

### III



## POETRY IN THE DESERT

Nabaṭi poetry is the product of a heroic age characterized by political turmoil and intertribal feuds. The incessant raids and forays of the desert Arabs of premodern Arabia were celebrated in poems composed by tribal poets and heroes. Major battles were generally preceded by a period of mobilization during which poems were exchanged by opponents. Such a war of words was part of the sportive attitude generally held by desert Arabs toward fighting. On the way to the battlefield, poets composed verses to challenge the enemy and instill courage in their own party. The circumstances of the fight, the spot where it took place, individual acts of gallantry, the gains and losses of both sides, and other details are recorded and passed on in verse. On the way back from battle, poems were composed to lament fallen heroes, to praise those who fought well, and to taunt cowards. Similarly, on their way back from intertribal raids, driving the booty before them, raiders composed cheerful lyrics praising the galloping of their mares and the stamina of their camel mounts. They described the wild intoxication of the charge, the thrill of the chase, the excitement of the battle, and the narrow escapes from the lances of enemies thirsty to lap up their blood. They also praised their enemies as worthy and gallant men, and expressed apologies for injuries to them and for the looting of their herds, but added that this was an honorable practice that had been undertaken by all noble men since ancient times.

The most stirring are the compositions of nomadic chiefs and desert knights who employed their poetic skills not to amuse or entertain, but to press for a course of action, to reveal a plan, to declare war, to deliver a threat, to challenge a foe, to sue for peace, to appeal for assistance, to celebrate a victory, to document an honorable deed, or to boast about a chivalrous act. Their verses are records of their heroic adventures and the roles they played in shaping the events of their time. Their compositions are characterized by absence of the stylistic embellishments and ornamental devices employed by professional poets. The language they employed is terse, dignified, and to the point. The appeal of their poetry

lies in the fact that it faithfully depicts in a rich language a nomadic existence that was heroic, chivalrous, and free.

In addition to the knights and chiefs, each tribe had a host of poets. Just as heroes unsheathed their swords to deal death blows to the men of enemy tribes, the poets unleashed their tongues with verses that flew like sharp arrows to strike enemy tribes and symbolically conquer them. Tribal poets fought their own battles of words, which were fueled by tribal feuds. The tribal poet drew the material for his compositions from tribal life and his role was to record in verse the honorable deeds of his tribe, to sing its praises, and to defend it against antagonist poets. To perform his task most effectively, the tribal poet had to have a thorough knowledge of tribal history and genealogies. In big assemblies, it was the alert and quick-witted poet who cogently and eloquently argued the case of the tribe. He kept in his head any blood debt owed to his tribe by others, and he continuously urged his tribesmen to redress the balance and cleanse their honor by exacting vengeance.

Although nomadic poetry deals mainly with tribal raids and forays, it is not straightforward historical narrative. Poets make only allusions and cryptic references to the incidents celebrated in their poems. Therefore, a poetic recitation usually alternates with a prose narrative which recounts the raids and battles celebrated in the poetry and serves to put the poetry into its proper historical context and to illuminate its allusions. The poetry does, however, serve as an authentic document substantiating the incidents in the narrative and enhancing their circulation and preservation in public memory.

The desert poetry of premodern Arabia resembles the poetry of ancient Arabia in its emphasis on tribal history and the intermixture of poetic recitation with prose narrative.<sup>1</sup> Ignaz Goldziher observed of classical poetry:

Pagan Arabic poetry truly reflects pre-Islamic tribal life with all its passions and traditional ideology. Its subjects include the petty intertribal feuds resulting from vendetta; the predatory guerrilla warfare (*ghazw*, from which our word 'razzia' is derived though with a modification of meaning); the adventures, both heroic and comic, of the itinerant poets; the praise of some prominent man for his bravery or hospitality, and the vilipending of misers and cowards. Nevertheless, the panegyric (*madh*) and the lampoon (*hijā*) are not confined to individuals for the poet drains to the bottom the repository of their ancestors' traditions, both glorious and unfavorable, and relates the praise or derision of the individual to the history of his tribe. All these subjects are variegated with episodes

characteristic of the *qaṣīda*. Thus, the poets had excellent opportunities to versify the famous events of intertribal warfare (*ayyām al-ʿarab*), the historical details of which are preserved in the prose narratives (*akhbār al-ʿarab*) pertaining to the poems.

