THE BASIS OF SELECTION
IN THE ḤAMĀṢA COLLECTIONS

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The ḥamāṣa collections represent a very large and important segment in the corpus of Arabic literature. The question of the bases of selection for the ḥamāṣa collections is intrinsically complex, but is made more difficult by virtue of the sheer bulk of material still extant either in printed or manuscript form. In the following investigation, attention will be confined to the printed collections.

It has traditionally been assumed that the oldest book we know of this kind and the most famous of them all is al-Ḥamāṣa by Abū Tammām (d. 231 A.H.). However, al-Ṭabrizī threw some doubt on this assumption. “The literary scholars of Isfahān”, he claimed, “concentrated on it (i.e. Abū Tammām’s book) and rejected all others of its kind.”¹ This might suggest that there were ḥamāṣa collections prior to and contemporary with Abū Tammām and that his book left all of them behind. One is still reluctant however to accept this view. Approximately three centuries elapsed between Abū Tammām’s death and that of al-Ṭabrizī, during which time no further mention was made of al-Ṭabrizī’s allegation. By “rejected all others of its kind”, al-Ṭabrizī meant, we may safely assume, the anthology books, such as al-Mu‘allaqāt, and al-ʾAṣma‘iyāt.² These books and the ḥamāṣa collections share a common ground: the vast majority of the materials in both of them are nothing but selections from pre-Islamic poetry. Beyond that, they differ in method of classification and theme. While the former are anthologies of long poems by renowned poets, selected according to the author’s taste and arranged haphazardly, the latter are subject to a rigorous and distinct classification scheme. They are divided into a certain number of chapters, each of which comprises verses of similar themes, arranged according to an explicit plan, as will be shown later, and always begin with the ḥamāṣa verses. Overwhelmed by this unique approach, Abū Tammām’s contemporaries, as well as authors of subsequent centuries, imitated him diligently.

The first one to do so was Abū Tammām’s fellow townsman and disciple, al-Buḥtūrī (d. 284 A.H.).

The fourth century witnessed the advent of three ḥamāṣa books. The first was by Ibn al-Marzūbān (d. 309 A.H.),³ of which we know nothing at all. The second

² For brief information on these books, see H. A. R. Gibb, Arabic Literature, (Oxford University Press 1963), p. 24.
bears the title “al-Hamāsā al-Muḥdatha”, by Ibn Fāris (d. 395 A.H.). Regrettably, this book was lost too. However, its title suggests that the type of selections it contained ran counter to the traditional Ḥamāsā books. It dealt mainly with modern poems contemporary with the author. This inference may be bolstered by the content of a letter which Ibn Fāris sent to Ibn Sa‘īd al-Kātib. In this letter he criticised bitterly the scholars’ fanatical insistence on classical poetry, and held, quite correctly, that if they were to spurn modern literature, the generations to come would lose a portion of their literary heritage. The third book to appear in this century was al-Ḥamāsā by Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskārī (d. 395). This writer’s commentary on Abū Tammām’s Ḥamāsā is well-known and often quoted by al-Ṭabarzī. His own Ḥamāsā was apparently less popular but its existence was fully attested by reliable authorities such as al-ʿAynī (d. 855).

The fifth century furnishes us with two Ḥamāsā books. The first of these is called “Ḥamāsāt al-Zurafāʾ” by al-ʿAbdallāḥī al-Zawzanī (d. 431 A.H.). In the introduction to his book, which still exists in manuscript form, al-Zawzanī stated that both ancient and modern poets had equal shares in his selections. This is the first respect in which he breaks away from the immense influence of Abū Tammām who, as mentioned before, allotted the major portion of his book to the classical poets. Abū Tammām’s collection, al-Zawzanī held, was not widely read by young students. Their tender years did not enable them to imbibe its highly sophisticated and extremely difficult verses. Therefore, al-Zawzanī’s chief purpose was to select easier poems to attract a large number of young and beginning readers. And here lies the second feature that characterizes his work and differentiates it from that of Abū Tammām.

The second book to appear in the fifth century was al-Ḥamāsā of al-Shantamarī (d. 476 A.H.). That al-Shantamarī wrote a commentary on Abu Tammām’s Ḥamāsā collection is common knowledge. That he also compiled his own Ḥamāsā collection is less well known, but equally a matter of fact.

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5 al-Ṭahālībī, Yatīmat al-Dahr, Ed. Muḥiyy al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo).
7 A copy of this work is in the manuscript section of the Arab League in Cairo, (no. 208 Adab). The first volume of this MS. was published recently in Iraq but it only contains three chapters out of the ten chapters included in the MS. Therefore I have preferred not to deal with it in this article because the published portion would not provide sufficient material to permit an accurate judgement.
8 A large portion of this commentary is extant in the National Library of Egypt (Dār al-Kutub). Al-Shantamarī arranged it alphabetically.
9 A very brief mention of this collection is made by Charles Pellat, see Encyclopaedia of Islam, (2nd ed.), Vol. 3, p. 111.