CONTEXT AND THE ENHANCEMENT OF THE MEANING OF AHBAR IN THE KITAB AL-AGANI*

BY

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In the last twenty years a handful of scholars have begun to investigate the intrinsic literary qualities of classical Arabic belles lettres; they have devoted their attention in particular to the maqâma, biographical dictionaries, and certain adab books organised round a particular theme1. On first sight, it may appear strange that the Kitâb al-agâni (Book of Songs) of Abû l-Faraq al-Iṣbahânî (d. 362-3/972-3)2, generally regarded as one of the masterpieces of classical Arabic literature, should have been neglected in this scholarly endeavour up till now.

On reflection, however, the reluctance of researchers to tackle this book can easily be explained. Not only is its size formidable, but the music which the word sazât (song) on page after page conjured up can never be recreated. The Agâni must therefore be approached as an adab work, but always in the knowledge that this

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approach takes no account of one of its fundamental components. And even when regarded as literature it poses special problems, because it is far more of a multi-purpose book than other adab works and thus far more varied in its contents. Parts of it, especially the lists of melodic and rhythmic indications, seek only to convey technical information, whereas the extensive quotations of poems independently of aḥbār may sometimes make the reader wonder if he has not picked up a diwān after all.

It is nevertheless true that the great bulk of the book consists of prose aḥbār often interwoven with poetry. The term ḥabar/aḥbār can perhaps best be translated neutrally as «units of information» and should certainly not be interpreted simply as denoting anecdotes, since it can cover anything from terse statements of fact with no narrative element beyond the process of transmission expressed in the isnād to lengthy historical accounts and the saga-like Ayyām al-ṣ-ʿarāb.

The literary, as distinct from the informative historical and cultural values of the Aḡānī, lies in those aḥbār which take the form of anecdotes or longer narratives, the poetry, and the interaction between them. To study the form, style and function of these more or less elaborated aḥbārī-s beyond the scope of an article. What I would like to look at here is the interaction between aḥbār; I would suggest that the context in which a ḥabar or group of aḥbār is placed enhances its meaning. In other words, not only does a ḥabar convey an isolated piece of information but it may also modify, add to, or comment on the information contained in other neighbouring aḥbār.

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5 The introductory section of Maḡnūn’s article furnishes a number of examples of such terse aḥbār on the subject of the poet’s name (II, 2-5, 9). For the use of the term «saga», at least in connection with the South Arabian material, cf. Karel Petráček, «Völksmäßliche Literatur», in Helmut Gäije (ed.), Grundriss der arabischen Philologie. Band II: Literaturwissenschaft, Wiesbaden 1987, p. 235 and the literature mentioned there.

6 Cf. Šukrī Faysal, Abū l-ʿAtāhiya, ašūr wa aḥbārūh, Damascus 1965, pp. 16-18, for the significance of the combination of poetry and aḥbār.