UMAYYAD PANEGYRIC AND THE POETICS OF ISLAMIC HEGEMONY: AL-AKHTAL’S KHAFFA AL-QATINU (“THOSE THAT DWELT WITH YOU HAVE LEFT IN HASTE”)

A man once said to Abū ‘Amr, “How amazing al-Akhtal was! A Christian infidel who composed invective against Muslims!” “O you vile fool! Al-Akhtal could come wearing a silken gown and a silken amulet-pouch, around his neck a golden chain from which there hung a golden cross, and with wine dripping from his beard, and thus present himself, without asking permission, before ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān.”

—al-Iṣbahānī, Kitāb al-Aghānī (8:3045)

Introduction

Throughout the classical Arabic literary tradition, from pre-Islamic times down to the beginning of our own century, the qasida (ode) held sway over the domain of poetry. Within that tradition the courtly panegyric ode, with its unparalleled genre stability and its vast corpus of contextualizing anecdotal materials, is eminently suited for the study of the relation of poetry and ceremony to political authority and the rhetoric of rulership. This paper singles out the Umayyad period (41-132 H./661-750 C.E.) as the culturally decisive moment when the panegyric ode was effectively established as the vehicle for the expression of a specifically Arabo-Islamic political allegiance and legitimacy, and, conversely, the moment when the high Jahili qaṣīdat al-madh was canonized as the paradigm (model and measure) for the Arabo-Islamic qasida.

I will claim for the Arabic panegyric qasida what most recently David Quint, building on Thomas Greene’s concept of “epic continuity,” has claimed for the European epic, i.e., that the continuity of this literary genre

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encodes and transmits an ideology of empire, or, more precisely for the qasida, of Arabo-Islamic rule. In other words, we will examine the qasida as genre in light of Gian Biagio Conte's definition of genre as "the organizing system that links, in stability, particular ideological and thematic contents with specific expressive structures." More particularly, I will argue that a rhetoric of the caliphate, of legitimate Arabo-Islamic rule, was developed during the Umayyad period and that the form this discourse took was, above all, the qasidat al-madh. Within this framework, I will try to establish further that the genre-determined poetic components—such as the departed mistress, the abandoned campsite, and the desert journey—which are dismissed by both historians and literary historians as irrelevant to the qasida's political aspects are, to the contrary, in and of themselves powerful and evocative bearers of political and religious legitimacy. I will argue that the elaboration of the "vision of a legitimizing past" that Tarif Khalidi has pointed to as the special domain of historians and jurists was eminently that of the poets as well, and, further, that the Umayyad poets achieved this vision through their adoption/cooption of the high Jahili panegyric ode.

Finally, I propose that the function of the qasida as an encoder and transmitter of the ideology of Islamic hegemony and as one of the insignia of legitimate (Arabo)-Islamic political authority is a decisive factor in the preeminence of this poetic genre in Arabic and its prominence in the other (Persian, Ottoman, etc.) Islamicate literary traditions.

The Umayyad Qasidat al-Madh

The great poets of the Umayyad period, chief among them the qasid-poets al-Akhtal, al-Nabighah al-Shaybani, al-Râ'i al-Numayri, Dhu al-Rummah and the rajaz-poets al-'Ajjâj and his son Ru'bah, chose to follow not the model of the Islamic qasida of the period of Prophet and the early conquests, i.e., the characteristically short, spontaneous, and often formally incomplete (muqattâ'ât) occasional poetry, such as the sirah poetry of Hassân ibn Thâbit and Ka'b ibn Mâlik, but rather the fully formally achieved, rhetorically opaque and metaphorically dense qasida of the high Jahili