Introduction

Belligerent, defiant, brutal, uncompromising, unsettling—the voice of ʿAntarah ibn Shaddād, legendary warrior and poet of clan ʿAbs, rings loud and clear today, some fifteen hundred years after he lived, loved, and fought.

ʿAntarah’s life and exploits are legendary. Many are the tales of his valor, of how he single-handedly held the line against marauders and saved the day. But in fact we know next to nothing about him, and what we do know seems at best amplified and larger than life, if not fantastical. As with Arthur of Camelot, we encounter ʿAntarah the legend, not ʿAntarah the man.

From the moment in the third/ninth century that ʿAntarah appears, charging full tilt against the record of history, he is cloaked in uncertainty, having already become the stuff of legend.¹ There are, however, points where all versions of the legend converge: that ʿAntarah was black and born a slave to a black mother, herself a slave; that he belonged to the tribe of ʿAbs; that he lived in the second half of the sixth century; that he was the most ferocious and accomplished warrior of his age; that he won his freedom in battle; and that he excelled as a poet.

ʿAntarah is an elemental force of nature. The name “ʿAntarah” (also “ʿAntar”) is variously explained.² One suggestion is that it is onomatopoeic and means “the blowfly, bluebottle” (Calliphora vomitoria) because the word replicates the sound the blowfly makes. Another that it means “valorous, valiant.” There is also a verbal form (ʿantara) that means to “thrust,” i.e., with a spear or a lance. The name “ʿAntarah” is thus polyvalent. It conveys an adeptness with the lance and valor in battle as well as skin color: the blowfly, with its loud buzz, red eyes, transparent wings, and black body, is often found around carrion and dead meat.

ʿAntarah was one of the three “Arab ravens” of the pre-Islamic era (a time known in Arabic as the Jāhiliyyah), that is, black poet-warriors born to black women. The mother of this raven (or was he a blowfly?) ʿAntarah was an Ethiopian woman called Zabībah, whose name means “black raisin.”³ According to one source, he was given the nickname “Cleftlip,” an epithet that denotes a deformity of the lip.⁴ And one version of the story of his death has him killed not by human hand, but by a rainstorm.⁵ After all, how could a human hand
Introduction

kill someone who identified so closely with death that he could claim, “Death I
know—it looks like me, grim as battle”? Even ʿAntarah’s lineage, a topic of such importance to both pre-Islamic Arabs and the scholars who recorded and studied pre-Islamic lore, is enveloped in uncertainty. Was he ʿAntarah son of Shaddād, or son of ‘Amr son of Shaddād, or son of Muʿāwiyyah son of Shaddād? If his father’s name was ‘Amr or Muʿāwiyyah, why had this name been eclipsed in ʿAntarah’s lineage by that of Shaddād? And was Shaddād his grandfather or paternal uncle? Whatever solution they offer to this conundrum, the sources agree that Shaddād was a famous knight and that he was known as “the Rider of Jirwah.” In other words, Shaddād is a paragon of the northern Arab elite cavalryman. While we may not know for sure who ʿAntarah’s father was, all our sources agree that it was his father who gave ʿAntarah his freedom after ʿAntarah had distinguished himself in battle.

Some of ʿAntarah’s poems mention his love for a woman named ʿAblah. Legend has it that she was his cousin, and that he asked for her hand in marriage but was refused. As “ʿAntar and ʿAblah,” this story of unrequited and doomed love enchanted and captivated subsequent centuries and continues to weave its spell today.

ʿAntarah’s poetry breathes a spirit of indomitability, pride, and loyalty to kith and kin. It can seem inward-looking, solipsistic even, consumed by its own world and isolated from events beyond the pasture lands of ‘Abs, caught up in the hurly-burly of the squabbles, battles, and power politics of his clan. There are, however, indications that ʿAntarah and ‘Abs were not completely cut off from the wider world: he charges into battle with bamboo lances from India, wields curved Indian blades, brandishes broadswords from Yemen and sabers from Mashārif in Syria, shoots arrows as thin as strips of leather from Ḥimyar, and rides Mahrah camels from South Arabia.

ʿAntarah may have lived in an isolated region, the highlands of Arabia, but his poetry is the poetry of a society in turmoil. The myriad clan conflicts that his verses so fiercely evoke were not isolated phenomena, but were a part of wider unrest among the tribes of the peninsula. And the unrest among the tribes of Arabia was not isolated from the turbulence in the world that surrounded Arabia, as the superpowers of Rome and Iran continued to wage war on one another, and the kingdoms of Axum and Ḥimyar spiraled into decline.
Introduction

The Arabian peninsula

The Arabian peninsula (or Arabia) extends today from the deserts of modern Syria and Jordan in the north to Yemen in the south, from the Red Sea coast of Saudi Arabia in the west to the Gulf states and Oman in the east. It is the largest peninsula in the world, occupying a landmass about as big as the Indian subcontinent. Its terrain slopes from west to east, and is characterized by two great ergs, or sand-dune deserts: the Empty Quarter (al-Rub‘ al-Khali) in the south, stretching from Yemen to the Gulf states, and the ‘Ālij (or al-Nafūd) in the north. These ergs are connected by a long strip of sand known as the Dahnāʾ (see Maps, pp. lix–lx). The heights of Yemen and Dhofar in Oman are blessed in summer with monsoon rains, but the rest of the peninsula receives little rain. Settlement patterns are therefore largely dictated by access to groundwater in the form of oases and wells, and by the need to travel to such sources of water or in search of areas of rainfall. In the pre-Islamic era, survival often depended on a group’s skill in gaining access to water.

