



A LITERARY
HISTORY OF THE ARABS

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(al-Jawlán), south of Damascus. Thus under the quickening impulse of Hellenistic culture the Ghassánids developed a civilisation far superior to that of the Lakhnites, who, just because of their half-barbarian character, were more closely in touch with the heathen Arabs, and exercised a deeper influence upon them. Some aspects of this civilisation have been indicated in the description of Jabala b. al-Ayham's court, attributed to the poet Hassán. An earlier bard, the famous Nábigha, having fallen out of favour with Nu'mán III of Hira, fled to Syria, where he composed a splendid eulogy of the Ghassánids in honour of his patron, King 'Amr, son of Harith the Lame. After celebrating their warlike prowess, which he has immortalised in the oft-quoted verse—

"One fault they have: their swords are blunt of edge
Through constant beating on their foemen's mail,"

he concludes in a softer strain:

"Theirs is a liberal nature that God gave
To no men else; their virtues never fail.
Their home the Holy Land: their faith upright;
They hope to prosper if good deeds avail.
Zoned in fair wise and delicately shod,
They keep the Feast of Palms, when maidens pale,
Whose scarlet silken robes on trestles hang,
Greet them with odorous bouquets and bid them hail.
Long lapped in ease tho' bred to war, their limbs
Green-shouldered vestments, white-sleeved, richly veil."*

The Pre-Islamic history of the Bedouins is mainly a record of wars, or rather guerillas, in which a great deal of raiding and plundering was accomplished, as a rule without serious bloodshed. There was no lack of shouting; volleys of vaunts

* Nábigha, ed. by Derenbourg, p. 78; Nöldcke's *Delicatus*, p. 96. The whole poem has been translated by Sir Charles Lyall in his *Ancient Arabian Poetry*, p. 95 sqq.

and satires were exchanged; camels and women were carried off; many skirmishes took place but few pitched battles: it was an Homeric kind of warfare that called forth individual exertion in the highest degree, and gave ample opportunity for single-handed deeds of heroism. "To write a true history of such Bedouin feuds is well-nigh impossible. As comparatively trustworthy sources of information we have only the poems and fragments of verse which have been preserved.

According to Suyúti, the Arabian traditionists used to demand from any Bedouin who related an historical event the citation of some verses in

its support; and, in effect, all such stories that have come down to us are crystallised round the poems. Unfortunately these crystals are seldom pure. It appears only too often that the narratives have been invented, with abundant fancy and with more or less skill, to suit the contents of the verses."† But although what is traditionally related concerning the Battle-days of the Arabs (*Ayyámu 'l-'Arab*) is to a large extent legendary, it describes with sufficient fidelity how tribal hostilities generally arose and the way in which they were conducted. The following account of the War of Basús—the most famous of those waged in Pre-Islamic times—will serve to illustrate this important phase of Bedouin life.‡

Towards the end of the fifth century A.D. Kulayb, son of Rab'ia, was chieftain of the Banú Taghlib, a powerful tribe which divided with their kinsmen, the Banú Bakr, a vast tract in north-eastern Arabia, extending from the central highlands to the Syrian desert. His victory at the head of a confederacy formed by these tribes and others over the Yememite Arabs made him the first man in the peninsula, and soon his pride became no less proverbial than his power.§ He was

† Thorbecke, *'Antarah, ein vorislamischer Dichter*, p. 14.

‡ The following narrative is an abridgment of the history of the War of Basús as related in Thibridi's commentary on the *Hamásá* (ed. by Freytag), pp. 420-423 and 251-255. Cf. Nöldcke's *Delicatus*, p. 39 sqq.

§ See p. 5 *supra*.

married to Halila, daughter of Murra, of the Banú Bakr, and dwelt in a 'preserve' (*himd*), where he claimed the sole right of pasturage for himself and the sons of Murra. His brother-in-law, Jassás, had an aunt named Basús. While living under her nephew's protection she was joined by a certain Sa'd, a client of her own people, who brought with him a she-camel called Sarábi.

