Precious little of the verse of 'Alqama b. 'Abada, known as 'Alqama al-Faḥl, of the Rabī'a of the Tamīmī has, unfortunately, survived the ravages of time, yet his divān, though modest, boasts three very substantial qaṣīdas, the internal and external evidence of which points to a floruit of circa 520-560² and to artistic kinship with the Wandering Prince of Kinda, Imru' al-Qays. Thus the sources tell the tradition of a poetic contest between the two, which is sufficiently intriguing to merit


² See von Grunebaum, Chronologie, 343-345; idem, "'Alkama b. 'Abada al-Tamīmī", ET² I, 405. Sezgin, GāS II, 121, refers to a tradition handed down by the poet Ru'ba on the authority of his father al-'Aṣāaq, to the effect that the latter's "Großtante... als sie Ḫmu' al-Qays nach der Bedeutung eines seiner Verse fragte, die beiden Dichter beieinander gesehen haben". Poem 8, in Ahlwardt's edition, in which al-Zibriqān (d. 632) is mentioned, adduced as proof of 'Alqama's survival into the 7th Century (by Th. Nöldeke, Die Ghassānischen Fürsten aus dem Hause Ğafnā's, Abh. Akad. d. Wissensch., Berlin 1887, 36, followed by Brockelmann GaL S I, 48, and Seligsohn, ET I, 301), is generally held not to be by him but is attributed to Ḫalīd b. 'Alqama (cf. Ahlwardt, Aechtheit, 67, von Grunebaum, ET² I, 405); in 12 the reference to Abā Qābūs (verse 4) is to al-Nu'mān III Abū Qābūs, c. 580-607 (Lyall's 17th ruler: Translations of Ancient Arabian Poetry, London 1930, 102) but cannot be dated with any precision. See further B. Rothstein, Die Dynastie der Lahmiden in al-Ḫirā, Berlin 1899, 107; von Grunebaum, Chronologie, 344. The anecdote that, in the company of al-Nābiqāb al-Dubayānī and Hāssān b. Ṭābit, our poet visited the Ġassānīd phylarch Ġabala b. al-Ayham (r. 629-637: cf. Lyall, op. cit. 99), is a fabrication, probably based on a misidentification of al-Ḥāriṯ b. Ġabala, al-A'raḡ, the dedicatee of Ahlwardt, poem 2, compounded by the chronological misattribution of poem 8 and association with al-Nābiqāb by virtue of 'Alqama's address of his patron al-Nu'mān b. Mundīr in Ahlwardt 12. This poem has been closely studied by M.M. Bravmann, "'Alqamah's Warning of the Approach of an Enemy", in Studies in Semitic Philology, Leiden 1977, 574-92 and A.F.L. Beeston, "'Alqamah and Bravmann", JAL XI (1980), 32-5. Poems 3-12 in Ahlwardt's edition were, according to al-ʿAlam, deemed spurious by al-ʿAšmaʾī; see Ahlwardt 111 (English text).

© E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1997    Arubica, tome XLIV
a brief rehearsal. Whilst living as a protégé under the tutelage of the tribe of Ṭayyi', Imruʾ al-Qays married one of its fair maidens, Umm Ǧundab, whom he duly and affectionately immortalised in his verse. The Kindite prince seems to have been satisfied, morally and physically, with his lady fair, until, one day, there alighted among the Ṭayyiʾ ‘Alqama b. ‘Abada. Two such poetic giants, who were by no means shrinking violets, soon locked horns in a poetic duel. In his arrogance, Imruʾ al-Qays misguidedly appointed his wife as arbiter, who fixed the horse as the theme of the contest. It was, accordingly, on an equine issue that the decision turned. To her husband’s mortification and chagrin, Umm Ǧundab awarded the laurels to ‘Alqama. Imruʾ al-Qays refused to accept the umpire’s decision, an act of somewhat adolescent petulance consonant with his poetic personality, and promptly divorced her. ‘Alqama, fresh with victory, flush with success, stepped into the breach and married Umm Ǧundab, thereby adding insult to injury to Imruʾ al-Qays’ pride: whence the designation ‘Alqama al-Fahl, i.e. “the Studhorse”.

Ahlwardt’s discussion of the poems (Aechtheit, 65-71) is comprehensive and challenging and is, to the best of my knowledge, the most detailed appraisal by a western orientalist. A propos the contest, he notes the omission of the crucial, decisive verse in some codices of the duasān of Imruʾ al-Qays and the occurrence of ‘Alqama’s winning verse as both verse 52 of Imruʾ al-Qays’s poem and as a mere lectio varia to verse 34 of the prize ode (Aechtheit, 68). He argues that as a result of the Kindite’s status as the most pre-eminent ancient poet it was inconceivable to the mediaeval transmitters and scholars that his corpus could boast of nothing to compare with the brilliance and bravura of ‘Alqama’s celebration of the horse and the chase.


Imruʾ al-Qays thereby remained the original, and hence, greater poet, ‘Alqama the plagiarist, and the award of the laurel wreath to the latter “konnte nur auf Reichnung weiblicher Thorheit und Untreue gesetzt werden”. In this light the divorce and subsequent marriage of Umm Ǧundab is to be evaluated. It also elucidates the application of the laqab.

That this has been felt to be an attractive theory is manifest in Gabrieli’s, albeit reluctant, acquiescence and his declaration “è innegabile che l’uno dei due carmi presuppone l’altro, e vuole garaggiare con esso, che qualcuno, in altre parole, ha messo piuttosto goffamente le mani in un’ opera di contaminazione e imitazione”. He shrewdly asks, however, “quale il modello, e quale la copia maledestra?”

Ahlwardt works from two assumptions: that the existence of ‘Alqama’s poem constituted an intolerable affront to the poetic supremacy, especially in equine

3 The chain of authorities is variously traced back to al-ʾAṣmaʾi, Abū ʿUbayda and al-Mufaḍḍal: al-ʾAbādī, Ḥizāna 3, 283 (al-ʾAṣmaʾi); Agānī 4, 8423 (Abū ʿUbayda); al-Marzubānī, Mawāṣṣaḥ, 30 (al-Mufaḍḍal).
4 This is the gist of the anecdote: the versions of it are decidedly harmonious (divergences are minor).
5 F. Gabrieli, Arabeschi e Studi Islamici, Rome, 74.