IBN BASSĀM AS A STYLIST*

The importance of Ibn Bassām’s (†542/1147-8) Kitāb al-dhakhirah fi mahāsin ahl al-Jazīrah as a source for the lives and works of eminent literary figures of al-Andalus has rather diverted attention from the author’s own literary achievement. This is displayed principally in the ‘biographies’ with which he prefaces his selections of his subjects’ writing—shorter or longer essays, of careful composition, consisting generally of ṣa’īḥ. They appear to be essentially rhetorical exercises, some of which say almost nothing about their subject, others of which can be, when closely examined, extremely revealing, or at least suggestive, of the author’s attitude to him.

In this article, I shall attempt an analysis, necessarily somewhat impressionistic, of four such ‘biographies’, from the point of view of the language and imagery used, the information conveyed and the tone adopted. Not all the points that might be made have been brought up; certain considerations have tended to dominate, at the expense of others that might, perhaps, have been given equal weight. One particular important aspect, that of the metrical or rhythmical composition of the passages, has had to be left on one side for present purposes, owing to considerations of space. In general, however, the object of the analysis has been to investigate the techniques employed by the author and to assess his success or otherwise in achieving what I take to be his object in a given passage. The passages are arranged in ascending order of their appeal to myself.

The term ‘unit’ has been adopted in this analysis to designate the smallest division to which the passages are susceptible; these are grouped in pairs, or larger numbers, according to their common rhyme. A vertical line indicates the end of each unit, and an oblique stroke, separated by a space from the words on either side, the end of an introductory word or phrase common to the following group of units.

The rhyming word or words have broken underlining; in certain cases only the ending of the words is so marked, where it seems that these are the only rhyming elements. In cases where, for example, the second and third unit of a group share an extra rhyme that is not common to the first unit, this is indicated by an even further broken underlining. Page

* I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of my former supervisor, Professor John N. Mattock, of the University of Glasgow, in the preparation of this article, as indeed in the preparation of the thesis of which it formed part.
references to the *Dhakhīrah* are to the edition by Iḥsān ʿAbbās, Beirut 1979.

1. Abū l-ʿAskarī b. Arqam [3, i, 360-409]

ahadu / kuttābī l-jaziratī l-mahārah [ia]

wa-l-naqadati l-shaʻarāh [ib], |

mim-man / nahaḍa fi l-ṣinā`atī bi-l-bāʾi l-asadd [iia]

wa-akhadha fīhā bi-l-sāfīdī l-ashadd [iib], |

wa-jadda fī muʿānātīhā [iii] |

wa-qaṣaṣara / tālā kasbī al-ḥātīhā [iib] |

wa-jamī` adawātīhā [iic], |

wa-rṭadā fī turuqīhā muʿādan wa-mubdiyān [iva] |

wa-rāmā lā aghrādīhā muṣīban wa-mukhtarīyān [ivb], |

ḥattā / tadarraja fī madārījīhā [va] |

wa-kharajā tālā jamī`ī manāḥījīhā [vb] |

wa-ṭṭalā`a min thanāyāhā [via] |

wa-ashrafa tālā khabāyāhā [vib]. |

wa-jarā baynahu wa-bayna tā`ifātīn min ahli ḥadhā l-shān [viia] |

fi dhaliqa l-zāmān [viib] |

ḥanāt [viia] |

fī-mā ntaqadu ʿalayhi min / alfāzīn wa-kalīmāt [viib] |

wa-taqʻīrin wa-stińārāt [viic] |

bāarıdah [ixa], |

wa-kānāt tilka l-tā`ifātī qad asnādat fi dhālika ilā Bnī Śiddāh [ixb]. |

wa-qad awradtu min dhālika mā / yaliqū bi-l-dīwān [xa] |

wa-yastawfi jumlāta l-īḥsān [xb]. |

Translation

One of / the writers [secretaries?] of the Peninsula that were skilful [ia] |

and <one of> the critic-poets [ib]; |

One of those who / arose in the craft with the most rightly-directed reach [iia] |

and commenced in it with the strongest arm [iib]; |

he exerted himself in its difficulties [iii] |

and confined himself to / acquiring its tools [iib] |

and collecting its implements [iic] |