Thus, the Arabian peninsula of the sixth century was geographically hemmed in, caught between the landmass of Iran to the east, Rome (Byzantium) to the northwest, and Africa to the west. It survived on the periphery of the two world superpowers of Late Antiquity: Sasanian Iran and Rome. And as a peninsula, an “almost-island,” it was both connected to and somewhat separated from this world on its three sides (by sea and desert). Culture and society were also peninsular, they mimicked geography—prior to the advent of Islam, Arabia both formed part of, and was independent of, the world of Late Antiquity, characterized by a curious combination of belonging to, and differing from, this world.

Rome and Iran

The Roman Empire and Sasanian Iran were not friends: at best their relations comprised an uneasy stasis characterized by mutual mistrust. Both shared a conception of universal empire and their sovereigns presumed a claim to universal authority, which was often expressed in the form of religion.

For the Romans, who had become Christian under the emperor Constantine (r. AD 305–37), this conception of empire was the universal establishment of Christian rule, including forced conversion and the eradication of paganism—in other words, the establishment of a God-guided kingdom. For the Zoroastrian Sasanians, universal authority was expressed through a social structure that
Introduction

amounted to a caste system of four social estates: priests (a class that included judges), landed gentry (the warrior class), cultivators, and artisans (a class that included merchants). As long as the four estates were kept discrete, the Sasanians did not ordinarily persecute members of other religious communities, because the communities of Jews, Buddhists, Manicheans, and Christians simply had no place in the stratified hierarchy. The Romans and Iranians, then, cherished two imperial visions that were never really going to get along with one another.

The roots of the animosity between Rome and Iran stretched back to Rome’s encounter with the Parthians (248 BC–AD 224), the predecessors of the Sasanians, as the Romans expanded into the eastern Mediterranean. The Sasanians (ca. AD 224–ca. AD 650), originally a landholder family from the highlands of southwest Iran, inherited this animosity and pursued it with zest. At their greatest extent, Sasanian rule extended from the Oxus River in the northeast to the Euphrates in the Fertile Crescent, giving them effective control of the silk trade with the Mediterranean.

The sixth century witnessed an increase in hostilities. In AD 531, Khusro I Anusheruwan (known as Kisrā Anushīrwān in Arabic sources) (r. AD 531–79) wrested control of Sasanian Iran from his father. Between AD 540 and 562, during the reign of Emperor Justinian (r. AD 527–65), Khusro’s Sasanians invaded Syria, formally a province of the Roman Empire. A peace treaty was negotiated in AD 562. In the last years of his rule, between AD 570 and 578, Khusro I conquered the kingdom of Ḥimyar in the Yemen and expelled its Axumite overlords. But by the end of the century, the Sasanian emperor Khusro II Aparviz (r. AD 591–628) had to depend upon troops provided by the Roman emperor Maurice in order to recapture his throne, yet when Maurice was assassinated in AD 602, Khusro II was quick to invade Roman Syria.

The Romans were not idle during the sixth century. Their involvement in Arabia was largely through the manipulation of proxies, including the Axumite kingdom, the Hujrids of Kindah, or the Jafnids of Syria. In part, this was a natural consequence of established Roman policy in the region implemented through the province of Roman Arabia, but it was more immediately a consequence of geography: the Syrian desert, devoid of food and water, was not the place for an army to cross, whether Roman or Sasanian. With the terrain so inimical to conventional warfare, both sides resorted to the cultivation of alliances and diplomacy.
The Romans and the Iranians developed links with two powerful Arabic-speaking clans at either end of the northernmost points of Arabia: the Jafnids of Ghassan in the west and the Nasrids of Lakhm in al-Ḥīrah near the Euphrates in the east. The Romans made the Jafnids into imperial foederati, confederates, bestowing a kingship upon them and recognizing them as phylarchs (tribal leaders). The Jafnids were charged with restraining the Arabic-speaking tribes and preventing them from interfering with trade routes and the collection of tax tribute. They supplied the Roman army with troops and waged war against the Nasrids of Lakhm, who acted on behalf of the Sasanians. Nasrid influence stretched along the eastern Arabian littoral and even into Oman. Their influence has been detected in Yathrib (the settlement that under Islam was to become Medina), to the extent that in the sixth century the Nasrids may have appointed a governor there. Roman and Iranian interest in the Arabian peninsula did not stop with the recruitment of elite warrior-rulers from the north to do their dirty work for them. Their activities extended as far as Yemen and Ethiopia, or the kingdoms of Ḥimyar and Axum.

Axum and Ḥimyar

We do not know much about the kingdom of Axum. Its ruler was known as the negus and his territory included modern Eritrea and the northern part of Ethiopia. It may even have stretched farther west into Sudan. Christianity took hold in Axum in the fourth century. From the fourth to sixth centuries, Axum grew astonishingly rich in African products such as gold, ivory, rhinoceros horn, and tortoiseshell.

