ANIMAL DESCRIPTIONS IN TWO QAṢĪDAHS
BY DHŪ L-RUMMAH: SOME REMARKS.*

The received view of Dhū l-Rummah is largely a negative one, founded on what might be termed this poet’s ‘lexical’ inspiration. However, as Blachère mentions, he was popular with medieval grammarians by reason of his animal descriptions and with singers because of his amatory odes devoted to his beloved Mayyah. Blachère further notes that Dhū l-Rummah clearly belonged to the milieu of the grammarians and philologists, who found his archaic language much to their liking. The popularity of his odes in honour of Mayyah may, in Blachère’s scheme of things, have attracted many imitations and false ascriptions, although this chain of reasoning should perhaps be deemed somewhat perverse.¹

Interest in the structure of the qaṣīdah, as manifested, for example, in works by Bateson, Jacobi and Badawi,² may help to promote this aspect of Dhū l-Rummah’s oeuvre, in addition to the philological work of Abū Šāliḥ Ābd al-Quddūs which resulted in the publication in Damascus of a new edition of the poet’s diwān,³ based on a collation of several manuscripts unavailable to Macartney in his early, but nonetheless useful, edition of 1919.⁴ Mention should also be made of Yusuf Khalif’s study, Dhū l-Rummah, shā‘īr al-hubb wa-l-sahra’, Cairo 1970.

Dhū l-Rummah stands as the major representative of the archaic ode in the Umayyad period: he is often deemed the last poet in the Jāhili manner.⁵ It is difficult to determine how his qaṣā‘id differ from pre-Islamic prototypes. Sells, in the introduction to his recent translation of a poem by Dhū l-Rummah, discerns a difference of approach between the poet and his Jāhili forbears:

The poet speaks directly of his feelings rather than mediating them, in pre-Islamic fashion, through the images of the ātlāl. He makes, for example, copious use of the words hawā and hubb (‘passion’ and ‘love’); in lines

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⁴ C.H.H. Macartney, The Diwān of Ghailān ibn ‘Uqba known as Dhu ‘r-Rummah, Cambridge 1919. In this essay, references are to Abū Šāliḥ’s edition (AS) first and then to Macartney’s (Mac).
⁵ Aghānī 1, XVI, 113; Aghānī 2, XVIII, 9; F. Sezgin, GAS II, 394-7.
3-10 [of the translated poem] hawā is used five times and hubb three times. In contrast, the pre-Islamic and mukhadram poet Labid, in the famous aštāl scene of his Mu‘allaqah, uses neither word at all.6

In this respect Sells echoes a comment made by Ḥusayn ʿAtwān concerning the disparity in tone between Labid and Dhu l-Rummah, viz. that the former is deficient in genuine feeling, whereas the latter is remarkable for his sincerity.7 However, given the profusion in pre-Islamic poems of amatory terms, as can be discerned most clearly from Lichtenstadter’s list of references in her article ‘Das Nasīb der altarabischen Qaṣīda’,8 a more complete data-base is required, before generalised and impressionistic statements concerning the poet’s use of amatory terms can be validated.

In her article ‘The Camel Section of the Panegyrical Ode’,9 R. Jacobi makes little mention of Dhu l-Rummah, when treating of the Umayyad poets, for this poet is somewhat singular in this respect; the camel sections in Dhu l-Rummah’s poetry tend to encompass substantial animal descriptions, which tendency is anomalous when compared with the three main Umayyad poets, Jarīr, al-Akhṭal and al-Farazdaq. Such scenes are found in the verse of the renowned mukhadram poet of Hudhayl, Abū Dhuḥayb,10 and Jāhili poems also feature passages in which the camel is compared with the oryx bull (and this may include a description of a hunter with his gazehounds), the wild ass, the ostrich and a bird of prey.11 What marks Dhu l-Rummah’s verse as remarkable is the consistency with which the poet’s diwān is peppered with such descriptions.

S. Jayyusi takes issue with Blachère’s slighting judgement of Dhu l-Rummah and lauds his poetry, fully rehabilitating the poet as one of ‘the greats’ of the period:

A desert poet, he found out that he possessed one of the widest vocabularies of any poet in his age, a richness of language which few poets could combine, as he did, with fine poetic creativity ... Everything is invested with emotion and meant to enhance the poignancy of experience. The desert, which forms the background on which the drama of life, love, struggle and death is enacted, is itself variable in appearance; a sea of

8 ‘Das Nasīb der altarabischen Qaṣīda’, Islamica 5 (1932), 17-96, esp. 73.
9 JAL 13 (1982), 1-22.