness of night. The sentinel of the camping tribe perceives the raiders driving off the herds and shouts to his fellows, who quickly grasp their weapons, unfetter their horses, and ride off after the enemy. The rescuers catch up with the raiders and engage them in a fight. Those who stayed behind to put on their coats of mail join in the melee and the raiders are completely routed. (In the opening line, the "bitter cup" refers to coffee. The desert Arabs make coffee with cardamom and other spices, but they never add cream or sugar to it; hence it is called *ghawat mirr,* "bitter coffee," and a cup of such coffee is called *finjāl mirr,* "bitter cup." On the other hand, a cup of tea is called *finjāl ḥiliw*, "sweet cup," because tea is always made with sugar.

1 The bitter cup I truly miss, the peace of mind and company
2 Of valiant lads and noble men, who are my folk and dearest ones.
3 I wish there were an easy way to make a knave a gentleman.

4 Abu Halā, I am a hawk; an eagle caged, I long to soar.
5 O Gracious Lord, you grant the wish of humble men and help the weak.
6 My anguished heart is filled with awe; my sleepless eyes are filled with tears.
7 Gone are my joy, my glorious days; far am I from my clansmen's might.
8 They move their camp and camel herds to follow the light of rainy clouds.
9 The lightning flashing through the night; the Trēbī's bed has overflowed,
10 From Sāgān basin to coastal lands, from Ridīfih plains to Ḥasnā' plateaus
11 And Xṣēfā too, all drenched with rain—the land of those who quench their swords' thirst [for enemy blood].
12 ʿAjmān tribesmen ride their noble mares and graze their herds on verdant steppes.
13 When it is time to change their camp, they strike the tents and move straightway.
14 The cavaliers direct the march; by end of day the marchers halt.
15 Sentinels perched on summits high cry out, "The herds are driven off!"
16 The horses swish their ample tails; disheartened are those who lost the keys [to their mares' fetters].
17 The furious youths charge on their mares to meet the foe and save the herds.
18 The champions shout their battle cries; the battle rages with swords and spears.
19 Thrusts and blows are interchanged; the ambush fights a bloody war.
20 The raiders push the coveted herds; they seek to flee 'neath darkness' veil.
21 Those left behind to don their shields, the coats of mail that David made,
22 Make haste to join the fray; they put to flight the mortal foes.
23 The enemies' blood is flowing free on the bare backs of hastening mares.
24 The dauntless lads of my fierce clan are yearling hawks, the birds of prey.
25 They ride upon their dashing mares with curving swords of shining steel.
26 They fear not death when battles rage; away with those who bow their heads.
27 I pray, my Lord, for peace upon the Prophet's soul, the guided one.

When the tribe decides to camp for an extended period of time, each man chooses a spot for his tent; he sticks his lance in the ground as a sign for his womenfolk to pitch the tent in that spot, while he goes to drink coffee and talk with the men. The tent is divided by a curtain into two sections: *rabᶜih,* where the men sit, and *riffih,* where the women sit. The mare of the tent's owner is fettered nearby and at night his camels couch (*yabirkin*) in front of the tent. The size of the tent is determined by how many poles it takes to prop it up. The largest tent is that of the sheikh, where men gather together to drink coffee and discuss tribal affairs. It is pitched on the most prominent and most dangerous spot in order to repel any sudden attack, and also so as to be the first to receive guests seeking hospitality and fugitives seeking protection.

The arrangement of summer and winter camps is determined by the availability of pasture, and is also subject to considerations of defense and protection of the camel herds. In summer, the tents are all pitched beside the wells in long rows with the ropes of each tent almost touching those of the next one. This mode of encampment is called *nazil.* The tribe must stay near the wells all summer, for the people need water every day. Since no grazing is available near the tents, the camels are sent to graze far away (*yaᶜazbin*), accompanied by a handful of brave youths as guards (*janab*). They come back every third day to drink only. It is at this time that major raids take place, for every tribe knows where its foes are camped and can easily surprise them. Since the herds are attended by a few men only and since they are far away from the main camp, the raiders can surprise the herders, quickly round up the herds, and drive them off. The herders, therefore, must always be on the watch, and the moment they sense danger they call for help while trying in the meantime to stampede the camels and distract the raiders from rounding them up.

In winter, the tribe is continually on the move in search of pasture. The camp is spread over a wide area with the tents scattered in small groups of a few tents each, each group (*firīǵ*) within calling distance of the next. Continual movement and the fact that camels can find sufficient grazing near the tents make surprise assault by enemies almost impossible. But since in winter there is not so much danger from thirst, this is the time when poor nomads traveling in pairs rove the desert on foot to try to steal the camels of the enemy tribe. A nocturnal prowler (*ḥāyif*/*ḥinšūlī*) may crawl into the camp, unfetter one or two of the couched camels and quietly lead them away. To eliminate this danger, each *firīǵ* pitches the tents in a ring (*duwwār*) with the ropes of each tent touching those of the next, and the camels are couched within this hedge of tents and stretched ropes. Under these circumstances, night prowlers cannot lead away any of the camels without causing much commotion, which would wake up the whole *firīǵ*.

The annual cycle of the nomadic camp, with all of its temporal and spatial aspects, has been formalized by poets and condensed into stock motifs which are interwoven with the love theme to constitute a conventional topic of poetic composition. Friendship and love relationships develop between members of the various lineages of the tribe as they occasionally come together in their ceaseless roaming of the tribal territory. But no sooner have these relationships developed than the lineages separate. The pulsating pattern of tribal dispersal and regrouping symbolizes for the poet the separation and reunion of lovers. A poet therefore may begin his poem by picturing himself riding his camel alone in the wilderness, and coming across a deserted encampment which was once the abode of his sweetheart. This sight cheers him up and awakens in his heart sweet memories of love and human companionship. Or the poet may begin his poem differently, by describing his climb to the top of the highest ridge to watch the early departure of his sweetheart with her kinsmen. As this scene vanishes, extreme passion overtakes the poet and he remains in his place till sunset, when he descends, having completed the composition of his poem. The poem describes how the tribal procession goes over hill and dale with the poet's beloved riding in her gaily decorated litter. Heavenly constellations, and rain, with its various manifestations such as clouds and lightning, are incorporated into the poem as metaphors for and direct agents in the separation and reunion of lovers. Several lines will be dedicated to the camel, which is the vehicle for this separation and reunion. The poet may also describe the great distances that separate him from his beloved, and give a list of place names which stand for tribal boundaries, grazing areas, water holes, desert roads and stations, and other places that are the pivots of tribal migration.