For these reasons pagan Arabic poetry, leaving apart its artistic value, is the main source of our knowledge of pre-Islāmic social life and institutions as well as tribal history. (1966:12)

Excellent examples of desert poems and narratives are recorded by M. A. al-Sudayrī in his book *Abṭāl min al-Ṣaḥrā* (1968). This book contains partial biographies of five desert heroes, which are essentially accounts of the roles played by these heroes in tribal wars, along with the poems composed to celebrate these wars. Of course, al-Sudayrī preserves the original vernacular diction of the poems which accompany the biographical narratives, but the narratives themselves are transformed from oral renditions into composite written texts and their language is changed from vernacular to literary. There follows below a freely adapted account drawn from the biography of Siʿdūn al-ʿWāji, the paramount chief of the Wild Slēmān section of the ʿAnazah tribe, who lived in the first half of the nineteenth century. The poems and incidents in this biography were collected from “the mouths of the grey beards of ʿAnazah” (*ibid.*, 47). In the following account, special attention will be paid to the parts of the biography that deal with the wars between ʿAnazah and Shammar.

Siʿdūn al-ʿWāji was famous for his valor and chivalry and was an outstanding poet who composed many boastful poems. He was obeyed and esteemed by his tribesmen, and even his foes respected him. He had many sons, but only ʿGāb and Ḥjāb—of the same mother—distinguished themselves. ʿGāb was counted among the heroes of Najd, and his fame even exceeded that of his father. However, when ʿGāb and Ḥjāb were still small boys, Siʿdūn had some disagreement with their mother, who moved away from the territory of Wild Slēmān in Najd to that of her own tribe in the Syrian desert, taking her two small sons along with her. She was from the al-Fidʿān section of the large ʿAnazah tribe. Thus ʿGāb and Ḥjāb were brought up among al-Fidʿān in the Syrian desert, away from their father. There, they were raised by their maternal uncles, who taught them how to ride horses and how to throw the spear. When they became mature men they distinguished themselves on the battlefield and became the war leaders of the Wild Slēmān tribesmen who had migrated to the Syrian desert and stayed with al-Fidʿān.

In the meantime, Siʿdūn continued to be the chief of Wild Slēmān until one of his cousins, by the name of Šāmix, defied his authority and

challenged his leadership. Šāmīx violated the orders of Si‘dūn and eventually usurped the leadership of Wild Slēmān, stripping Si‘dūn of all power and treating him unjustly. Šāmīx pitched himself a large chiefly tent with many poles, and ordered Si‘dūn to live in a small, mean tent which he was obliged to pitch at the farthest edge of the camp. Šāmīx also told Si‘dūn that he must never bring his camels to drink till the herds of all other people had had enough. Si‘dūn was thus humiliated and reduced from a venerable chief to a miserable outcast. He composed many poems lamenting his ill fortune, and some of these poems he sent to his two sons, ‘Gāb and Ḥjāb, in the Syrian desert. In his poems, Si‘dūn complained to his sons about Šāmīx and pleaded for their help. His appeals to ‘Gāb, the elder and more valiant of the two, were especially urgent. He implored him to come and help him regain the chieftainship of Wild Slēmān. In the following poem addressed to ‘Gāb, Si‘dūn laments the passing of his glorious days and bemoans the reversal of his fortune. In the third line, he pictures misfortune as a horse running after him; in the past he was well ahead of it, but now it tramples upon him with its shod hooves.

- 1 My heart is set ablaze by anxieties; it simmers as if on glowing embers.
- 2 Oh, treacherous fate, how quick it turns! My happy days suddenly changed to adversity.
- 3 I was far ahead of misfortune before, but now it tramples upon me with its shod hooves.
- 4 I used to wear a badge of distinction, and led the troops astride a noble steed.
- 5 When enemy horsemen attacked, I was the first to meet them and cover the retreat of my kinsmen.
- 6 But today, I have no mount on which to carry my baggage. Oh, how shameful! I have been humbled and subdued.
- 7 Oh, how painful is misfortune! Gone are the glorious days.
- 8 I have often asked, where is my son, who spills the red blood of the enemy? I have often wondered, where is my beloved son?
- 9 Enemy horses flee when they hear his thunderous voice; he terrifies the mares on the battlefield.
- 10 He chases them like an eagle; vultures dine on the flesh of his enemies.

In the second poem, Si‘dūn is more specific in his complaints about Šāmīx and his appeals to ‘Gāb are more fervent. In line 16 he refers to his sons as the poles and cords he needs to erect the large multipoled

tent of chieftainship. In the last line, he appeals to his sons in the name of their sister Nimšah to answer his call.