The fate of Axum is closely tied up with the history of South Arabia. In about 110 BC the South Arabian tribe of Ḥimyar formed itself into a kingdom and brought South Arabia under its control. By the third century AD, under the rule of Shammar Yuha’rish, Ḥimyar had conquered the southern Arabian region of Ḥaḍramawt and expelled the Axumites from the Yemeni coast. In the following centuries, the Ḥimyarites sought to extend their influence over the tribes of the interior, venturing deep into the Yamāmah and maybe even as far as Ḥajr (modern-day Riyadh) (see Maps). During the fourth century they converted to Judaism, and in the fifth century they exerted their dominion over Ma’add, the main tribal confederation of the northern Arabs of Najd, by installing the Hujrīds as their proxies under a chieftain of the powerful tribe of Kindah.
Introduction

With Roman help, Kaleb Ella Asbeha, negus of Axum (r. ca. AD 520–40), invaded Ḥimyar, placing a Christian king on the throne. This led to a reprisal from the Jewish royal family, and the new Himyarite ruler, Yūsuf, slaughtered the Axumite garrison and in AD 523 executed several hundred Christians, who became known as the Martyrs of Najrān. This event led to an Axumite invasion in AD 525, the death of Yūsuf, the eventual replacement of the Himyarite kingdom with an Axumite protectorate, and enforced conversion to Christianity.

One of the Axumites who had remained in Ḥimyar after the return of the negus Kaleb to Ethiopia was a man named Abraha (in Arabic sources: Abraḥah), who assumed control of the protectorate. In AD 547, he received ambassadors from Rome, Iran, and Ethiopia, and from the Nasrids and Jafnids. In ca. AD 550, he constructed the Christian cathedral of Sanaa, and five years later mounted a major expedition into central Arabia, but that expedition resulted in his defeat and retreat.

Perhaps the most notable construction project undertaken by the kingdom of Ḥimyar was the Maʾrib Dam, which was 650 meters wide and 15 meters high. Maʾrib (presumably the church and not the dam) was where, in AD 552, Abraha chose to receive the delegations of ambassadors, but sometime between AD 575 and 580, during the childhood of Prophet Muḥammad, the dam is reported to have burst and not been repaired. The collapse of the dam signaled the end of the kingdom of Ḥimyar and may have led to a massive influx of mercenaries and professional soldiery maintained by the kingdom into central and northern Arabia.10

During the second half of the sixth century, the frontiers between Rome and Iran were destabilized, and the interior of Arabia was thrown into turmoil. On the eve of the advent of Islam—and toward the end of ʿAntarah’s life—the Jafnids were overthrown by Rome in AD 573, and the Nasrids by the Sasanians in AD 602. Ḥimyar had been unable to repair the dam that it so crucially depended on. And in AD 604, the Sasanian army was defeated by an army of Arabian tribesmen at the Battle of Dhū Qār.

Arabs in Arabia

The term “Arab” is apparently an old one. Its earliest appearance is thought to occur in Assyrian texts from the seventh century BC, though this has been disputed. But there is no indication in this or any of its subsequent occurrences
that it is an ethnonym, i.e., the name of an ethnic group. In fact, it is likely that for many centuries inhabitants of Arabia were not widely or even automatically known as Arabs. Other names, such as the Greek names *homēritai* (i.e., Ḥimyarites) and *sarakēnoi* (Saracens), predominate—presumably they are designations of specific groups of inhabitants of regions of Arabia.

Two basic solutions to the identity of the Arabs has been proposed, one maximalist, the other minimalist. The maximalist solution is to take “Arab” as an atemporal designation of transhumant tribespeople, that is, nomadic pastoralists who herded camels, or other domestic animals such as goats and sheep, in designated winter and summer camping grounds. Yet the probable percentage of the population of the Arabian peninsula that may at any one time have been nomadic was small, even allowing for returns to nomadism after a period of sedentarization. As Donner notes, “Most Arabians . . . are, and have been, settled people.” If the “Arabs” were transhumant tribespeople, they would not have been particularly numerous. And if the “Arabs” were nomads, we should not presume that they would necessarily be Bedouins, i.e., people of the desert. Bedouins could, counterintuitively, be settled for much of the year, and could also share some of the features of the nomad’s lifestyle, such as camel pastoralism.

The word “Bedouin” represents the hinge point at which the maximalist solution becomes minimalist: its historical frame of reference is specifically the fifth and sixth centuries AD; its geographical frame is North Arabia (specifically Najd), the highlands of modern Saudi Arabia, and the imperial satellites of the Jafnids in the west and the Nasrids of al-Ḥīrah. Thus, Macdonald argues (in the context of North Arabia) for greater discrimination in the use of the label “Bedouin,” and Zwettler would establish “its most restrictive” designation as “the camel-raising and -riding Arab nomads of the late antique Near East.” Whittow has advocated replacing the term “Arab” with the term “Bedu,” in accordance with contemporary anthropological and ethnographic practice. Dostal, arguing for an Iranian (Parthian) influence for the saddlebow and its associated weaponry and cultural complexes (including tent types, customs, and clothing), distinguishes between nomads, “half-bedouins (breeders of small-cattle),” and “full bedouins (camel-breeders).” Retsö, in a bold argument that has not won many supporters, argues that the Arabs were a “razzia-loving warrior caste” and imagines them forming:
Introduction

a socio-religious association of warriors, subject to a divinity or ruler as his slaves . . . separate from ordinary settled farmers and city-dwellers, living in their own lots often outside the border between the desert and the sown.  

The notion of a “socio-religious association of warriors” (one that celebrates the desert wastes, wherever their residence may be) is appealing. The lifestyle would have been typified by unsettledness, by the rapid shifts from sedentary to nomad and back again.