The following poem by Swēlim Ibn Twēm ad-Dawwāy of the alʿAwāzim tribe (al-ʿUbayyid 1971:124–125) illustrates the use of these topics.

1 Last night I did not close my eyes; my mind was beset by anxieties.
2 Today I stand atop the high ridge like a sentinel walking back and forth on its summit.
3 I climbed atop a high mount strewn with big boulders, watching the moving camp, whither they go.
4 My sweetheart's herds go south, while my people will be moving north.
5 I watch them moving camp with tears in my eyes; now I see them, now they disappear.
6 Confound the Wārih ridge! It is too low; from it I cannot see the moving camp behind the Abrag hills.

7 I descended from it with heavy heart; I was distressed, with no one near to console me.
8 Tears flowed freely from my eyes; may God strike with misfortune any who would admonish my eyes.
9 My eyes shed tears, hot as coffee boiling in the pot; I cried as one bereaved of kin.
10 I cry over my beloved, whose neck shines like lightning from rain-laden clouds,
11 Auspicious lightning, presaging abundant rain that will drench the land and fill the pools.
12 I only looked upon her, I never touched her; for she is a chaste lady whose virtue is without doubt.
13 She is protected by valiant men, supported by strong kinsmen.
14 I shall endure and hope for better days; may the hard times end in joy.

Camels and Horses

Nomadism in Arabia is both necessitated and facilitated by the camel. The nomad is well aware of the importance of camels in his life; hence he calls them *ʿaṭa llah* (the gift of Allah), and derives immense pleasure from talking about them. Camels are an inexhaustible source of bedouin lore, and conversation always leads to this subject. Many a Nabaṭi poem begins with a prelude of several lines enumerating the qualities of a fine riding camel. A thoroughbred camel (*ḏilūl, miṭĭyyih*) is graceful and alert with sharp, glowing eyes, small pointed ears, long arched neck, long limbs, muscular shoulders, wide chest, erect hump, and broad, bulging ribs. It perceives danger quickly and alerts the rider by its movements, but it never growls, for a growling camel can easily attract enemies. It can travel tirelessly over long stretches of waterless desert, and it can graze on the run so that the rider does not lose valuable time.

Going on a long journey in the open desert is a perilous undertaking which may prove fatal to both camel and rider unless they both use their excellent senses and cooperate to avoid danger. These journeys, as the poets point out, are undertaken only by worthy men on worthy camels. The camel starts the journey fat and strong, but by the end of the journey, if it survives, it is emaciated to mere skin and bones. The hump is completely gone and the back is sore and blistered, showing deep marks of the saddle and girths. If the camel dies from exhaustion, the rider may perish with it. An experienced rider never ill-treats his mount, but always looks after its needs, and an intimate bond develops between them.

A riding camel is preferably a barren female because female camels are more docile and enduring than males, especially in winter, the rutting

season. Also, a barren camel is stronger and more manageable than a pregnant or suckling camel because the strong attachment of the mother to its calf makes it quite difficult to separate the two. Male camels, however, are much stronger and better able to carry heavy loads; therefore, when the camp moves, the tent, its furniture, and the women and children are loaded onto male camels.

Besides riding camels and common pack camels, every tribe has special camel herds of distinct and uniform color. These herds are, so to speak, the tribal emblem. They are herded under the protection of the bravest youths in the tribe. These honored herds must be defended to the death and the men of the tribe will risk anything to save them, for it is a disgrace to lose them. Glubb writes:

> It is impossible to convey to our unfamiliar minds all the romance and glory attached in the bedouin mind to the idea of camels, in seizing or defending which so many give up their lives. They contain something of the associations which a regiment derives from its colours. Warriors were thus in the habit of calling their flocks by names, which they employed in battle as war cries, in the same manner as the names of women. Men would thus fight, calling out "The horsemen of the Aliya" or "The horsemen of the Gurwa," referring to the titles given to their flocks. (1935:22–23)

The nobility and honor of the tribe is measured by the number of its herds and whether they have ever been taken by enemy tribes. Only strong tribes can defend their herds and fatten them on green pastures, which are usually the most contested spots in the desert.

Next to the camel in importance for the bedouin is his mare. Horses in the desert are symbols of nobility and power. In their boastful poems, desert heroes praise their horses and address their verses to them. The strength and prosperity of the tribe is measured by the number of its horses, which are called *sibāya* (bringers of booty). The horse is indispensable to the nomads who live in a perpetual state of war. The horse and the camel complement each other in the desert—the horse is swift and the camel is enduring. The camel and the horse are not only necessary for the survival of the nomad, but each is necessary for the well-being of the other. Without the horse, the camels cannot be defended against raiders or retrieved when they are plundered. But without the sweet milk of camels, the horse cannot survive in the desert.

Raiding

The nomad's energies are directed toward the welfare and increase of his camel herds. His life, in all its aspects, is adapted to that end. He

declines the comfort and ease of settled life to roam the open desert spaces in ceaseless search of pasture for his noble beasts. Camel herding is the most efficient means of exploiting the meager resources of the Arabian desert. Camels, however, are peculiarly vulnerable as a form of capital. They must always have enough pasturage, but this is determined by rainfall. It is unusual for the annual rains to fall over all of Arabia in sufficient quantities. When it does rain, the rain falls over some areas but not others. When seasonal rains fall on tribal territory, the grass sprouts and the shrub comes back to life, blooming with flowers and green with succulent shoots. The desert turns into luxuriant pastures and the camels become fat and overblown with milk. If seasonal rains fail, the tribal territory becomes barren and desiccated. When this happens, the camel herds suffer and may even perish from lack of grazing food. Under such circumstances, the only course left for the unfortunate tribes if they are to improve their lot is to plunder the herds of their more fortunate neighbors or force their way into their pastures.