Now it happened that Kulayb, seeing a lark's nest as he walked on his land, said to the bird, which was screaming and fluttering distressfully over her eggs, "Have no fear! I will protect thee." But a short time afterwards he observed in that place the track of a strange camel and found the eggs trodden to pieces. Next morning

when he and Jassás visited the pasture ground, Kulayb noticed the she-camel of Sa'd among his brother-in-law's herd, and conjecturing that she had destroyed the eggs, cried out to Jassás, "Take heed thou! Take heed! I have pondered something, and were I sure, I would have done it! May this she-camel never come here again with this herd!" "By God," exclaimed Jassás, "but she shall come!" and when Kulayb threatened to pierce her udder with an arrow, Jassás retorted, "By the stones of Wá'il, fix thine arrow in her udder and I will fix my lance in thy backbone!" Then he drove his camels forth from the *himd*. Kulayb went home in a passion, and said to his wife, who sought to discover what ailed him, "Knowest thou any one who durst defend his client against me?" She answered, "No one except my brother Jassás, if he has given his word." She did what she could to prevent the quarrel going further, and for a time nothing worse than taunts passed between them, until one day Kulayb went to look after his camels which were being taken to water, and were followed by those of Jassás. While the latter were waiting their turn to the wounding of Sa'd's she-camel. the water. Kulayb imagined that Jassás had let her go deliberately, and resenting the supposed insult, he seized his bow and shot her through the udder. The beast lay down, moaning loudly, before the tent of Basús, who in vehement indignation at the wrong suffered by her friend, Sa'd, tore the veil from her head, beating her face and crying, "O shame, shame!" Then, addressing Sa'd, but raising her voice so that Jassás might

* Wá'il is the common ancestor of Bakr and Taghlib. For the use of stones (*ansábi*) in the worship of the Pagan Arabs see Wellhausen, *Reise Arabischen Hententums* (2nd ed.), p. 101 sqq. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (London, 1894), p. 200 sqq.

hear, she spoke these verses, which are known as 'The Instigators' (*al-Muwahhidá*):—

"O Sa'd, be not deceived! Protect thyself!
This people for their clients have no care.

Look to my herds, I charge thee, for I doubt
Even my little daughters till my fare.

By thy life, had I been in Mingar's house,

Thou wouldst not have been wronged, my client, there!

But now such folk I dwell among that when
The wolf comes, 'tis my sheep he comes to tear!"

Jassás was stung to the quick by the imputation, which no Arab can endure, that injury and insult might be inflicted upon his guest-friend with impunity. Some days afterwards, having ascertained that Kulayb had gone out unarmed, he followed and slew him, and fled in haste to his own people. Murra, when he heard the news, said to his son, "Thou alone must answer for thy deed: thou shalt be put in chains that his kinsmen may slay thee. By the stones of Wá'il, never will Bakr and Taghlib be joined together in welfare after the death of Kulayb. Verily, an evil thing hast thou brought upon thy people, O Jassás!

Kulayb
murdered by
Jassás.

Thou hast slain their chief and severed their union and cast war into their midst." So he put Jassás in chains and confined him in a tent; then he summoned the elders of the families and asked them, "What do ye say concerning Jassás? Here he is, a prisoner, until the avengers demand him and we deliver him unto them." "No, by God," cried Sa'd b. Málik b. Dubay'a b. Gays, "we will not give him up, but will fight for him to the last man!" With these words he called for a camel to be sacrificed, and when its throat was cut they swore to one another over the blood. Thereupon Murra said to Jassás:—

"If war thou hast wrought and brought on me,
No laggard I with arms outborn.

Whatever befall, I make to flow
The baneful cups of death at morn.

When spear-points clash, my wounded man

Is forced to drag the spear he stained.

Never I reck, if war must be,
What Destiny hath preordained.

* *Hamása*, 422, 14 sqq. Nöldeke's *Delectus*, p. 39, last line and foll.