Whether or not we accept Retsö’s suggestion of a “socio-religious association of warriors,” during these centuries the northern Arabian peninsula witnessed the emergence of aristocratic “rider-warriors” (the term is Walter Dostal’s), adept at warfare with both horse and camel, implicated, to varying extents, in the Roman and Iranian imperial reliance (in North and Central Arabia) of confederations of rider-warriors as mercenaries or proxies, and characterized by developed military technology such as body armor and the lance. We can perhaps go further and identify these “rider-warriors” as the elites of Ma’add. In the three centuries before Islam, Ma’add were:

predominantly camel-herding . . . bedouins and bedouin tribal groups—irrespective of lineage or place of origin—who ranged, encamped and resided throughout most of the central and northern peninsula . . . and who had come to adopt the shadād-saddle and . . . by the third century, to utilize it so effectively as a means of developing and exploiting within a desert environment the superior military advantages offered by horses and horse cavalry.

These elites were organized in their various kin groups, and Zwettler notes that their principles of organization were not exclusively based on blood relationship or kinship; rather, they operated as colleagues, associates or cohorts in an amorphous, far-ranging, almost idealized aggregation of like-minded compeers and communities who shared many of the same social, cultural and ecological experiences, aspirations, opinions, and values.

According to Zwettler, this is how, by the middle or the end of the seventh century, “Ma’add entered the genealogical realm, where it became an eponym for the ‘progressive’ Northern Arabs.” As part of this process, tribalism and genealogy emerged as central defining features of the descendants of Ma’add. It is, then, the inability of the imperial powers of Rome and Iran to control their
buffer zones through the Jafnids and Nasrids, and the various mercenaries they relied on, that created in the second half of the sixth century the state of instability and turmoil that characterized northern Arabia.\(^{23}\)

The elites of Ma’add shared another important feature: language. The language of these groups was the *ʿarabiyyah*, the Arabic we encounter today in the poetry of pre-Islamic Arabia. We should not overstate the evidence, but we should bear in mind the observation that the predominance of this *ʿarabiyyah* is an accurate, if not fully representative, account of the linguistic situation during the centuries under discussion. Jenssen reminds us that “very little . . . can be known about Arabic before the dawn of Islam.” He notes that of all the varieties of Arabic similar to the Arabic of pre-Islamic poetry, it was only this latter variety that was in fact preserved “in the form of a corpus of text and a systematic description.”\(^{24}\) The survival of the *ʿarabiyyah*, preserved in a specific corpus of poetry, the qasida poem, suggests that at some stage this “classical” Arabic emerged as a dominant form of expression of a dominant group. The users of this *ʿarabiyyah* were the masters of qasida poetry: they controlled both language and society, as renowned warriors and chieftains or as figures closely connected to these chieftains.

*ʿAbs of Ghaṭafān*

The inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula were caught up in this turbulence that engulfed the world on their borders during the sixth century. Often they were the agents of turmoil. ʿAntarah belonged to a kin group known as *ʿAbs*, transhumant pastoralists who lived in Najd and belonged to the larger kin group of Ghaṭafān, itself claiming descent from the super-lineage group Qays ʿAylān. Ghaṭafān contained other conglomerated kin groups, including Sulaym and Dhubyān (see Map 1), and Dhubyān in turn comprised three distinct kin groups: Fazārah, Murrah, and Thaʿlabah.

By the middle of the sixth century, Ghaṭafān was a conglomeration in a state of upheaval. *ʿAbs*, under the leadership of Zuhayr ibn Jadhīmah, had gained hegemony of Ghaṭafān and over the Hawāzin (see Map 1), who also claimed descent from Qays ʿAylān. Ghaṭafān had to contend with some powerful neighbors, chief among whom was ʿĀmir ibn Ṣaʿṣaʿah. The killing of Zuhayr, chieftain of *ʿAbs*, by a member of ʿĀmir signaled the decline in *ʿAbs’s* hegemony. Before long, as a result of a power struggle between *ʿAbs* and Fazārah of Dhubyān,
Introduction

hostilities broke out and quickly escalated into the forty-year War of Dāḥis and al-Ghabrāʾ. This power struggle is expressed in the sources as a quarrel between two chieftain protagonists: Qays ibn Zuhayr (of ʿAbs) and Ḥudhayfah ibn Badr (of Fazārah). A pretext for conflict was afforded by a horse race between the protagonists. Each chief agreed to race two horses, a stallion and a mare. Qays chose to run Dāḥis and his mare al-Ghabrāʾ, but Ḥudhayfah’s men cheated and slowed Qays’s racehorses down, so Qays lost the wager.

In the war that ensued, ‘Abs initially enjoyed notable successes, but eventually the combined forces of Dhubyān proved too strong and ‘Abs were expelled from their ancestral pasturelands. It was in this crucible of exile and wandering that ‘Antarah’s warrior spirit was tested and found true. We encounter him participating in the battles of ‘Urāʿir and al-Farūq, and repeatedly saving his people from calamity. ‘Abs and Dhubyān were eventually reconciled by the end of the sixth century. In the siege of Medina known as the War of the Trench (5/627), Ghaṭafān, under the leadership of ‘Uyaynah ibn Ḥisn of Fazārah, fought on the side of the Meccans against the Muslims.25

Whatever the historicity of the narrative of the War of Dāḥis and al-Ghabrāʾ, the turbulent relationship between kin groups within the same lineage group over a prolonged period is typical of the kind of turmoil that dominated much of Arabia during the sixth century.

The Poets and Their Cosmos

The elite warriors of sixth-century Maʿadd chose to express their views of the world, their war culture, and their ethos in qasida poetry, which is poetry composed in a prestige language (classical Arabic) in works of varying length and complexity, from simple poems to complex odes.