The swiftness of the camel and its ability to travel for days tirelessly and without food or water make it both means and end of perpetual raids and counter-raids between the various nomadic tribes. Camel riders can carry out distant forays, and by launching a surprise assault they can easily drive off the animals of the enemy and elude pursuers by swiftly retreating into the open desert. As a result of these skirmishes, the political situation in the desert is constantly boiling. Among the tribes, there are always scores to settle and blood to avenge. The desert tracts are continually traversed by raiders on their way to adventure (*mġīrīn*) or returning (*minćfīn*).

Raiding (*ġaziw*) is a mechanism of adaptation to the precarious circumstances of desert life. Throughout the centuries the nomads have developed it into a complex institution with intricate codes and procedures. According to the law of desert warfare, a tribe never engages in hostilities against another tribe before making a formal declaration of war. The most honorable time to attack is in broad daylight, a night attack being considered dishonorable and treacherous (*bōg*). Women, children, old people, the sick, the sleeping, and the unarmed are never molested.

A full-fledged raid is carried out by a sizable group of warriors and takes a long time in preparation. It must have at least one leader (*ʿagīd*) who is responsible for procuring guides and for establishing the availability of water and grazing areas along the way. A raiding expedition may cover hundreds of miles, and it may be months before the raiders are back with the booty (*ćasb*). On these distant excursions, the raiders ride their camels and lead their mares (*yistajinbūn*), which are mounted only at the time of assault (*ġarih*). Each horseman (*xayyāl*) must seek a

camel rider (*zammāl*) to carry him and to transport water and provisions for himself and his mare. When the raiders approach the enemy, the cavalry (*xayyālih*) makes the assault while the cameleers (*az-zimāmīl*) remain some distance behind to guard the mounts and provisions and also, if possible, to ambush the sorties (*al-fazʿih*) and cover the retreat of the horsemen after they have driven off the enemy's herds. The raiders are usually less in number than the men of the attacked camp, so their most effective tactic is a surprise attack. They have the best chance of success when the enemy is moving camp, because the camel herds are already on the move and the tents, along with all the furniture, are already rolled up and loaded on pack camels. If the camp is not moving, the most favorable time for attack is just after sunrise (*aḍ-ḍaha*) when the herds are led to pasture, or a little before sunset (*msayyān*) when they are led back. Other times of the day are not considered good because the herds are so dispersed that rounding them up would be difficult.

It is not always easy for raiders to surprise their enemies. Just before sunrise, the camp sends a sentinel (*rigībih*) who climbs to the highest hilltop and hides behind a pile of stones (*rijim*) to watch for enemies. The moment he notices anything suspicious he calls out at the top of his voice to warn the camp. Immediately the women unfetter the mares and the men reach for their arms. The men of the attacked camp evaluate the situation and, if they believe they cannot manage a successful defense, they simply withdraw and let the raiders despoil their camp. If the men of the pillaged camp can rally in time, they ride their horses in hot pursuit (*ṭalab*) of the raiders to retrieve their property. If they lose sight of the raiders, they head for the nearest water hole (*mārad*), where the raiders are most likely to halt. When the two parties meet again, a second battle ensues and the pursuers may win back their camels (*yiffikūn ḥalālihum*). On other occasions, the attacked camp may decide that their only course is to wait for a more favorable opportunity to tip the balance in their favor.

When one tribe wants to occupy the pastures of another, the sheikh leads all his people with their herds into the territory they intend to occupy and camps there. The opposing tribes pitch war tents (*byūt al-ḥarb*) and prepare for a major battle (*manāx*). At such times, the tribes use what is called *ʿiṭfih* (also called *ʿammārīyah* or *markab*) as a kind of war banner or rallying point for their fighters. This is a richly decorated litter in which sits a sheikhly maiden or other noble and beautiful woman who "warbles the battlenote, with a passionate sweetness, which kindles the manly hearts of the young tribesmen" (Doughty 1921:II, 329). The warriors rally around to defend the lady in the litter who spurs her kinsmen to deeds of valor.

> If it seems as if the enemy would win, the girls, if present, with words and gestures encourage the warriors to persevere. With their

> breasts bared and hair loosened they ride on camels where the greatest danger appears, call to their friends and to those dear to them, and threaten to join the enemy if their own people disappoint them.
>
> Many, especially the younger warriors, then with the left hands raise the hem of their cloaks before their eyes and, with the saber or dagger in the right hand, throw themselves on the enemy. During the fight they shout: "Away! Tremble! At you! at you! O faithless people! Ye shall not escape. We came from afar to get you!" And then the fight changes into a series of duels. Personal bravery, though greatly limited by the use of firearms, may even now be exhibited. (Musil 1928:527–528)

When the fighting becomes fierce, the women tend the wounded and give water to the thirsty. On such occasions, young maidens loosen their hair and bare their breasts and urge their men to fight and defend their honor. This inflames the hearts of the youths who leap into the battle and fight valiantly in the hope of winning the hearts of these beautiful maidens.

Raiding is not only a means of redistributing wealth but also a mechanism of allocating status. "Raiding brings out all that is hard, brave, and skillful in man, so the occupation is honored and encouraged" (Dickson 1949:341). The bedouin warrior is not so much interested in material gain as he is anxious to be known for his hardiness and valor. "War gives him an opportunity of displaying his cunning, endurance, and courage. He neither loves the shedding of blood, nor craves booty, but is allured by danger and delights in the predatory art. The booty itself he will give without thinking much about it—even to the wife of the very man he has just robbed" (Musil 1928:504). Young boys look forward to the day when they are allowed to accompany their elders on raiding expeditions so they can exhibit their gallantry and endurance. Courage on the battlefield is a sure way to gain booty, high social position, and the heart of a young maiden.

