A CRITICAL REVIEW OF MODERN SCHOLARSHIP ON SĪRAT 'ANTAR IBN SHADDĀD AND THE POPULAR SĪRA

This essay attempts to review and take critical stock of one part of the modern study of Arabic literature: the scholarship concerning Sīrat 'Antar ibn Shaddād. Although it concentrates its view on the work of modern students of this particular sīra, when appropriate it widens its scope to include studies of other popular sīras. Simultaneous with reviewing this body of scholarship, it criticizes the use of the methodology that has dominated it: historical philology. This criticism is concerned less with the nature of the methodology itself—like any methodology historical philology has uses and advantages—than with what appears to be scholars’ automatic and mechanical reliance on it in areas of study where it is not particularly applicable. My point here is not to suggest the scrapping of one methodology in favor of another, or to chastise past scholars for not using methodologies as yet undeveloped in their day. Rather, it is to clarify the reasons for some of the major weaknesses that have continued to mark the study of popular sīra literature until the present day, and, in the process, clear the way for more fruitful lines of inquiry in the future.

Nineteenth Century Scholarship

In 1799 Baron von Hammer-Purgstall—Austrian orientalist, diplomat, and man of letters—set out for a sojourn in Istanbul. Before his departure his friend Baron Thugut, then the Minister for Foreign Affairs for the Imperial Austrian government, asked a favor of him. He asked Von Hammer to obtain for him “at whatever the price” a manuscript of the Thousand and One Nights in the original Arabic. This request, coming

1 In terms of literary classification one must take care to distinguish between the use of the word sīra to denominate historiographical, empirical biographies, the most famous being Ibn Ishaq’s biography of the Prophet Muḥammad, Sīrat an-nabi, and pseudo-historical, fictional narratives such as Sīrat ‘Antar. To help maintain this distinction, I call the latter type “popular sīras,” a term which corresponds to the modern Arabic term for these works (as-sīra ash-shab‘īya). Works that fall within the general spectrum of this genre are: (1) Sīrat ‘Antar ibn Shaddād, (2) Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma (= Sīrat al-mujahidin), (3) Sīrat Bani Hilal, (4) Sīrat Sa‘īd ibn Dhi Yazan, (5) Sīrat al-Malik az-Zahir Baibars, (6) Sīrat az-Zir Sālim, (7) Sīrat Amīr Hamza, (8) Sīrat Fīrusz Shāh, (9) Sīrat Iskandar. Also closely related to the sīra genre are the following Thousand and One Night stories: ‘Umar ibn an-Nu‘mān, ‘Ali Zaibq, and ‘Ajib wa Gharībi.

The reader should also note that in the following pages when I refer to the historical figure of the poet ‘Antara ibn Shaddād, I use the classical Arabic form of the name, i.e., ‘Antara. When I refer to the sīra and its hero, I use the vernacular form: ‘Antar.
from a diplomat, might strike us as surprising now, but it was not really unusual. Ever since the time of its first translation into French almost a century before, the *Thousand and One Nights* had enjoyed spectacular popularity in Europe. It was perhaps natural that men of culture and education such as Baron Thugut—even those who might not ordinarily have taken an interest in "oriental" literatures—might want an Arabic copy of the work for their libraries. Whatever the reason behind this particular request, it proved impossible to fulfill. Baron von Hammer searched dutifully among the bookstalls and storytellers of Istanbul; but although the *Nights* was well-known, no copy of it was to be had. However, the course of his inquiries did lead the Baron across another work that was, like the *Thousand and One Nights*, a part of the standard repertoire of Arab storytellers: *Sīrat ‘Antar*.

Von Hammer found only a small fragment, but nevertheless it was an exciting discovery for him. ‘Antara ibn Shaddād was already known to European orientalists as a famous pre-Islamic warrior and poet, the composer of one of the long poems of the famous *Mu‘allaqāt* anthology. Moreover, Von Hammer recalled that the prominent English orientalist, Sir William Jones, had also seen a fragment of *Sīrat ‘Antar* and had pronounced that:

> It comprises all that is elegant and noble in composition. So lofty, so various, and so bold is its style, that I do not hesitate to rank it among the most finished poems.\(^3\)

There were, in general, three areas of study that dominated the interest of European students of Arabic during Von Hammer’s time: the *Thousand and One Nights*, the early history of the Arabs, and the study of pre-Islamic poetry. Here was a work that encompassed all these interests. Like the *Thousand and One Nights* it was a standard narrative of the popular storytellers of the time; its story was set in the historical period of pre-Islamic Arabia; and not only was its protagonist a famous pre-Islamic poet, it was also filled with a great number of poems attributed to him. One can understand Von Hammer’s excitement and imagine how avidly the Baron must have searched Istanbul for other parts of the work. To no avail. He was unable to find more of the work. But he was told that it was popular in Syria and Egypt and advised to continue his search there.

\(^2\) For a description of Europe’s reception of the *Thousand and One Nights* as well as a full bibliography of previous research on the subject, see Mia I. Gerhardt, *The Art of Storytelling: A Literary Study of the Thousand and One Nights* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1963).  