Like the society the warrior-poets lived in, qasida poetry was in a state of turmoil. This oral poetry emerged abruptly in the second half of the sixth century, was subject to an astonishing variety of experimentations, manipulations, conceptualizations, and imaginings in the seven or eight decades before the advent of Islam, and continued to thrive well into the Umayyad era (41–132/661–750).

The poetry of ‘Antarah is one of the many examples of the emergence in the course of the sixth century of the warrior-poet as spokesperson of a war culture, a complex of ideals celebrated in qasida poetry. These ideals were informed by a universal vision of manly virtue (muruwwah),26 at the very heart of which lay a
passionate and uncompromising adherence to honor (ʿirḍ), set within “a universal perspective where the paradigm for how one must live and die is founded on the principle of chance.”

These warriors were united, yet kept distinct by their scrupulous adherence to an ever-changing and flexible social dynamic of alliance and protection, as well as by their expression of ties, kinship, and loyalties through genealogy, both acquired (ḥasab) and inherited (nasab). They cherished their vehicles of war, the she-camel and the horse, as well as their weaponry and armaments, and perfected the raid and the hunt. War was often retributive, driven by the need for vengeance, although it was also hazarded to win spoils: women, camels, livestock, and slaves. War was how a man preserved, acquired, and displayed honor and glory. It was the ultimate realization of risk and chance. For these warriors, war was effectively a religion.

The cosmos of the pre-Islamic qasida poets is stark. Everything is governed by Time (or Fate) and its avatar, Death. At the heart of the cosmos stands man, either alone, or with his family and/or his kin group. The cosmos was unpredictable: a man knew that it could and would inevitably infect him, his honor, and his society with a most terrifying disease: disunity and disintegration. What he did not know was when this would happen. The events of this cosmos play out in the desert, the landscape where a man on camelback pits himself against Time and risks his all, in a series of actions whose outcomes are determined solely by chance.

The poet-warriors were unanimous in their celebration of and devotion to the majesty of the qasida and the ʿarabiyyah. Poetry as memorialization offered man a victory over Time: if his feats were immortalized in verse, and his descendants and kin group perpetuated his memory, man would thus vanquish Time. Therefore, memory and kin group solidarity were central to the perpetuation of an individual’s glory, an all too fragile and ephemeral possession unless reinforced by constant and repeated efforts to acquire more glory.

Poetry existed to celebrate the winners in the deadly game of war or to commemorate the valiant losers who died on the battlefield. In their commemoration of glorious ancestors, the masters of qasida poetry sought, through the perpetuation of genealogy and the memorization of poetry, to preserve this glory against the depredations of Time. They did not do this through, say, a cult of heroes, but by positioning the last living member of a line of glorious ancestors as the guarantor of the perpetuation of glory. It was this elite warrior’s heroic
duty to embody and consolidate former glory, but also to build upon it and sur-

pass the deeds of his forbears.\textsuperscript{31}

The Qasida

Pre-Islamic qasida poetry is a public art form and is in a profound way theatri-
cal: it cannot function without an audience. In its orality, it is addressed to, and
entirely dependent upon, a group of listeners; it appeals to others and voices
challenges to them; it cries defiance against Time; it trumpets the triumph of
man; it memorializes his afterlife. It is the poetry of performance, and its sound-
scapes are performed on the stage of the cosmos.\textsuperscript{32}

Out of this simple set of elements (Time, man, and the sweltering heat of the
desert), a profound and imaginative poetic tradition was fashioned. Its themes
were as simple as its elements: ruins and abandoned encampments, lost loves,
arduous desert crossings, honor and glory, battles and raids.

Thus, many qasidas explore variations on the following narrative pattern:
while on a desert journey, a poet comes across some ruins. His discovery forces
him to stop and determine whether this is the site where he once enjoyed
happiness with a woman who was subsequently either lost or denied to him.
He explores his memories of their time together, but then resumes his journey
on camelback, possibly comparing his camel to some other animal of the desert,
such as an oryx, a wild ass, or an ostrich. His journey brings him to a destination:
this destination can be physical, such as a patron or chieftain, or metaphysical,
such as a celebration of honor, nobility, and glory, perhaps through acts of com-
munal generosity by feeding the needy in times of famine and drought, perhaps
through the provision of wine for others, perhaps through military exploits in
the battlefield, or through the righting of a wrong.

Not all qasida poems fit this simplistic and generalized characterization: there
are many variations on the pattern, across time, region, lineage, and kin group.
But what is typical of all of this poetry is its economy—it fashions complex and
profound works of art out of a simple set of components.

‘Antarah’s “Golden Ode” and the Undoing of the Qasida

The poems ascribed to ‘Antarah belong to a number of distinct genres: there
are personal and tribal vaunts, war chants, full-blown qasidas, threats, and
introduction

vituperation. His fame and reputation as a poet, however, are entirely dependent upon his most important composition, known both as his Muʿallaqah, “Suspended Ode,” and as his “Golden Ode” (Poem 1). This is a difficult poem, one dominated by grotesquery, where meaning and established order are in flux. It is a poem that pushes the qasida as art form to the very edge of signification and derives its meaning from the obliteration of existence in death.

