1. Introduction

There are two metrical problems connected with the place of rajaz in the history of Arabic verse: a) its relation to saj; and b) its relation to the system of 'Arūd meters. The sources of information about the character of the ancient, pre-'Arūd verse are a) samples of early rajaz and b) writings of medieval philologists. Both sources should be treated with reserve when we try to reconstruct the structure of primitive verse. Above all we should keep in mind that medieval philologists did not have a modern historical sense and their vision was formed by the theory of al-Khalil. That is why, for them, the structure of later rajaz superseded that of archaic verse. Still the situation is not hopeless, because the ancient, folkloric type of rajaz, which grew out of saj and prepared the ground for 'Arūd verse, continued to co-exist—practically without change—with high poetry throughout most of the classical period. Besides that, the writings of medieval scholars have preserved for us elements of a very old, pre-'Arūd notion of rajaz.

Al-Khalil treated rajaz as an 'Arūd meter no different from other meters. The third circle of his system "generates" rajaz as a six-foot meter of two hemistichs with a caesura after the third foot. Its formula is: 223 223 223 // 223 223 223 (or: mustaf’ilun mustaf’ilan mustaf’ilan x 2). 'Arūd theory admits two forms of rajaz: a) long (4 or 6 feet) with a caesura; and b) short (2 or 3 feet) without it. The second form is considered a truncated variant of the first form. All modifications of the final feet of the first hemistich and of the verse line, as well as all permitted deviations in the structure of non-final feet, are set up in the same rigid manner as they are for other meters. If we turn, however, from theory to practice, a more complex reality unfolds from this picture into which al-Khalil has compressed several evolutionary stages.

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The original version of this study appeared in Russian as Chapter four, "Rajaz—perekhodnaya forma arabskogo stikha," of my monograph Klassicheskii arabskii stikh: istoriya i teoriya 'aruda (Moscow: Nauka, 1991), 94-138. This revised English version will appear as Chapter four of the revised English version of my forthcoming monograph: Classical Arabic Verse: History and Theory of 'Arūd.

The following system of metrical annotation will be employed in this study: an Elementary Prosodic Unit (EPU) consists of n vocalized harfs + a final unvocalized harf. Thus la = 2; na'am = 3, etc. The augmentation of additional unvocalized harfs is indicated by
2. The Historical Development of Rajaz

It is generally accepted among both Arab and European scholars that rajaz is very old, much older than Qasid poetry. A widespread Muslim tradition asserts that the first to compose rajaz was the legendary ancestor of North Arabian tribes, Ma‘add ibn ‘Adnán, who once fell from his horse, broke his arm and exclaimed:

(1) yadi yadi yadi yadi
My arm, my arm, my arm, my arm!
Formula: 33 33 33 33

The legend, fictitious as it is, reflects correctly the fact that rajaz was born at the time when “professional” poetry was still absent.

After Qasid poetry came to light, ancient rajaz did not disappear. It survived in the form of short pieces (two, three, four lines, rarely more) as a means of improvisation or expression of an emotional or ecstatic state, in short, as a kind of metrical saj. Even Muḥammad spoke in rajaz on several occasions. Two of his rajaz sayings are often cited:

(2) ‘ana-n-nabiyyu là kadhib
‘ana-bnu ‘abdi-l-muṭṭalib
I am the Prophet, not a liar!
I am a descendant of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib!
Scheme: 33 33 // 33 223

(3) hal ‘anti ’illā ‘isha’un damitti
wa-fī sabili-llāhi nid laqiti
Are you not but a bleeding toe?
And was it not on the path of Allah that this befell you?
Scheme: 223 223 32 // 33 223 32

+1, +2, etc. Thus kitāb = 3 + 1 rukn = 2 + 1. The number of segments in a word model is usually two or three: darlbun = 22; mustāṣṭulbalun = 223.

There are of course exceptions. Ibrahim Anis considered rajaz a comparatively young verse form, that grew out of kamil, see Ibrahim Anis, Müsiqä al-shi‘r (Beirut, 1965), 145. This rather curious view contained nevertheless an important idea of the basic affinity between rajaz and kamil which could be easily overlooked if one looked at the verse structure through the theory of ‘Arid.  

It is evident that this text cannot be a product of deliberate verse-making. The structure is ambiguous. According to the ‘Arid rules, it can be treated as a transformation of two very different meters: rajaz and hazaj. Another, slightly modified version of Ma‘add’s saying looks like another meter, khaḍīf. Both versions are cited in al-Zamakhshari, al-Qistās al-mustaqim (Baghdad, 1989), 163 n. 1.


See Ibn Rashīq, al-‘Umda fi mahasin al-shi‘r wa adabih wa-naqdih, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Beirut, 1972), 1:185. Muḥammad composed these lines when he hurt his toe in battle. It is noteworthy that, according to the theory of ‘Arid, the meter could equally be sari’ as well as