Raiding preoccupies the mind of the nomad and colors his whole outlook. It is his only passion and he chooses to look only at the glorious aspects of it. Most bedouin stories and poetic compositions are about fighting and raiding expeditions; as Glubb observed, "Famous raiders acquired great reputations, and the ubiquitous poet was always at hand to celebrate their prowess in sonorous ballads" (1935:22). And Doughty wrote of the bedouins: "All their speech is homely; they tell of bygone forays and of adventures in their desert lives. You may often hear them in their tale quote the rhythms between wisdom and mirth of the *kasasīd* (riming desert poets without letters); the best are often widely current among the tribes" (1921:I, 306).

A desert hero celebrates his bravery in boastful odes in which he also describes the fair cheeks, the fluttering eyelashes, and the long tresses of his sweetheart, who cries out his name and calls after him from her litter to defend her frightened camel mount from attackers. The following is a poem by the famous warrior from Gḥatān, Nāṣir Ibn ʿAmir Ibn Hādī, which he composed on the occasion when his tribe and the tribe of Mṭēr fought each other at the watering place Amēlāḥ (al-Fuhayd 1978:105).

1 Fortunate are those who were absent the day we were attacked at Amēlāḥ, those who did not witness the uproar of our frightened camel herds.
2 The panicked beasts threw off their loads. My heart was inflamed by the urging shouts of our ladies.
3 When I charged the enemy lines, they met me with lances and spears; but when I fled, the lady with the beautiful eyes cried out after me.
4 After the spear broke I unsheathed Abū Lāḥ, my sword, the only weapon left in my hand.
5 I fought in their midst until I repelled the attacking multitudes. I chased them away like the rutting male camel after she-camels in heat.
6 Slow down, mounted lady with thick eyelashes! I shall defend you as long as my swift mare can run.
7 For the sake of your eyes, I shall run down the foe, and his soul shall leave his body before reaching the ground. I shall leave him for the lame hyenas and spotted vultures to sup on.
8 It is my custom to risk my life on the battlefield while the cowardly run away.
9 These are the words of a fearless man. I am a noble hunting bird.

Valor and Chivalry

Because of the constant struggle against nature and against other men, desert life puts a premium on manly courage and the combative traits of character. Desert knights who are well known for their valor are distinguished by special costumes and badges which they wear on the battlefield; hence they are called *al-malābīs*. A hero among the nomads is also distinguished by his special war cry (*ʿizwih, nxawih*) which he shouts vociferously in the heat of battle. A brave man derives great honor from protecting his camel herds and from defending the honor of his womenfolk; in battle he will use the name of his sister or sweetheart, or the name of his camel herd, as his war cry. Sometimes the war cry is a reference to a previously accomplished act of chivalry.

Before the introduction of firearms, the arms of the bedouins, such as

the lance, saber, and coat of mail, along with the horse, allowed full scope for the display of bravery with little loss of life. The bedouins are fond of single combat because it is spectacular and because it gives the individual warrior an opportunity to distinguish himself.

> When two hostile parties of Bedouin cavalry meet, and perceive from afar that they are equal in point of numbers, they halt opposite each other out of the reach of musket-shot; and the battle begins by skirmishes between two men. A horseman leaves his party and gallops off towards the enemy, exclaiming, "O horsemen, O horsemen, let such a one meet me!" If the adversary for whom he calls be present, and not afraid to meet him in combat, he gallops forwards; if absent, his friends reply that he is not amongst them. The challenged horseman in his turn exclaims, "And you upon the grey mare, who are you?" The other answers, "I am * * * the son of * * *." Having thus become acquainted with each other, they begin to fight; none of the by-standers join in this combat, to do so would be reckoned a treacherous action; but if one of the combatants should turn back, and fly towards his friends, the latter hasten to his assistance, and drive back the pursuer, who is in turn protected by his friends. After several of these partial combats between the best men of both parties, the whole corps join in promiscuous combat. If an Arab in battle should meet with a personal friend among the enemy's ranks, he turns his mare to a different side, and cries out, "Keep away! let not thy blood be upon me!"
>
> Should a horseman not be inclined to accept the challenge of an adversary, but choose to remain among the ranks of his friends, the challenger laughs at him with taunts and reproaches, and makes it known, as a boast, during the rest of his life, that such a one * * would not venture to meet such a one * * in battle. (Burckhardt 1831:I, 306–308)

The nomads love the predatory art and live in perpetual conflict with each other. Nonetheless, the martial spirit of the nomad does not stem from an innate or overtly aggressive nature, but is simply a response to the instability and insecurity of desert life. The speech of the nomads abounds with allusions to physical and moral courage as a means to defend tribal honor and protect tribal interests, but the nomads abhor excessive violence and the abuse of power. The objective of tribal warfare is not to annihilate or subjugate opponents, but to plunder their herds or occupy their pastures with a minimum of casualties. In tribal war, only a resisting foe is harmed. It is shameful to kill the wounded or the captive. When a man finds himself cornered on the battlefield in a

desperate position, he can always save himself by asking his adversary for pardon.