*Donning war's harness, I will strive
To fend from me the shame that sears.
Already I thrill and my lust is roused.
For the shock of the horsemen against the spears!"**

Thus began the War of Basūs between Taghlib on the one side and the clan of Shaybān, to which Murra belonged, on the other; for at first the remaining divisions of Bakr held aloof from the struggle, considering Shaybān to be clearly in the wrong. The latter were reduced to dire straits, when an event occurred which caused the Bakrites to rise as one man on behalf of their fellows. Hārith b. 'Ubad, a famous knight of Bakr, had refused to take part in the contest, saying in words which became proverbial, "I have neither camel nor she-camel in it," i.e., "it is no affair of mine." One day his nephew, Bujayr, encountered Kulayb's brother, Muthalhi, on whom the mantle of the murdered chief had fallen; and Muthalhi, struck with admiration for the youth's comeliness, asked him who he was. "Bujayr," said he, "the son of 'Amr, the son of 'Ubad." "And who is thy uncle on the mother's side?" "My mother is a captive" (for he would not name an uncle of whom he had no honour). Then Muthalhi slew him, crying, "Pay for Kulayb's shoe-latchet!" On hearing this, Hārith sent a message to Muthalhi in which he declared that if vengeance were satisfied by the death of Bujayr, he for his part would gladly acquiesce. But Muthalhi replied, "I have taken satisfaction only for Kulayb's shoe-latchet." Thereupon Hārith sprang up in wrath and cried:—

*"God knows, I kindled not this fire, altho'
I am burned in it to-day.
A lord for a shoe-latchet is too dear:
To horse! To horse! Away!"**

And al-Find, of the Banū Bakr, said on this occasion:—

*"We spared the Banū Hind's and said, 'Our brothers they remain:
It may be Time will make of us one people yet again.'"*

* *Hamdsā*, 423, 11 sqq. Nöldeke's *Delectus*, p. 41, l. 3 sqq.

* *Hamdsā*, 252, 8 sqq. Nöldeke's *Delectus*, p. 44, l. 3 sqq.

* Hind is the mother of Bakr and Taghlib. Here the Banū Hind (Sons of Hind) are the Taghlibites.

*But when the wrong grew manifest, and naked Ill stood plain,
And naught was left but ruthless hate, we paid them
Vengeance by
al-Find.
bane with bane!
As hoars marched we forth to war in wrath and high
disdain:
Our swords brought widowhood and tears and weeping in their
train,
Our spears dealt gashes wide whence blood like water spilled
amain.
No way but Force to weaken Force and mastery obtain;
'Tis wooing contumely to meet wild actions with humane:
By evil thou may'st win to peace when good is tried in vain."**

The Banū Bakr now prepared for a decisive battle. As their enemy had the advantage in numbers, they adopted a stratagem devised by Hārith. "Fight them," said he, "with your women. Equip every woman with a small waterskin and give her a club. Place the whole body of them behind you—this will make you more resolved in battle—and wear some distinguishing mark which they will recognise, so that when a woman passes by one of your wounded she may know him by his mark and give him water to drink, and raise him from the ground; but when she passes by one of your foes she will smite him with her club and slay him." So the Bakrites shaved their heads, devoting themselves to death, and made this a mark of recognition between themselves and their women, and this day was called the Day of Shearing. Now Jaḥdar b. Dubay'a was an ill-favoured, dwarfish man, with fair flowing love-locks, and he said, "O my people, if ye shave my head ye will disfigure me, so leave my locks for the first horseman of Taghlib that shall emerge from the hill-pass on the morrow" (meaning "I will answer for him, if my locks are spared"). On his request being granted, he exclaimed:

*"To wife and daughter
Henceforth I am dead:
Dust for ornament
On my hair is shed.
Let me close with the horsemen
Who hither ride,
Cut my locks from me
If I stand aside!"*

The vow of
Jaḥdar b.
Dubay'a.

* *Hamdsā*, 9, 17 sqq. Nöldeke's *Delectus*, p. 45, l. 10 sqq.