- 1 Hail, you rider on a speedy mount, a fleet camel fit to cover desolate wastes;
- 2 Noble and young, its molar teeth are not all out yet. In a scant two days you reach al-Fiḍīlih,
- 3 Where you alight near liberal hosts who welcome guests with open arms. After you rest, take leave of the gallant men.
- 4 Ride your mount and follow the tracks in the wilderness; travel north, keeping the Pole Star before your eyes.
- 5 Go in safety and carry my verses to ‘Gāb and Ḥjāb; when you come to my dear sons, give them my best regards.
- 6 Give a special salutation to ‘Gāb, the valiant lad who protects the weak and the oppressed.
- 7 Tell him that Šāmīx has become a brazen man in his old age; by God, O ‘Gāb, he oppresses me so.
- 8 O ‘Gāb, bitter is the taste of defeat; I am forced to stay away from the tribal wells.
- 9 In the past, I was the champion of the tribal cause, the hero on the battlefield.
- 10 But now Šāmīx owns the noble mares; so long as he is chief, I shall never enjoy the coffee cup.
- 11 His oppression pains me in the heart, O ‘Gāb. For years I have not tasted sweet slumber,
- 12 As if a guard were standing over me, lest I close my eyes; even food tastes bitter in my mouth.
- 13 Gone is my glory, O ‘Gāb; I am a defeated man, a dead man walking among the living.
- 14 O ‘Gāb, O wild eagle, oppression has turned my hair gray; too much suffering has crushed my spirit, and soon I may be driven to distraction.
- 15 For years I have not enjoyed sleep; I stay awake alone all night, sighing and weeping.
- 16 A tent cannot be pitched without poles and cords; when will you come, ‘Gāb, and build my tent?
- 17 Alone, I can do nothing but bite on my fingers [in sorrow]; I close my eyes and turn away.
- 18 I wait for the wind to bring me glad tidings; I hope for the brothers of Nimšah to answer my call.

‘Gāb and Ḥjāb had remained with their maternal uncles in the Syrian desert and did not join their father in Najd after they became grown men

because each was receiving a yearly pension of a considerable sum from the Turkish government. At that time, the Turkish government was paying subsidies to notable bedouin chiefs in the Syrian desert in its effort to pacify the nomads and curb their predatory activities, in order to make the desert roads, especially the Ḥajj road, safer for travelers. But upon receiving their father's poems, 'Gāb and Ḥjāb renounced the government subsidies and, in defiance of the Turkish decree, went to Najd to answer their father's call, accompanied by a few faithful friends and servants. Throughout this long journey, 'Gāb gathered information from camel riders concerning his father and the whereabouts of Šāmīx.

After thirty days of forced marches, 'Gāb and his company spent the last night of their journey near the wells of al-Ḥēzih, having received information that Šāmīx was camping there. At dawn, 'Gāb went alone to look for his father's tent; he knew that Šāmīx had obliged his father to pitch a small tent on the outskirts of the camp. When he found the tent, he woke up the herder and ordered him to drive his father's camels to the wells to drink. The herder protested, saying that Šāmīx had warned him several times never to take Si'dūn's camels to the water till midday, after the herds of all the others had drunk their fill. 'Gāb told the herder not to fear Šāmīx and insisted that he must take the camels to drink. The herder drove the camels to the wells while 'Gāb hid among them. When Šāmīx saw the camels of Si'dūn driven to the water, he was outraged and ran after the herder with his camel stick, intent on thrashing him. When he came close, 'Gāb, like a furious tiger, came out from among the camels to meet him. Šāmīx was so struck by the awesome sight of 'Gāb with drawn sword in hand that he panicked and threw himself into one of the wells. He refused to come out until 'Gāb gave him assurances that his life would be spared. By that time, Ḥjāb had arrived in the camp with the pack camels and the rest of the company. A large, fully furnished, multipoled tent was built for Si'dūn. Messengers were sent to call out through the camp that every man should come to Si'dūn's new tent and pay him homage. Thus, Si'dūn once again became the chief of Wild Slēmān, and Šāmīx was soon forgotten.

Si'dūn was an energetic and capable leader. After regaining the chieftainship of Wild Slēmān, he immediately set out to assert his authority and demonstrate his qualities as a leader. He was supported by his two sons, 'Gāb and Ḥjāb, whose names became known throughout the desert—'Gāb for his valor and Ḥjāb for his hospitality.