The occasion of its composition is roughly the last decade of the sixth century, a time before the first truce in the War of Dāḥis and al-Ghabrāʾ. The concluding verses refer to both sons of Ḍamḍam as alive: Harim ibn Ḍamḍam died after the first truce of the war, at the hands of Ward ibn Ḥābis, a kinsman of ʿAntarah. The poem begins with a desolation so extreme that it defies recognition. The poet is on a journey, on camelback. He comes across an area that he thinks was once inhabited by ʿAblah, the woman he loves. But so much time has passed, so much has happened to the poet, that he cannot at first be sure. The despair and sadness that overcome him, and his inability to move on, gradually convince him that this is in fact the place. He pleads with the ruins, trying to conjure up the time when they were full of life, in an attempt to revivify not only the ruins but poetry itself, slaughtered by earlier poets and left unburied on the battlefield (lines 1–8).

The poet’s identification of the desolate site brings home to him the emptiness of the present: ʿAblah is beyond the poet’s reach, physically (i.e., geographically) and temporally (because the past is irrecoverable). It awakens memories of the epiphany of the beloved on the night of the departure of her tribe, memories that now engulf the poem, in a comparison between the strong perfumed scent that accompanies the vision of the beloved and a musk pouch, a heady wine, and flowers growing in a lush meadow, a remote and sacred enclosure rarely visited even by the animals of the desert. But in this terrestrial paradise, beauty is sullied—the screeching insect is intoxicated and out of control, its actions like a one-armed amputee trying to light a fire with two fire sticks. Under the surface of this apparent plenty, then, lurk pain and grotesquery. Such memories accentuate the desolation of lines 1–8 and intensify the poet’s sense of his loss, for he is denied the luxuries his beloved enjoys: she sleeps in comfort, while he, true to his bellicosity, passes the night on his horse, poised to launch a dawn raid, which as poet he will soon turn to (lines 9–26).

In a good number of pre-Islamic odes, the poet effects a transition (known in Arabic criticism as takhallus, literally “setting oneself free” or “being rid of”)
Introduction

from the first movements of the ode (frequently referred to in Arabic poetic criticism as dhikr al-ʿatāl, evocation of ruins, and nasīb, the amatory episode) to the desert adventure (raḥīl) and description of the camel (waṣf al-nāqah). Most odes conclude their desert adventures and descriptive scenes with an incantation of the exploits of poet or tribe (mufākharah). In some odes, such as the Muʿallaqah of Zuhayr, the destination of the desert adventure is a warlord or a regent (this is typical of panegyric poems, known as mādīḥ), and the poem’s conclusion marks a return to civilization from the desolation of the ruins and the desert.

In ‘Antarah’s poem, the destination is ‘Ablah, the beloved, and not a patron. The shape of the qasida is thus temporarily destabilized, because the transition does not mark a progression but rather signals a return to the beginning, to the nasīb. This destabilization is conveyed syntactically through the fact that the question posed at line 27 concludes with the final verse of the movement, line 39 (lines 27–39).

Shape-shifting dominates the description: the camel resembles an ostrich that in turns resembles a funeral bier, an incomprehensible foreigner, and a slave wearing a fur cloak; the ostrich’s flock resembles Yemeni camels; when the poet’s camel runs she seems to be attacked by a cat tied to her side; the journey converts her into a brick fortress, supported on tentpoles. Her legs are like fifes, and she sweats tar. After her metamorphosis from ostrich to human-made structure, her final act of shape-shifting is the abandonment of her gender altogether as she becomes a stallion, the consummation of the denial to allow her to produce milk at the onset of the passage. Once more, pain and grotesquery abound: the camel is physically maimed (her teats are snipped); the slave has had his ears docked; the foreign camel herder is incomprehensible; the cat is ferocious in its attacks on the poet’s she-camel.

With the camel now transmogrified almost beyond recognition, the poet addresses ‘Ablah, his destination. It is as yet unclear whether ‘Antarah has reached her—he entertains the possibility that she may refuse to lower her veil before him. The words he addresses to her epitomize the pre-Islamic warrior ethos: the fulfillment of the warrior’s identity through excess, whether as implacable vengeance or unbounded generosity. And the poet’s demand that ‘Ablah recognize his merits with praise reminds us that this ethos is ineffectual and empty without its celebration in verse (lines 40–46). The force of this apostrophe and its significance for the shape of the qasida should not be underestimated. It means that, somewhat uncommonly in the pre-Islamic poetic corpus, the
boasting intoned in the remainder of the ode (i.e., the mufākharah) is addressed directly to the poet’s beloved, and not to his tribe or opponents. So, once again, the shape of the qasida is destabilized and the shape-shifting of the desert adventure continues in line 42, in metaphor and simile: the harm the poet inflicts on his enemies is a snarling lion (bāsil, in Arabic); in the mouth of his enemies his actions taste as bitter as colocynth.

Now it becomes clear that the dawn raid, alluded to in line 25 and line 26, is about to begin. The raid is launched (line 47): three champions are felled in rapid succession. The sequence is structured as a priamel, with the most significant kill coming last—at the end of the ode. Again, grotesquery abounds: the severed jugular of the first victim hisses like breath whistling through a harelip; the poet feeds savage hyenas and other predators with butchered flesh, the thud of his spear sounding a clarion call that dinner is ready; spilled blood (as red as resin) and rotting flesh (dark as indigo) frame the three vivid close-ups that zoom in on the killing and pulsate with battle lust, as the poet delights in slaughtering his highborn opponents (lines 47–63).

ʿAblah, the poet’s target, is now easy prey: she is an exposed and vulnerable gazelle that beckons and invites him to pounce. But do these verses depict the aftermath of the raid or are they a memory of the time when the poet and his beloved were together? Why is the poet accompanied by a slave girl on the raid? The scene is perhaps more appropriate for the period when ʿAntarah pursued ʿAblah before her tribe struck camp. Once again, meaning is destabilized and uncertainty flits over the chronography, shape, and direction of the poem (lines 64–67).