> He who sees certain death before him asks for pardon in these words: "Give pardon, O rider! *emna*ᶜ *emna*ᶜ *jâ ḥajjâl.*"
>
> The man addressed will answer: "Come hither and thou wilt save thy neck. Come hither, Allah lies on thee," or: "Dismount before the face of So-and-So"—naming himself. The suppliant, coming nearer, says: "ᶜ*Aṭni allâh*, give me Allah," or "*Ḥoṭṭ* ᶜ*alejji allâh*, lay on me Allah!" When this is done, the pardoned man says: "ᶜ*Aṭâni allâh w-*ᶜ*aṭejteh allâh* ᶜ*an al-bowḳ*, he assured me by Allah and I assured him by Allah against treachery!"
>
> He then surrenders his arms and most of his clothing, and receives from his captor either a kerchief or head rope, accompanied by the words: "Here, take my kerchief (or my rope) and tell any one who approaches thee that thou hast been pardoned by So-and-So, *hâk kẓâẓti* (ᶜ *asâbti*) *w-alli jeǧîk ḥabbereh ana manî*ᶜ *flân.*"
>
> His mare or she-camel is taken by the victor, *mâne*ᶜ *eh*, or the latter lets some comrade keep her for him a while and returns to the fight. The pardoned one waves the kerchief or the rope, crying: "I am the *manî* of So-and-So." If both himself and his animal are wounded, his pardoner, *mâne*ᶜ, conducts him to his own party where assistance will be given him, or else the *mâne*ᶜ will allow him to return home at once. Should he live too far away, he is furnished with a she-camel, water bag, food, and a reliable guide, but must give his word of honor to return everything or to give compensation. (Musil 1928:529)

In desert warfare, fair play and honorable victory are important principles which serve as deterrents to indiscriminate killing. The precariousness of desert life makes the nomad much too aware of the vagaries of fortune to be intoxicated by temporary prosperity or a moment of victory. The victors treat the vanquished as they would wish to be treated should they fall into their opponents' hands.

The nomads have managed to turn the battlefield from a pool of blood into an arena where beaux gestes and glorious deeds are performed. The hero acquires glory not by taking an opponent's life but by giving him a new one; by pardoning him and restoring to him his human dignity. Usually, the combatants are not genuine enemies nor are they total strangers to each other. They know each other personally and treat each other with respect and consideration. There is "a lack of resentment or hatred between the combatants in a war governed by strict rules and a ready generosity to acknowledge the noble acts performed by the heroes

of the other side" (Glubb 1937:8). Outside of battle, the warring parties may socialize and exchange courtesies like intimate friends, calling on each other to drink coffee together and to make an appointment for the next round of fighting.

Hospitality

The bedouins respect a daring knight not only for his defense of the tribe and his pursuit of its interests, but for the liberality with which he dispenses booty brought back from distant raids in acts of hospitality. Valor is a quality necessary to attain the more exalted virtue of generosity, which is a basic prerequisite for nobility in the desert. Glubb, who stayed with the bedouins for some time, wrote that "the reckless character of the famous raider often went with equally heedless generosity and hospitality" (1960:31). The reputation (*ḏiċir*) and good name (*ṣīt*) of a bedouin is measured by his bounty (*jūd*) and open-handedness (*ṭīb*). When a man slaughters an animal in honor of his guests, he will spray its blood on the necks of their mounts (*rikāyib*). After the guests leave their host and go on their long journey, they meet many people in distant lands who see the blood that was sprayed on their mounts and ask, "Who is the host who slaughtered for you?" The host will thus become famous throughout the desert and stories will be told about his hospitality. Tirkī Ibn Mhēd, the famous knight and chief of the Fedᶜān section of the ᶜAnazah tribes, is nicknamed *mṣawwit b-al-ᶜaša* ("he who calls out for supper") because in lean times he would send his slave to climb on a high knoll in the evening and call forth for anyone hungry to come and eat supper.

Hospitality in the desert is not just the giving of food. It is an intricate web of symbolic acts and rituals that are structurally and functionally interwined with one another and interrelated with the other components of the nomadic value system. The "salt bond" is very sacred among the nomads, and the giving of life is a protection against the taking of life. By sharing his food with a guest, the nomad gives life to the guest (*aḍ-ḍēf*) not only by offering him nourishment but also by granting him protection while he is his guest and for three days after he departs, three days being the length of time it presumably takes the body to digest the last meal the guest shared with his host. It is the *ḥagg aḍ-ḍēf* (right of the guest) to be fed and protected by his host. A man who betrays his guest or fails to provide him with the necessary protection is forever disgraced among the nomads. Of the ᶜAnazah tribe, Burckhardt wrote: "A guest is regarded as sacred; his person is protected, and a violation of hospitality, by the betraying of a guest, has not occurred within memory of man" (1831:I, 176).

The refusal to partake of a man's hospitality is a sign of bad intentions. When a nomad sees a stranger approaching his camp, he will run after him and force him to turn around and stay for supper or at least have some coffee or milk. If the stranger refuses to turn around he is taken for an enemy and may be shot at. When a man goes to see another man on serious business, the visitor will not taste water, coffee, or any food until the host grants him his wish. This in effect means, "Grant me my wish or consider me an enemy."

Preparation and serving of coffee is not just an ingredient of hospitality but its most important and ceremonious part. When a host first perceives his guests, he rushes to meet and welcome them (*yhallī w-yraḥḥib*). After they sit down, he rakes the hearth (*yaḥarṯ al-wjār*), strikes a blazing fire (*yiṭiʿʿ an-nār*), and begins to roast the coffee beans. The beans must be roasted slowly and carefully lest they burn. When they turn yellowish brown and start to glisten with sweat, they are cast into a shallow pan (*mbarrad*) to cool off. The husks are then blown off and the roasted beans are pounded with measured strokes, with an occasional rap on the rim of the mortar to give variety to the beat. The rhythmic pounding of the mortar is soothing music to the ears of the weary travelers. The host empties the ground coffee into the first of the two pots used in this process. After a few minutes of boiling, that pot is drawn away from the glowing coals and left for a while to settle (*taṣfī*). The second and smaller coffee pot into which the coffee is now emptied is called *al-mibharih* because it is in this pot that the *bhār* is added to the coffee. The *bhār* consists of one pinch of saffron, a few cloves, and a generous amount of ground cardamom seeds (*hēl*).

