

QUADERNI DI ARABIA ANTICA I

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ARABI

Arabs Recount Arabia Before Islam

Part I

«L'ERMA» di BRETSCHNEIDER

QUADERNI DI ARABIA ANTICA 1
series directed by Alessandra Avanzini

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ARABI. Arabs Recount Arabia Before Islam, Part I

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Introduction: Story before History

Handling the sources of Arabic historiography on Pre-Islamic Arabia

Early Arabic historiography, developed since the first centuries of Hijra, mainly focused on recent and contemporary events: the coming of the Prophet, the rise of Islam, the age of four Righteous Caliphs, the great conquests. Inferred by many factors (such as tribal factionalism, ideological and religious intent, philological purposes, pure entertainment scope) earlier historiographers compiled monographs whose basic material was biographies and speeches, battles and raids, conquests and poetry.¹ But they also started to look at what happened before Islam, for some similar reasons.

The Quran, the first text of Arabic literature to be written down, in evoking episodes of ancient Arabian history and narratives, gave some examples, though scattered and presented as glimpses into what the Arabs of the early seventh century knew or thought about their past.

Subsequently, beside the religious literature that increased and broadened the Quranic themes, two main fields gained the interest of Arabic writers on Pre-Islamic Arabia: poetry and genealogy (*ansāb*).

Poetry was one of the most important and widespread *mediums* in Pre-Islamic times, and still in the early centuries of Hijra remained a preference archive for many scholars in any field.

Genealogy was also a long term method for reconstruction of identities, both individual and tribal, and it surely received further impulse with the second Caliph ‘Umar’s re-organization of the army, the so-called *dīwān al-ġund*, which adopted a tribal system for recruiting and booty-sharing between the 15 and 20 year after Hijra; genealogy forcedly pushes specialists to look back to a past where important events of a given group might be located in a mythological shape.

On these bases, a number of genres developed, including of course historiography, as well as poetry collections and commentaries, narrative, antiquarian and geographical compilations and so on. All of them incorporated a great amount of stories, legends and poems on Arabian past.

In this concern, it is probably not by the chance that the word “history” (*ta’rīḥ*, originally intended as “chronicle” and as such applied to annalistic historiography) appeared relatively late in Arabic literature as a title of a book.²

¹ Critical literature on the development of Arab-Islamic historiography sensibly increased in the last decades, here I quote among the most referential authors F. Donner, M. Lecker, A. Noth.

² According to titles of the first works bearing the word *ta’rīḥ* in their title – e. g. those by al-Hayṭam b. ‘Adī, al-Wāqidī, ‘Abd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb, al-Ḥalīfa b. Ḥayyāt, all of them from the beginning of third century of Hijra (see J. Schacht in *Arabica* XVI, 1969, pp. 79-81), is the annalistic system to put events in a chronological order that influenced this idea of history. It is finally the “History” (*Ta’rīḥ*) by Ya‘qūbī, dated around 873 CE, i.e. in the second half of the third century of Hijra, that may be considered the birth of Arabic historiography *strictu sensu*, i.e. the first attempt to build an universal historical framework where events of the whole humanity could fit.

Previous works which can be counted among “historical literature”, indeed, basically did not mean to be “history” as we mean it today. It was not *taʿrīḥ*, but *aḥbār*: not history, but stories, or better, a recounting of historical facts.

It was what Fred Donner defined the difference between the “historical” vision of the past³ and the “memorial” one, being the former a representation of a “collective” record of the past, and the latter an “individual” one.

Yet it was probably the only way known or used in earlier times to transmit the past. A way that, with its own rules, models and methodology, was somehow considered trustful and truthful.

Dealing with the question of relationship between “fictive” and “factual” ways to express and communicate in Arabic literature Stefan Leder⁴ remarked that fiction, as we mean it today, has never been an esteemed literary genre in the whole classical Arabic production, and it is however classified as “fables” (*ḥurāfa*) or “legends” (*asāṭīr*) or “evening conversations” (*asmār*). On the other hand, *adab* and other genres of learned literature, with their strong educative though amusing mission, always claimed to be truthful or to some extent trustful, although they include fictional narratives, since that was the way news was recorded and transmitted.