One year, the territory of Wild Slēmān was stricken by drought, so Si'dūn decided to invade Beḡā Niḡīl, a large territory in northern Arabia which is famous for its rich pastures and which then belonged to Shammar. He sent a declaration of war to Miṣliṡ at-Timyāṡ, the paramount chief of the at-Tūmān section of Shammar, in the form of a poem asking him

to quit Bēḏā Niṭīl or be evicted by force. The poem, as the opening lines indicate, was sent with a delegation of eight men riding eight identical mounts. According to Musil, “When a chief sends out a mission he takes care that all ride camels of the same color” (1928:319). In the fourth line of the poem, Si‘dūn boasts that the camels of Wild Slēmān are fat because they graze in the richest and most contested pastures. In the following line, he declares that these camels were not inherited, but were seized by force from other tribes. In the penultimate line, Si‘dūn states that his tribesmen ride horses of pure breed whose dams were never covered by a nag and whose noble ancestry can be traced back to the time of the Prophet. In this poem, Si‘dūn does not vilify Miṣliṭ. On the contrary, he praises him as a noble man. Desert knights and poets usually do not disparage their adversaries. Their principle is that a worthy man must fight only with a worthy adversary. For after all, what prestige can a man derive from defeating an unworthy foe?

- 1 Hail, you rider on a barren mount whose breasts were never suckled by a calf; one of eight identical camels, she is not alone.
- 2 Their chests are wide, their legs are spotted with white, thoroughbreds of Omani origin.
- 3 You will alight by the camp of Miṣliṭ, the scion of noble ancestors; tell him to quit his land, we wish to take possession of it.
- 4 We wish to graze our camel herds there—sweet to the ear is their growling; we fatten them on coveted pastures.
- 5 We herd them, bearing long lances to protect them against enemy tribes.
- 6 We did not inherit them from our ancestors; they are the milch camels of our adversaries, which we took by force.
- 7 They graze protected by ‘Gāb, who carries a sharp spear to guard them from enemy attacks.
- 8 O riders, tell Miṣliṭ we are marching against him; I challenge him to meet us on the battlefield.
- 9 For days we march searching for our enemies; we trample upon them with our feet.
- 10 We ride slender thoroughbred mares whose ancestors we trace to the Prophet’s days.
- 11 We sing on their backs as we deliver death blows; swiftly they retreat, yet more quickly we turn them around.

Having attacked Shammar and driven them out of Bēḏā Niṭīl, Si‘dūn celebrated his victory over Miṣliṭ at-Timyāṭ in the following poem. He begins by imploring a mounted courier to spread the news in the camps of ‘Anazah. The speed of the courier’s camel mount is compared to that

of a terrified ostrich. This is a stock image in Nabaṭi poetry. It is common to compare a fleet camel mount to an ostrich, antelope, or similar hunted animal of the wild. These animals run very fast, especially when terrified by the approach of a hunter or predator. In this poem, Si‘dūn describes how Miṣliṭ fled the battlefield on a speedy horse, leaving behind his cousin Jrēs, a renowned Shammari warrior, who was slain in Zawāḡīb by the ‘Anazah horsemen. Si‘dūn praises his son ‘Gāb and in the last line describes him as young and handsome.

- 1 Hail, you rider on a speedy mount that runs like a terrified ostrich on level plains,
- 2 A handsome mount with erect hump and arched neck, a purebred of noble ancestry—
- 3 Not a common pack animal—it is a wild beast that has never been ridden before.
- 4 You will alight at the camps of ‘Anazah, who adorn their sharp spears with gallant deeds.
- 5 When you join their assemblies in the tents of their chiefs, and my faithful friends among them question you,
- 6 Tell them, multitudes that cannot be counted attacked us at dawn; the people of the mountain attacked us in the early morning.
- 7 Praise the Lord, they were vanquished and their stragglers sought refuge in [the distant settlements of] Gfār and Ḥāyil.
- 8 Many bodies fell to the ground, their heads severed by our sabers; with our swords we demonstrate our anger at our foes.
- 9 Many enemy horsemen were thrown down; they fell from their horses and rolled in the dust.
- 10 Intoxicated by his multitudes [of followers], Miṣliṭ attacked us in the morning, and ‘Gāb, the wild eagle, met him on the field, riding his fiery horse.
- 11 He [Miṣliṭ] threw down his sword and ran away; he spurred his mare and hid behind the dunes.
- 12 He left behind [his slain cousin] Jrēs in Zawāḡīb; woe to him, he will bemoan this gallant lad.
- 13 He [‘Gāb] sits in the tent, dignified and clad in his war attire; he is still young, but he is already renowned for his glorious deeds.