The host performs every step in this ritual coffee preparation ceremoniously and with the utmost dignity. With welcoming gestures and pleasantries, he tries to put his guests at ease and let them feel that they have done him a favor by alighting at his tent and honoring him with their presence. He tries to make (*ykayyif*) a truly refreshing cup (*finjāl*) for them which, besides its good taste, looks (in the words of poets) like henna dye (*xḍāb*) on the fair hands of a beautiful bride, a cup that will *yaṭird an-nʿās* (banish fatigue) and *yiġiʿd ar-rās* (clear the head).

The serving of coffee is no less ceremonious than the making of it. When the coffee is ready to serve, the host lifts up the pot to a level almost above his head and pours into the small porcelain cups held in his right hand "a stream of coffee as delicate as a spider's thread. As soon as the bottom of the cup is covered, he hands it to the foremost guest" (Musil 1928:102). The cup must not be filled; "to fill it up to a guest, as in the northern towns, were among the bedouins an injury, and of such bitter meaning, 'this drink thou and depart'" (Doughty 1921:I, 287).

Indeed, the serving of coffee is a ritual act fraught with symbolic significance, as the following quote from Musil illustrates.

> If the attackers learn that there is in the camp to be assailed a fighter feared for his bravery, they prepare to destroy him. The evening before the attack the leader takes a cup of black coffee in his hand and says:
>
> "This cup is filled with the blood of So-and-So. Who will drink it?"
>
> If one of the men present takes the cup and drinks the coffee with the words "I am drinking the blood of So-and-So," he is obliged to meet the aforesaid hero in a duel. During the fight he asks again and again:
>
> "O riders, who of you has seen So-and-So?"
>
> If the hero is not among the fighters on that day, a comrade of his will answer: "O thou son of an honorable family, he is not here. If he were, thou mayst be sure he would not hide from thee. But here is one who will take his place. Only come nearer with her (the mare)! *Jâ walad al-ḥalâl mâ hw ḥâẓer lâ čân ḥâẓer mâ čân ittaḳa ʿank ḥâẓer min jesedd ʿanneh mâr zarrebha ğâj.*"
>
> But if the hero happens to be present, he says: "Oh, who is inquiring for So-and-So? This is he. Thou hast reached him. *Jâ nâšeden ʿan flân hâḏa hw waṣelt ḥâẓer.*"
>
> The comrades of both warriors then stop fighting, the better to observe the result of the duel, *mulâkaʿ*. Both duellists first utter the battle cry of their tribe, adding: "Never say: 'He has surprised or tricked me.' *Lâ tḳûl ṛaṭarni w-bâḳni.* Brace up now and defend thyself! *Hôḏ ḥaẓarak w-enfaʿ ḥâlek.* Oh, how do I frighten heroes! Thou sneerest at me and thy lips are twitching!" (1928:527–8)

Coffee is called *kēf*, "that substance that sets the mood right." Making and serving coffee is a significant theme in Nabaṭi poetry. Many a poet begins his composition with a few lines describing the details of this ritual. The poet speaks of serving the first cup to the worthiest man: he who single-handedly covers the retreat of his comrades, he who drives pursuers away from those comrades whose mares are slow, he who assists (*yiḏhir*) fallen comrades, and above all he whose tent flaps are always dripping with grease and whose ash-mound resembles the dirt heap of a recently dug water well. The poet may conclude his composition by stating that he will not present the cup of coffee to the scoundrel or the slothful who have never gone on a raid and who raise herds to sell in the market instead of slaughtering them for hungry guests. When coffee is served, the hero is always presented with the first cup. But as the cup passes on the right from one man to the next, it bypasses idle men, who

are not given coffee until the more respected men have drunk the first round. It is a grave insult to call a man *yā mʿaggab al-finjāl*, "thou who art bypassed when the cup goes round."

Valor and hospitality are central themes in poems of boasting and panegyric (the great bulk of Nabaṭi poetry), and the two are usually mentioned together. The hero is praised as one who protects the ladies and the camel herds and who dares to pasture his herds on the most coveted, hence most dangerous, spots. His war cry terrifies mares on the battlefield, and his spear always drips with the blood of his enemies. The poet also expands upon the various signs and manifestations of the hero's sumptuous hospitality. These include a many-poled tent pitched on high ground so as to be visible from afar, a brass mortar (*nijir*), the rhythmic pounding of which sends a loud and clear message to men of neiġhboring tents to assemble for a feast that is in preparation, a blazing bonfire which attracts night travelers, a high mound of ashes, a shallow pan (*miḥmāsih*) for roasting coffee beans, large coffee pots in which coffee is constantly brewing, slaughtered young camels and sheep with fat tails, and huge cauldrons filled with heaps of meat and mounds of boiled rice. The sight, smell, and taste of tallow (*šaḥam*) and fat (*disam*) are rare aesthetic pleasures in the desert. Fat stands for prosperity and a life of ease; thus a year with auspicious seasonal rainfall is called a fat year, *sintin dasmih*. When the nomad squeezes lumps of rice (*ʿēš*) in his right hand and grease drips from between his fingers, a meal, in his view, can truly be called delicious. After eating with the sheikh, guests wipe off their greasy hands on the front part of the tent, so that the tent flaps of hospitable tribal chiefs are said to be always dripping with grease.

Honor

To cope with the volatile and potentially explosive politics of the desert in the absence of central authority, the nomads devised various codes of honor which served to minimize danger and prevented the breakdown of order. Chivalry in warfare and protection of the guest, which have already been discussed, are constituent elements in a complex system which is instrumental in curbing violence and providing protection for the weak and powerless. This system includes the right of protection to companions, tent-neighbors, and fugitives.

Friends and comrades traveling together are honor-bound to help and protect each other. Like the guest, the traveling companion (*xawiy, rifīġ*) has the right (*ḥagg*) to be protected. The rights and obligations of comradeship can be extended and applied in a different way. A man traveling alone in the desert is easy prey to marauders from enemy tribes who will attack and rob him. Therefore, a traveler advisedly seeks from

every tribe along his route a companion who acts as an escort to see him safely through his tribal territory. This companion pledges to look after the traveler and protect him from his fellow tribesmen. The following anecdote from H. St. John B. Philby illustrates how the tribal escort performs his duties.