With the poet’s prey apparently captured, the poem launches into an exultant boast (mufākharah), as the poet reiterates his exploits on the battlefield. In a panoramic battle description, ʿAntarah holds the line and leads his tribe to victory in a hard-won contest—the combatants lose the power of language; the poet’s horse almost acquires it. The only words to be heard are the chants, “ʿAntar!” and, “Ho ʿAntar, Onward!” (lines 73 and 78), which frame the poet’s charge into the fray and his rout of the enemy (lines 68–78).

Many pre-Islamic qasidas end on this note of unbridled exultation, but not so this Golden Ode, for the poet addresses a further bout of self-justification to ʿAblah. The extent of the poem’s instability becomes clear, for ʿAntarah has not yet been able to reach her, seize his prize, and fulfill his desire—ʿAblah remains unattainable, physically and figuratively beyond his reach. The poet is now at
Introduction

war with both kinfolk and foe: the clan that bars his way to ʿAblah traces its
descent from Baghīḍ, an ancestor of both the ’Abs, the poet’s own tribe, and
the Dhubyān, its inveterate opponents in the War of Dāḥis and al-Ghabrāʾ
(lines 79–81). The poet launches into the final (and in a sense the only real)
expression of self-glorification (mufākharah) in the qasida as he challenges his
opponents to combat (lines 82–85).

The poem concludes with a disturbing, intensified image of the desolation
it began with: a corpse left unburied on the field of battle, carrion for hyenas
and vultures. In this way, we are led by this shimmering mirage of a qasida to
ponder the one true reality. It is the conclusion the ode has been straining to
reach: Death, the obliteration of existence, is the only true reality; it is the real
subject of the ode.

The Abbasid Discovery of ʿAntarah

The story of the discovery of ʿAntarah is the story of the recovery of the
Jāhiliyyah in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries, when this body
of oral verse came to be salvaged, recorded, and studied by Abbasid language
experts, scholars, enthusiasts, and intellectuals. Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889), one
of the architects of high Arabic culture, and part of the second wave of scholars
who devoted their lives and energies to this corpus of poetry and the Qur’an,
summed up pre-Islamic poetry thus:

Poetry is the source of the Arabs’ learning, the basis of their wisdom, the
archive of their history, the repository of their battle lore. It is the wall built
to protect the memory of their glories, the moat that safeguards their laurels.
It is the truthful witness on the day of crisis, the irrefutable proof in disputes.
He who has no decisive proof to support his claims of nobility, or his claims
about his ancestors’ glory and praiseworthy deeds, will find that his efforts are
in vain, even if his glorious deeds are famous. Their memory will be effaced
over time even if they are momentous. But he who has his merits committed to
rhyming verse and bound in meter, and gives them renown through a choice
verse, a memorable maxim, or a subtle notion, will immortalize them for all
time. He will secure them against disavowal, and protect them from the plots of
enemies. He will repel the jealous eye. Even if his glories are modest, they will
forever be evident for all to see and recollect.34
Introduction

By the middle of the third/ninth century, discussion of pre-Islamic hero warriors had become so widespread that al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868–69), theologian, author, and prominent intellectual, could write in a discussion of lexicography:

There are warrior-knights who, with their steeds, attain the pinnacle of fame and yet still fail to enjoy the same reputation as those who are much less deserving. Consider how our uneducated colleagues think that Ibn al-Qirriyyah is a more famous orator than Saḥbān Wāʾil, and that ʿUbayd ibn al-Ḥurr is a greater paragon of knighthood than Zuḥayr ibn Dhuʿayb. The same is true of their treatment of ʿAntarah ibn Shaddād and ʿUtaybah ibn al-Ḥārith ibn Shihāb, and they love to quote ʿAmr ibn Maʿdī Karib but have never even heard of Biṣṭām ibn Qays.35

Al-Jāḥiẓ is annoyed that a lack of specialized knowledge means that for many of his contemporaries ʿAntarah ibn Shaddād is a warrior of greater renown than ʿUtaybah ibn al-Ḥārith, the chieftain of the Tamīm kin group.36

The genesis of the legend of ʿAntarah and the story of the collection of his poetry are accordingly unclear, but the cultural currents that led to it being written down gather around a series of narratives known as “The Battle Lore of the Arabs” (Ayyām al-ʿArab), i.e., the stories of the wars, conflicts, and skirmishes that were fought by the North Arabian tribes a century or so before the advent of Islam. Any form of fighting, from the slinging of stones to full-scale military engagement, qualified as worthy of record and justified the label of “battle day.”37

A typical battle narrative is told in an unadorned prose style and is usually identified by the name of the place where the incident occurred. Accuracy of geographic and genealogical detail is paramount, with scant regard paid to chronological accuracy. The main protagonists, the tribal context, and the bone of contention that led to the dispute are introduced, and then the narrative is typically focused on the actions of individuals, as a composite picture of the events of the battle is drawn. Sometimes tribal champions exchange poetic taunts before engaging in combat. Often dialogues proliferate. The narrative culminates in a rehearsal of the poetry, usually boasts and vaunts, composed to celebrate the victory or commemorate the memory of the glorious dead. Poems relating to the event are quoted, often as fragments. Poetry is central. It corroborates and ensures the veracity of the narrative, while the narrative contextualizes, justifies, and explains the poetry. In this way, the powerful and enduring concept that poetry is “the (historical and genealogical) register of the Arabs” (al-shiʿr diwān al-ʿarab) took root and became widespread.
Introduction

These tales of tribal conflict began life as the collective memory of an oral society; as one of the means whereby, unsystematically but consistently, the pre-Islamic kin groups of North Arabia communicated and imagined their visions of themselves, and commemorated their histories. Under the rule of the Umayyad dynasty that followed the first half century of early Islam, tribal allegiance dominated political conflict:

The reevaluation and transformation of tribalism fostered the interest in preserving tribal lore as an object of tribal pride and as argumentative basis in the ongoing struggles for political power.38

Thus, battle lore emerged as tribal apologetics, a contested and disputed lore of immense political clout and relevance.