Miftāḥ al-Ġēī, the chief of al-Ġyīṭih, a principal line of the ‘Abdah section of Shammar, was enraged by the defeat of his kinsmen at the hands of Si‘dūn. He sent urgent appeals to the various clans of Shammar, inciting them to close their ranks and stand united against Si‘dūn and his ‘Anazah tribesmen. Many answered the call of Miftāḥ and a large army of Shammar clansmen marched against Si‘dūn. The armies of



‘Anazah and Shammar met by the water wells of Ḍafrih in the lands of Shammar. This time Shammar won the day, and their victory was celebrated by the Shammari poet Ršēd Ibn Ṭō‘ān.

The poem opens with the description of the battlefield as a raincloud. This is a stock image in Nabaṭi poetry, which is also reversible: a raincloud may equally be likened to a battlefield. In this image, the smoke from firing guns mixed with the dust raised by galloping horses and trotting camels veils the midday sun like a thick cloud and turns day into night. The flashing of brandished swords and firing guns is lightning, and the sound of galloping and firing is thunder. The bullets are hailstones, and the flowing blood is rain. A mighty tribe is likened to a flash flood raging down from the summit of a lofty mountain to the level plains below. Those who attempt to stand in the way of such a mighty tribe are like a man who tries to stop a torrent with his cloak.

In the poem, Ršēd likens the meeting of the Shammar and ‘Anazah armies on the battlefield to the coming together of rain clouds. The clouds pour rain heavily on Ḍafrih, but it is the rain of death, and the battleground is left strewn as if with mushrooms and grass, with the severed heads of noble mares and the long plaits of slain men. (It is a custom among the desert warriors to grow long plaits.) In line 10, the poet lists the various Shammari clans that fought well. The name Xlēf in line 12 refers to the poet’s friend, to whom he addresses his lines. In line 13, the poet lists the names of some settlements and pasturelands of Shammar. The last three lines are dedicated to Rimmān, a Shammari settlement famous for its palm gardens.

- 1 A white cloud is flashing and thundering, and pouring heavy rains on Ḍafrih.
- 2 The heads of noble mares [killed on the battlefield] are the mushrooms [growing after the rain], the grass is the long plaits of [slain] gallant men.
- 3 The sharp curved swords clash and the vultures open their beaks.
- 4 With long lances, we repulsed the assailants, saying, “Turn back and flee, you hyenas.”
- 5 The men of Shammar loaded their mounts and came in haste from every direction to answer our call.
- 6 They urged on their fleet camels of the Ṭwāliyyāt breed, traversing the vast plains of hostile lands.
- 7 ‘Adwān, defender of the oppressed, is the commander of the fierce [Shammari] warriors who adorn their spear shafts with ostrich plumes.
- 8 I walked among their multitudes to delight my eyes; I gazed at the enemy lines and saw that their heads were low and their eyes aghast.

- 9 I turned my eyes to my kinsmen's lines and found the men cheerful  
and the horses at the ready.
- 10 Worthy are the men of al-ʿIṣlān and Awlād Abu Sēf; so too are the  
men of al-ʿAlyā when the time for vengeance comes.
- 11 After they ran out of bullets and gunpowder, they grasped the  
handles of their drawn swords.
- 12 O Xlēf, with fearless hearts they run to the pool of death, like thirsty  
camels after water.
- 13 We do not slacken in defending Salmā, Rimmān, Ajā, and al-ʿṢāmī,  
our beloved lands.
- 14 We shall defend tenaciously the shady palm gardens of Rimmān;  
many a bold youth we killed in its defense.
- 15 We spear and are speared in defense of our gardens; we readily  
give our lives to defend them.
- 16 From the harvest [of the palm gardens] we feed the hungry guests  
in lean times when others close their doors and eat their food alone.

Despite the victory of Shammar in this encounter with ʿAnazah, the latter remained the masters of the field. The Shammaris knew that in order to drive Siʿdūn out of their rich pastures they must strike down his intrepid son, ʿGāb. Once, when a large assembly of Shammari warriors was gathered at the tent of one of their chiefs, the chief poured a cup of coffee and declared, "This is the cup of ʿGāb; whoever drinks it must meet him and slay him on the battlefield." An obscure young man by the name of Aba-l-wgayy sprang up and drank the cup. The next time ʿAnazah and Shammar met on the field, Aba-l-wgayy challenged ʿGāb to single combat. ʿAnazah and Shammar lined up facing each other, the better to watch the fight between ʿGāb and Aba-l-wgayy. At first, the two champions fought on horseback with spears, but soon they fell to the ground and began to fight with swords. As soon as the two fell to the ground, the horsemen of ʿAnazah and Shammar charged each other, each side seeking to save its champion. In the confusion of the melee, the valuable sword and noble mare of ʿGāb went to Aba-l-wgayy, while ʿGāb walked away with the sword and horse of Aba-l-wgayy. This in itself was a moral victory for Shammar and an honor for Aba-l-wgayy. Siʿdūn was disheartened by the incident. His friends tried to console him, and promised to obtain a better sword and horse for ʿGāb as a recompense for the ones he lost to Aba-l-wgayy. Siʿdūn responded, "It is not the loss of the sword or the horse that saddens me. Rather, I am saddened because they were taken from the hands of my famous son by an unrenowned Shammari youth who is not his equal. I am also afraid that the Shammari poet Mbērić at-Tbēnāwī will compose a poem about the incident and