As long as the fictional character of narratives is not assigned by convention, the reader is generally inclined to receive it as factual report. The pretension of historical narration – i.e. narration representing historical figures – to be truth-centered, naturally entails the proposition that it is in some sense factual. The use of this kind of narration as a historical documentation thus prevails, whereas the reading of these texts as modes of literary creation is neglected.⁵

Historiographers of the classical Arabic period thus had to rely on what was the traditional way of recording the past: the speeches of witnesses (*aḥādīṭ*), usually orally handed down through a chain of transmission, as well as on stories and tales (*aḥbār*), i.e. (folk)lore, reported by storytellers and *rāwīs*. In these poetry played a very important role: frequently the narration of a given event is accompanied by verses, and sometimes a verse by an esteemed poet may contain stronger evidence compared to a disreputable witness.

A huge amount of material has been listened to, collected, compiled, read, translated and studied for centuries by many scholars, whose intentions were widely different and various. The sum of all these stories, tales, poetry, folklore, etc., represents what we may call the “Tradition”, following the definition given by Christian Robin:

*appellation commode pour désigner les données de toute nature que les savants musulmans ont collectées pendant les premiers siècles de l’Islam sur les circonstances de la Révélation, sur la naissance de la Communauté et sur le passé de l’Arabie.*⁶

³ Donner 1998, p. 138.

⁴ Leder 1998.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶ Robin 2012a, p. 4.

Questions have been raised to as what extent this material can be considered a “historical source”. Later Muslim historians already tagged some of these sources as “storytellers” and their doubts were usually expressed by the formula “God knows better” (*Allah a‘lam*); yet they had to take account of the material these sources transmitted, and sometimes to refer to them as “learned” (*‘ulamā*).

Analogous, or even stronger, skepticism about such “news” of course excites modern scholars who have to deal with them. And the debate has gone for a long time.

What has been handed down about the *Tubba*’s, the Ḥimyarites and Yemenite poets of ancient times, as well as the stories about soothsayers and everything concerning the al-‘Arim dam and the subsequent diaspora of the Arabs, has not any base at all.⁷

This 1926 statement by Taha Husein, which quite annoyed the rather reactionary circles of the Egyptian educational system in those times, sounds, nowadays, to us taken as granted. Actually T. Husein was mainly concerned with that poetry ascribed to the leading characters of those stories (*qiṣaṣ* or *aḥbār*), collected by philologists as a proof of those same stories, which should be thus relegated into the domain of mere myth and epos of Pre-Islamic Arabia. Decades of critic studies on the sources led to distrusting of most of them. In some cases hyper-criticism practically dismissed almost the whole Tradition as an unreliable source for scientific history.

Nevertheless the question is still open we are faced with by the statement M. Piotroski posed in 1986: “Even for modern science the problem of historical value of epic remains a very complicated one”.⁸ Different answers may and have been given to this question.

Paul Zumthor, in his study on oral traditions, in the chapter concerning epics, gave some synthetic statements in the attempt to put the relationship between history and myth in a right perspective: “*Il n’y a pas [dans l’épopée] d’histoire à proprement parler, mais une vérité perpétuellement recrée par le chant*” he says, but also “*elle [=l’épopée] est auto-biographie, sa propre vie collective qu’il se raconte, aux confins du sommeil et de la névrose*”.⁹ Then he explains:

*L’histoire fournit au poète épique un cadre narrative malléable, important moins pour les informations qu’il comporte que par l’émotions qu’il va provoquer. Une même action, d’un poème à l’autre, d’une version à l’autre, peut être rapportée à un héros différent, ou l’inverse; des personnages d’époques différent, réunis sous un même toit. Des cycles entiers véhiculent ainsi durant des siècles, sous le masque de transpositions successives et aléatoires, le marques ineffaçables d’un événement fondateur... dont la permanence, justement, constitue le cycle.*¹⁰

And concludes: “*Aucune épopée n’est totalement dépourvue d’ingrédient historique, quelle que soit l’opacité mythique de son discours*”.¹¹ Substantially, epic is not history, but it evokes

⁷ Husein 1926, p. 424 (54).

⁸ Piotrovsky 1986, p. 18.

⁹ Zumthor 1983, p. 109.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.