Modernity in the Ninth Century: The Controversy around Abū Tammām

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Dean, your excellencies, learned colleagues, ladies, gentlemen, friends. Arabic poetry is a music of words, as the modern poet Adunis says, but it also has a visual presence. Even to the eye of the lay reader, who has no knowledge of Arabic, the poetry on the displayed folio¹ is immediately recognizable through the repeated last letter of the rhyme on the left border of the text block. Superposed verses are carefully justified on the left side by stretching the final words out. The Arabic script lends itself to this, because its letters are connected by a continuous baseline, similar to English long hand, except that this connecting line can take any length. The parallel horizontal elongations give the page a graphic rhythm that echoes the acoustic rhythm of the verses.

This text being poetry, it is carefully vocalized with additional small signs, because it contains difficult language. One often dispenses with such added phonetic precision, because a normal text, such as a newspaper, is completely understandable without them. Readers would know where to place the short vowels, which the Arabic script leaves out. In poetry this is different, for it is brimming with rare words and unusual syntax. This folio page is therefore dense with information, yet the skilled copyist has arranged letters and signs harmoniously, so as to create a balance, and he emphasizes similar-looking

* Leiden-Aramco Lecture on Arabic Language and Culture, 4 February 2016.
1 Istanbul Fatih 3900 (Süleymaniye Library), fol. 20r. The manuscript has been dated to the twelfth century.