say, ‘We took the sword from the right hand of ‘Gāb, and his noble horse we exchanged for a jade.’” Strangely enough, at-Tbēnāwī did compose a poem about the incident which included this very line. And in the third line of this poem, which is translated below, at-Tbēnāwī points out to Si‘dūn that it is the ancient custom of Shammar and ‘Anazah to fight each other. To understand the jest of this line, one must understand that the nomads view human interaction in reciprocal terms. They conceive of their relationships with friends and foes as a form of debt or exchange. An act, whether friendly or hostile, has to be paid back or requited in kind, the sooner the better. The term “son of Wāyil” in line 3 refers to Si‘dūn, as Wāyil is the ancient ancestor of ‘Anazah.

- 1 O fair maidens, paint the hands of Aba-l-wgayy [in recognition of his bravery]; he is truly the son of noble ancestors.
- 2 We took the sword from the right hand of ‘Gāb, and his noble horse we exchanged for a jade.
- 3 O dear friends, such is our ancient habit; O son of Wāyil, sweet is fair and swift exchange.
- 4 I do not belittle ‘Gāb and the likes of him; he is a true hero when he rides his prancing horse.
- 5 It is well known among all tribes that he meets his assailants courageously on the battlefield.
- 6 But I have for him specially trained tigers, the stalwart lads of Shammar, on fiery mares.

Hāyis al-G‘ēṭ, the redoubtable chief of the al-Brēc section of Shammar, once decided to undertake a raid against Wild Slēmān. His plan was to surprise the camel herds of Wild Slēmān in the outlying pastures and drive them off before their herders had time to muster a rescue party. He marched from Mesopotamia to Najd at the head of seventy horsemen of the Zōba‘ clan with their *zimāmīl* (cameleers who carry food and water for the horses and their riders). However, it so happened that just in the nick of time Si‘dūn was informed of the intentions of Hāyis; he called on his sons ‘Gāb and Ḥjāb to lead the troops of Wild Slēmān and proceed to the pastures to protect the herds. They marched all night and reached the pastures at dawn of the same day that Hāyis had chosen for his attack. The small Shammari force was routed by the ‘Anazah tribesmen. Hāyis and his cavaliers managed to escape, but the cameleers and the provisions were captured. While their kinsmen were dividing the spoils, ‘Gāb and Ḥjāb alone chased the fleeing horsemen. When Hāyis saw that they were pursued by ‘Gāb followed only by his brother,

Ḥjāb, he turned to his horsemen, saying, "O men of Shammar, today is the day of vengeance. Our good fortune has brought 'Gāb to us where we want him. Close your ranks and let us rush upon him as one man." Hāyis also reminded his tribesmen of the famous Shammari knight Hiḍlūl aš-Šwēhrī who had been killed by 'Gāb the previous year. The words of Hāyis filled his comrades with rage and courage. They turned around and charged furiously against 'Gāb and Ḥjāb, killing them both.

