Towards a Better Understanding of Al-Mutanabbi's Poem on the Battle of Al-Ḥadath

1. 'Alā qadr-i abl-i l-ʿazm-i taʾtī l-ʿazāʾim-u
   wa-taʾtī 'alā qadr-i l-kirām-i l-makārīm-u
2. wa-taʾqumu fi ʿayn-i l-saghīr-i šīghār-u-hā
   wa-taṣghāru fi ʿayn-i l-ʿazīm-i l-ʿazāʾim-u

With the worth of men of resolve are resolutions in accordance, and in accordance with the worth of the generous are generous deeds.1

Great in the eye of the small are small deeds, and small in the eye of the great are great deeds.

It is with these two verses, now proverbial and as famous as their celebrated author, that al-Mutanabbi opens one of his best known qasidas.2 Perhaps because the poem is so familiar, its undoubted artistic merits have been taken very much for granted, or worse, they have passed the undiscerning unperceived.3 Such merits—as indeed the merits of much great Arabic poetry, which are only too often lost on Arabists4—can only be brought out and impressed on

1 “Generous” is well suited to the Arabic since it conveys the two senses “munificent” and “noble-minded”.
2 The principal sources of the poem are noted in A. J. Arberry, Arabic Poetry: a Primer for Students (Cambridge U.P., 1965), p. 84. Additional information on editions of the Diwān of Mutanabbi as well as on principal studies of the poet and his work (to which add F. Gabrieli, Studi su al-Mutanabbi (Rome, 1972)) may be obtained from Arberry, Poems of al-Mutanabbi (Cambridge U.P., 1967), which does not, incidentally, include the text earlier reproduced in Arabic Poetry. As Arberry’s text is that to which most people in the English-speaking world are likely to have access, it is the one which (with corrections where necessary) I use for present purposes (op. cit., pp. 84-91). The translation will be my own since Arberry’s (contained in Arabic Poetry on pages facing the Arabic text) is only too often regrettably inaccurate or infelicitous.
3 I find it surprising that Blachère should have dismissed the literary aspect of the poem in less than three lines (R. Blachère, Un poète arabe . . . : Abou l-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi (Essai d’histoire littéraire) (Paris, 1935), p. 176), and that it should not have claimed more of Gabrieli’s attention than it has (cf. op. cit., p. 21).
4 Many who would describe themselves as such know surprisingly little and care less about what R. Scheindlin rightly describes as “the chief aesthetic experience of an entire civilization” (Form and Structure in the Poetry of al-Mu’tamid ibn ʿAbbād (Leiden, 1974), p. 1). I have spoken more fully to this point in my review of Scheindlin’s book in BSOAS, xxxviii, 3 (1975), p. 631, where I have suggested some reasons for the general Western neglect of Arabic poetry. This, of course, is not to deny that some notable contributions have been and are continuing to be made to the subject, despite the fact that some of those who have made them seem not to have as sound a knowledge of Arabic as they ought!
the mind by close reading of the Arabic with rigorous attention to
structure and texture, diction and meaning, and all such other in-
gredients as go into the making of any true poetic work of art.5
Here is not the place to accord the gasida the exhaustive treatment to
which it could be subjected if limitations of space did not forbid. Of
necessity, I must restrict myself to a limited number of points primari-
ly calculated to alert the reader to the merits of a masterpiece and the
artistry of its creator.

In order to understand and appreciate the gasida in question, its
historical context is not a mere desideratum; it is a sine qua non. The
year is 343/954, and the source of inspiration Sayf al-Dawla's re-
occupation, courageous defence, and refortification of al-Ḥadath
al-Hamra.6 Wrested and demilitarized7 in 336/950 by Leo, son of
Bardas Phocas, the Byzantine commander ("Domesticus"), al-
Ḥadath was a strategically situated town which "owed its importance
to its situation on the Arabo-Byzantine frontier, between Mar'ash
and Maltiya, at the entry of the saddle which guarded the route to
Albistān. Its protection was assured by a fortress built on a hill
called Uḥaydab [sic], 'the little Hunchback'. To the north-west . . .
was the darb al-Ḥadath, a narrow pass which was the scene of many
battles and whose name the Arabs changed to darb al-salāma in an
attempt to exorcise the evil fate which seemed to be attached to it."8

Having surprised al-Ḥadath shortly after mid-October 954, Sayf
al-Dawla had immediately set to work on the reconstruction of its
fortifications, only to be interrupted in next to no time by the ap-
pearance of Byzantine forces led by Bardas Phocas with the assistance
of his son Nicephorus and other senior officers from his own family.9
From all accounts the Byzantine army was, by mediaeval standards
at least, vast and, moreover, calculated to overawe, with its core of
regular troops reinforced by a motley array of Bulgar, Khazar,

5 Among noteworthy contributions to the understanding of Arabic poetry the
following may be mentioned as material appearing since 1970: M. C. Bateson,
Structural Continuity in Poetry (New York, 1970); R. Jacobi, Studien zur Poetik der
altarabischen Qaside (Wiesbaden, 1971); A. Hamori, On the Art of Medieval Arabic
Literature (Princeton U.P., 1974); R. Scheindlin, op. cit.; G. E. von Grunebaum
(ed.), Arabic Poetry: Theory and Development (Wiesbaden, 1973) (not all contri-
butions are of equal merit). The Journal of Arabic Literature (Leiden, 1970-) (=
JAL) contains valuable articles.

6 See EI2 (= Encyclopaedia of Islām. New edition), iii, 19 f.

7 I.e. by dismantling its fortifications.

8 EI2, loc. cit.