> On reaching the western edge we turned aside into a deep hollow and camped for the night. We were now on the fringe of the ʿAtaiba marches; hitherto from the coast westwards it had never been necessary to take precautions either to conceal our presence or to guard our camps; now it was different; we had turned aside from the road to be out of the way of chance passengers; we had camped in a hollow to conceal our camp-fire; among us were four men of the ʿAtaiba tribe, who now assumed responsibility for our safety; at intervals they went forth to the surrounding sand-hummocks and proclaimed to the world: 'Look you, O men of the ʿAtaiba, here am I, Jarman, a man of the Barqa, and I say to you, we are men of Ibn Saʿud journeying to the Sharif; so let none molest us; and whoso hear my words, let him come to us and share our dinner or drink coffee and welcome; but molest us not or, if you do, say not you knew not who and what we are.' (1922:I, 131)

The tent-neighbor (*jār*) is a stranger who quits his kinsmen and attaches himself to a foreign tribe. He pitches his tent next to that of a strong man in the tribe, thus becoming his tent-neighbor. A nomad considers it a sacred duty to protect his tent-neighbor and look after his interests. A fugitive could also find refuge in the tent of a powerful person, who is obliged by honor to protect him as his *dixīl* (from the verb *daxal*, "to enter the tent"). The *dixīl* is different from the tent-neighbor in that he is a fugitive and he lodges himself inside the tent of his protector. I cannot give a better explanation of this institution than the one given in the following account from Musil.

> One who is oppressed personally has to ask protection of someone more powerful or of a member of an important kin; it is sufficient, however, for him to enter the tent of the one whose protection he desires or even its sacred precincts, *muḥârem*. The precincts begin either at the limits of hearing distance or at a full spear's length from the farthest tent pegs. When a pursued person cries from afar to the tent owner that he is putting himself under his protection and is heard, the latter is bound to protect him. The term for such an occurrence is *ḥaḳḳ aṣ-ṣowt*. On reaching the sacred precincts the pursued man finds himself under the protection of the tent. If

he is unable from exhaustion to proceed any farther and remains lying on the ground inside the precincts, no harm may be done to him, as that would be a violation of the tent, *ʿatab al-bejt*. The owner of the tent, his wife, or child shouts:

"Why dost thou violate my protege? thine eyesight is sharp enough, is it not? *Lêh taʿteb ʿala dahîli ent ʿajnak žwijje*. With us the precincts of a tent are recognized as sacred by an old custom; no one would dare to violate it; *al-muḥârem ʿendana ʿâdaten sanîjjaten mâ ḥad jakṭaʿha*." (1928:441–442)

The codes relating to chivalry and to the protection of the guest, the companion, the tent-neighbor, and the fugitive are basic ingredients of the nomadic outlook, and are universally recognized in the desert. The upholding of these codes is a point of individual honor, and their violation is a treachery that strips the offender of his honor and brings him and his kinsmen everlasting shame.

Among the nomads, an honorable man is one who has the physical and moral courage to keep his pledges and to conduct all his affairs with faith and integrity (*nigā*). He is a benevolent person (*rāʿī mruwwih*) who is always *rāʿī nxawih* (ready to help) and *rāʿī fazʿah* (provide assistance). It is only to this man of honor that the oppressed and powerless turn for help and protection. A refusal to give help "would imply weakness, would blacken one's honor, and the man who refuses would be derided at all camp fires for his lack of manly courage" (Musil 1928:441).

An honorable man would consider an injury to anyone under his protection to be a breach of his covenant and an insult to himself. To cleanse his honor, he must demonstrate his anger and indignation and must punish the culprit severely, even if he is his closest relative, as the following account illustrates.

Certain desert tribes, notably the Dhafir, are particularly proud of the name they have won for protecting their tent-neighbours. They have become famous in this respect, as the following stories will show. . . .

The uncle of Hamud al Suwait, the Shaikh of all the Dhafir tribe, once threatened in public *majlis*, to impale himself upon his sword which he had drawn for the purpose, unless *his own son* were brought before him and slain in his presence, because the son had killed his tent-neighbor in the heat of a foolish quarrel. The various members of the family tried hard to shield the youth, but realizing that the old shaikh was in deadly earnest, Hamud al Suwait (he became shaikh after his uncle's death two years later) himself seized

> the boy and with his own hand cut him down before the eyes of his father. Thus was tribal honour satisfied. This incident happened in 1912. . . .
>
> Shaikh Jadaʿan al Suwait, who succeeded to the Shaikhship of the Dhafir after the death of Hamud, was camped near Athaiba and Ruhail on the Kuwait-Iraq border in 1931. Hearing that one of his own tribesmen had fired at and wounded a Mutairi tribesman who was his *qasír* at the time, even though the Mutair tribe and the Dhafir tribe were open enemies, Shaikh Jadaʿan had the offending tribesman brought before him, and with his own hand slashed him over the head with his sword.
>
> The deed flashed through the Badawin world like lightning at the time, and Jadaʿan's name, as the upholder of Badawin honour, became almost as famous as that of his forebear. Unfortunately the Iraq authorities, with that folly which has frequently characterised them in dealing with the high-spirited tribesmen of the desert, imprisoned Shaikh Jadacan for several weeks, before they saw that they were making a martyr of a desert hero. This act cost them his allegiance. Shortly after, Shaikh Jadaʿan went over to Bin Saʿud, taking half the tribe with him.
>
> Shaikh Jadaʿan told me the story himself, saying that he only acted as he did in order to keep the vital Badawin law clean and untarnished.
>
> So greatly have the Dhafir tribe preserved and guarded their good name in the above respect, that it is said of Mana, another famous Shaikh of the Dhafir, that the immediate cause of his death was the news (which was brought to him as he was riding home from a raid) that a certain well-known guest of the tribe had, in his absence, been attacked and slain. Certain it is that on being told what had happened, his heart seemed to stop beating and he fell forward on his camel's neck and rolled to the ground a dead man. His daughter, whom I met in 1935, told me that the old man had literally died of a broken heart, and her words were vouched for by her husband, Shaikh Hautush al Suwait, cousin of Jadaʿan. (Dickson 1949:129–130)