The slaying of 'Gāb and Ḥjāb was a great victory for Hāyis, and he became famous throughout the desert. The incident became the topic of conversation throughout the Shammari camps, and it was celebrated by the poets of Shammar as much as it was lamented by the poets of 'Anazah. The following poem was composed by the famous Shammari poet Ršēd Ibn Ṭō'an. Ršēd begins his poem by praising Hāyis and comparing him to a wild falcon which soars in the skies in search of its prey. In line 2, the poet says that while still a young man Hāyis had worn out strong rugged camel mounts by his incessant riding and relentless raiding, and that even in his old age he conquered everything in his path till he reached the sea. In the third line, Ršēd begins an account of the raid that Hāyis undertook against Wild Slēmān. He points out that Wild Slēmān had been forewarned of the impending raid and were able to rally in time to defend their camels. The ensuing fight is compared to that between Aba Zēd and Ḍyāb, the famous heroes in the *sīrah* of Bani Hilāl. The place where the fight took place is mentioned in line 5, and in line 7 the Shammari warriors are described as resplendent youths whose maternal uncles are noble. (The bedouins believe that the character of a person is equally determined by his maternal and paternal lines; a man who wishes to have distinguished children must marry into an honorable family.) In the second hemistich of the same line, the poet speaks of the warriors of Wild Slēmān as having close ties of kinship and thus as being ready to die for each other. These two hemistichs succinctly draw a picture of the pitched battle between the noble warriors of Shammar on one side and the tenacious, resolute men of 'Anazah on the other. In line 8, two names are mentioned: Nūt, the wife of 'Gāb, and Hēfā, the mother of Hiḍlūl aš-Šwēhrī, the Shammari knight who had been killed by 'Gāb in the previous year. The ninth line states that it took the search party of Wild Slēmān four days to find the bodies of 'Gāb and Ḥjāb. Ḍbēb, mentioned in line 12, was the cousin of 'Gāb and Ḥjāb, who, upon hearing that they had been killed by the horsemen of Shammar, ordered that all the cameleers who had been captured by Wild Slēmān be put to the sword. The poet rails at Ḍbēb for committing such a shameful act, for it is considered dishonorable to kill a captured foe. In the last line, the poet mildly reproaches Si'dūn and reminds him (perhaps in apology

for the slaying of his sons) that he, Si'dūn, should not expect to harry Shammar and yet live in peace himself.

- 1 A wild falcon took off, followed by horsemen and cameleers, seeking to despoil the enemy and attack him unawares.
- 2 In his youth he tormented rugged mounts, and in his ripe age he struck the sea with his right hand.
- 3 The [enemy] camp was alarmed on the night of the attack, and the sorties sallied forth before dawn.
- 4 They met on the soft sands by the dunes, and the champions fought like Aba Zēd and D̲yāb.
- 5 Zibār Wrēc was covered by rising dust, and the enemy lances pierced our kinsmen in the back.
- 6 The battle raged among the valiant men who cover the retreat of their troops and defend those riding on slow mares.
- 7 Our resplendent youths of noble maternal uncles charged against the dauntless warriors who are close kinsmen.
- 8 Nūt raised her voice wailing; 'Gāb we killed to please Hēfā.
- 9 Four nights had passed before his body was found; he was humbled and his face rolled in the dust.
- 10 Our women rejoiced and cheered after the wild falcon seized 'Gāb,
- 11 But their women wailed and screeched like water wheels; they shuddered at the news brought them by the returning horsemen.
- 12 O Ḍbēb, you dishonored your house by killing the cameleers; you defiled your tent by killing those who entered it.
- 13 O al-'Wāji, this life is full of adversity; he who rends other people's garments, his garments will be rent.

The Shammarī poet Mbērīc at-Tbēnāwī also composed two poems celebrating the victory of Shammar over 'Anazah and the slaying of 'Gāb and Ḥjāb at Zibār Wrēc. Here is one of these poems, in which he addresses 'Gāb:

- 1 O 'Gāb, the eagles of Shammar swooped over you; they snatched your head and another head [that of Ḥjāb].
- 2 When the mares gave you their backs in retreat, they were not fleeing; they made a sharp turn and charged at you.
- 3 Beware of the bold [Shammarī] stalwarts, riding the slender wiry mares nourished by camels' milk.
- 4 Hāyis led against you the horsemen of Zōba', whose spears drip with enemy blood.
- 5 When they met you at the western edge of Zibār Wrēc, your body rolled in the dust, headless.

The following is the second poem by at-Tbēnāwī:

- 1 Last year it was Hēfā who wailed and screamed; but today the wailing of Nūt and the women in her camp fills the heart with pity.
- 2 ‘Gāb was thrown down by the riders of swift mares, and vultures have torn his heart out with their powerful talons.
- 3 And Hġāb, the gallant man in whose tent wayfarers found shade and food; alas for those who mourn him.
- 4 He was killed instantly by the horsemen of Shammar; he did not return to his loved ones.
- 5 O dear friends [of ‘Anazah], such are our ancient customs; sweet is the paying of a debt before it is due.

Si‘dūn was grief-stricken by the slaying of his two sons and composed many elegies lamenting their deaths. ‘Gāb and Hġāb each had a son, so Si‘dūn began to train his grandchildren to be doughty warriors like their slain fathers. He taught them how to ride horses and how to throw the spear. When the two boys became mature men (in the desert, a fifteen-year-old youth is considered mature), Si‘dūn demanded of each that he compose a poem expressing his yearning to avenge his slain father and uncle. Si‘dūn promised Falġā, the filly of ‘Gāb’s mare (which was the noblest mare in the desert), to the one who composed the better poem. The son of ‘Gāb won the prize for composing the following poem. In line 10, the muzzles of galloping mares are likened to the snouts of wild boars. (Thoroughbred mares breathe through their wide nostrils, never through their mouths. After a gallop, a mare breathes heavily through its nostrils; thus, its muzzle resembles the snout of a wild boar.)

- 1 I long to ride Falġā when she is full grown with all her hooves shod.
- 2 So when raiders attack the moving herds and the pretty virgins glance at me from their litters,
- 3 I may meet the attacking horsemen of Zōba<sup>c</sup>, the flashing of whose swords and spears blinds the eyes.
- 4 With a curved sword of shining steel in my hand, I look for the slayer of my father among the horsemen.
- 5 If I do not spur my horse to meet the foe, I do not deserve the love of pretty virgins with erect breasts.
- 6 The day of reckoning will come when we meet on the battlefield to settle our accounts.
- 7 I must avenge my father, ‘Gāb; this is a duty entrusted to me by a venerable man,
- 8 Si‘dūn, my grandfather, the honorable chief, our commander in peace and war.

- 9 A debt [is] owed to me by Hāyis, the defender of slow mares on the retreat; I pray to God to bring him to me.
- 10 If I do not meet the charging horses and repulse their attack—their muzzles like the snouts of wild boars—
- 11 I do not deserve membership in my noble tribe, nor to be served when the coffee cup goes round in great assemblies.

This poem by the son of ‘Gāb was answered by the following poem by a Shammari poet.

- 1 So what if you ride Falhā, a full-grown mare? A Shammari youth will meet you on a broad-chested slender steed.
- 2 Your father was struck by a spear adorned [with ostrich plumes], and fell from his horse, as a bucket is cast into a well.
- 3 He was felled by a stalwart who does not flee enemy attacks,
- 4 A fierce fighter on the battlefield. Vultures tore the breast of your father with their powerful beaks.
- 5 The Zōba‘ lads are bold warriors who rout their opponents on the battlefield.

Some time later, a major battle took place between ‘Anazah under the leadership of Ġnēm ar-Rubbiḍa and Shammar under the leadership of Hāyis al-G‘ēṭ. The son of ‘Gāb joined Ġnēm ar-Rubbiḍa and killed Hāyis on the battlefield, thus avenging his father.

When Fayṣal Ibn Tirkī al-Sa‘ūd appointed the Shammari prince ‘Abdal-lāh Ibn ‘Alī Ibn Rashīd as governor of Hāyil (see the next chapter), all the sheikhs of the tribes of northern Najd came to pay their respects to Ibn Rashīd and present him with gifts of horses. Among them was Ġnēm ar-Rubbiḍa. Upon receiving Ġnēm, Ibn Rashīd presented him to the blind Shammari poet Ršēd Ibn Ṭō‘ān, saying, “This is Ġnēm ar-Rubbiḍa; shake hands with him!” The poet replied, “I will not shake hands with him, for there is no peace between him and me.” Ršēd extemporized the following two lines to incite Ibn Rashīd against Ġnēm.

- 1 O Ġnēm, you owe us the blood of Hāyis, the cavalier protecting the troops of Shammar in retreat.
- 2 If he [Ibn Rashīd] does not repay you with two morning attacks, he is not the progeny of a noble sire.

(Although Hāyis was killed by the son of ‘Gāb, the poet here holds Ġnēm responsible, since he was the one who led ‘Anazah tribesmen against Shammar.) Upon hearing these two lines, Ibn Rashīd told Ġnēm, “Take back the horses you offered me as a gift, and go back to your territory

and prepare, for I must avenge the blood of Hāyis.” Ibn Rashīd did make a raid against Ġnēm, and shed his blood for that of Hāyis.

The aim in presenting this somewhat lengthy biographical sketch of Si‘dūn al-‘Wāji and his two sons, ‘Gāb and Ḥjāb, and their tribal wars with Shammar has been to demonstrate the function of Nabaṭi poetry in tribal politics, and the relationship of this poetry to its narrative context. Again, I must emphasize the resemblance of Nabaṭi poetry to classical Arabic poetry in both respects. The above narrative and poems read like a chapter from *Ayyām al-‘Arab*, “The Days of the Arabs,” a popular collection of narratives and poems dealing with tribal wars in Arabia. Such examples illustrate one of the main points I wish to establish—namely, the significant amount of continuity between classical Arabic poetry and Nabaṭi poetry.