To solicit the help of a powerful person, a suppliant would appeal to him and ask for his "face" (countenance). The face (*wijh*) of a man is his prestige and standing in the eyes of his fellow tribesmen. An honorable man keeps his face clean and without blemish by leading a noble life of virtue and chivalry. To express approval of a man's conduct one says "May Allah whiten his face," but to express disapproval, "May Allah

blacken his face." To demonstrate his gratitude, a suppliant would fly a white flag in honor of his benefactor, showing that the benefactor has performed all his obligations and that his face is white.

Nabaṭi poetry played an influential role in maintaining the various codes of honor and chivalry. Noble and heroic acts were encouraged with poems of praise and blame; honorable men were eulogized and their noble actions immortalized in verses which were handed down from generation to generation, while those who violated the code of honor were vilified by the poets as base men with whom one must avoid intermarriage. Urgent appeals for support and protection were usually submitted in verses extolling the manly courage and honorable reputation of the man from whom assistance was sought. The most rewarding tribute for an act of honor or chivalry was for the beneficiary to compose an ode praising his benefactor as a noble and honorable man.

I shall close this chapter with a story and a short poem which illustrate the seriousness with which a nomad views the violation of his honor (al-Mārik 1963–1965:I, 57–92). Mājid al-Ḥaṯribī and Mfawwiz at-Tajġīf were clansmen of the same section of the famous tribe of Shammar. One morning their clan was attacked by raiders who plundered their herds. Mājid and Mfawwiz, along with the other youths of the clan, followed the raiders in hot pursuit until they caught up with them. As has been pointed out already, it is the custom when a nomad finds himself in a desperate situation on the battlefield to turn to his pursuer, throw down his weapons, put his two thumbs in his mouth, and say to the pursuer, "*ana b-wajhik*" (I put myself under your countenance") or "*ana dixīlik*" ("I put myself under your protection"), in which case the pursuer must spare his life and grant him protection from other members of his (the pursuer's) tribe. Such a protected person is called *minīᶜ*. In the heat of the battle Mājid granted protection to one of the enemy, and to make sure that no one of his own tribe would molest his *minīᶜ*, he gave him his head rope (*ᶜgāl*) as a token. But it so happened that this *minīᶜ* who was granted protection by Mājid was the person who during a previous battle had slain Mfawwiz's father, and Mfawwiz had been looking for him ever since to avenge his father's blood. When Mfawwiz saw this man, he ran him down with his lance and killed him instantly, not realizing that he was the *minīᶜ* of his friend Mājid. After the battle Mājid looked for his *minīᶜ*, but he found him dead and he was told that his friend Mfawwiz had killed him.

When Mājid went back to the camp he found that his mother had struck their tent (to symbolize that the action of Mfawwiz had ruined their house) and threatened to cut her breasts, which had nourished her son Mājid, if he did not avenge his slain *minīᶜ* and wash clean his honor. Mājid sent a messenger to Mfawwiz giving him an ultimatum: he had

three days to escape (these three days are called *al-mharrbāt*, from the verb *harab*, "to escape"), after which he would hunt him down and kill him. The killing of his *minī*ᶜ and breach of his honor caused Mājid such anguish that he became distracted and withdrawn. He refused to eat or even talk to anyone. One of his clansmen by the name of ᶜAmir noticed that Mājid's health was deteriorating and kept asking him repeatedly what was the matter with him. In answer, Mājid composed this poem.

1 O valiant ᶜAmir who is not afraid to graze herds in the spots of danger, you are the protector of the oppressed person who seeks refuge in you.
2 O brother of Fhēd, [you are] well known for your hospitality; and you throw supper to the vultures hovering over the battlefield.
3 You meet the attacking horsemen and risk your life to protect your people; for days you have pressed me with your ceaseless questioning.
4 Do you not see what state I am in? I am like a little insect, or a wretched man who refuses nourishment.
5 I will not eat though the food might be drenched with butter and fat strips from the camel's hump;
6 Even though it might be grain from al-Balgā and dates from al-Jōf, my soul, overflowing with anger, does not accept it.
7 A slender-waisted maiden clad in her best raiment does not appeal to me, though she might have power over other men's hearts.
8 She does not appeal to me even though we were to meet in a safe place, on a sand dune where there are neither Muslims nor infidels about.
9 I only yearn to meet the noble Mfawwiz, the pick of his peers, their true knight when they give chase to their enemies on the level plain between the soft sands and the rocky mountains.
10 I will advance towards him and cross line upon line of men surrounding him; I will reach him sitting in the innermost part of his tent.
11 Then I will stab him with a sharp saber that will burn his entrails; a new scimitar which has never been mended by blacksmiths.
12 Either his ladies will clap their hands in mourning, or, if he lives, he will never stand upon his feet.
13 He clad me in the black robe of shame; he humiliated me, and I became like a despised coal dealer among settled folks.
14 Once my honor was white as hemp, but he stained it black as wool; [with this threat] he will stay awake at night [from fear of me] while I go to sleep.

In the preceding pages I have attempted to give the reader a glimpse of the social conditions of premodern Arabia, and point out how Nabaṭi poetry, in its world view and thematic makeup, provides a mirror of these conditions. This is an important point to bear in mind, since the native audience of a Nabaṭi poem judge its artistic merit by the degree to which it is a response to, and a reflection of, real life. In this regard, Nabaṭi poetry and classical Arabic poetry share many qualities and, being products of the same social conditions, are highly similar in both content and outlook.