As the Abbasid dynasty (132–656/750–1258) court in Baghdad and elite society began to be shaped by new social, cultural, and political structures, genealogy and tribal battle narratives gradually lost much of the political immediacy they had enjoyed during the Umayyad era (41–132/661–750), when tribes in Syria and Arabia jockeyed for preeminence and politics were largely expressed through tribal loyalties. This was when genealogy and battle narratives emerged as subjects to be studied and codified.

By the end of the second/eighth century, a large-scale, major collection of poetry with a commentary incorporating battle narratives was composed in the garrison town of Kufa by al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī (d. 90/784). In this monumental collection, known as *al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, the battle narratives are used as context for and commentary on the poems. Al-Mufaḍḍal’s approach to narrative as context for and commentary on poetry set the standard to be followed in subsequent centuries. Thus, when we encounter ‘Antarah’s poetry in the two collections of the fifth/eleventh century, it is presented predominantly in this form, with narrative as preface to the poem, and the poem with commentary interspersed after every two, sometimes three, verses.

Genealogy and battle narratives were of central concern for two antiquarian enthusiasts and expert philologists: Abū ‘Ubaydah Maʿmar ibn al-Muthannā of Basra (ca. 210/825) and Hishām ibn al-Kalbī of Kufa (d. 204/819 or 206/821). Ibn al-Kalbī was the undisputed master of Arabian genealogy: his masterpiece was known as *The Roll Call of Genealogy (Jamharat al-nasab)*.39 He also composed a work on the battle days of the Arabs that has not survived. The two key works on battle days composed by Abū ‘Ubaydah have also been lost. The shorter
of Abū ʿUbaydah’s two monographs is thought to have covered either 75 or 150 battle days, whereas his major work, *Deaths of the Knights* (*Maqātil al-fursān*), is thought to have contained narratives of either 1,200 or 1,600 battle days. Abū ʿUbaydah also composed a monumental collection of poetry, *The Flytings of Jarīr and al-Farazdaq* (*Naqāʾiḍ Jarīr wa-l-Farazdaq*), a series of high-profile public slanging matches expressed in poetry by two major Umayyad poets. In this work, Abū ʿUbaydah’s expertise on pre-Islamic battle days is evident: it is our primary source for the War of Dāḥis and al-Ghabrāʾ waged between the ‘Abs and Fazārah.40 The principles of organization of Abū ʿUbaydah’s battle-lore books is not known, but evidently he created a corpus of battle lore that became canonical.

The works of Abū ʿUbaydah and Ibn al-Kalbī were informed by, and helped shape, a wider intellectual, cultural, and religious process that developed over the course of the third/ninth century. In their quest for a pure, original Arabic to set the pristine (divine) Arabic of the Qurʾan against, the philologists of third/ninth century Iraq sought to imagine a correspondingly pure, original Arabia inhabited by noble warrior nomads. It is hard to think of a figure that could have met their requirements more completely than ʿAntarah ibn Shaddād, legendary warrior, chivalrous Arab, tragic lover, and composer of one of the poetic masterpieces of the *Jāhiliyyah*, “the Suspended Odes” (*al-Muʿallaqāt*).41 Yet we know almost nothing of how ʿAntarah’s poetry and its associated battle lore was collected. Glimpses of this process of discovery are afforded by four types of textual evidence:

1. The comments of al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/858–59), and the entries on ʿAntarah provided by Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889) and Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī (d. 356/967).

2. The redactions and commentaries of the poetry of six pre-Islamic poets by two scholars from al-Andalus: Abū l-Ḥajjāj Yūsuf ibn Sulayman the Grammarian, known as al-Aʿlam al-Shantamarī (the man from Faro with the harelip) (d. 476/1083); and Abū Bakr ʿĀṣim ibn Ayyūb al-Baṭalyawsī (d. 494/1101), from Badajoz. Both philologists include ʿAntarah ibn Shaddād as one of the six pre-Islamic poets. Al-Shantamarī’s redaction includes twenty-seven poems, and he notes that the philologist al-Aṣmaʿī (d. 213/828 or 216/831), whom he identifies as the ultimate source for his own redaction, accepted without question the attribution of twenty-three of these.42 The redaction of al-Baṭalyawsī includes thirteen more
Introduction

poems than those commented upon by al-Shantamī, i.e., forty poems in total. Al-Baṭalyawsī does not indicate the provenance of his collection, though he provides more variant readings in his commentary than does al-Shantamī, and Abū ʿUbaydah looms largest among those scholars whose variant readings al-Baṭalyawsī does quote. Both scholars include, as prefaces to the poems and commentary, a number of poetry narratives (akhbār al-shiʿr) that seem to be descendants or retellings of opposite narratives from the battle-lore tradition.

3. The anthology of Abū Ghālib ibn Maymūn (d. 597/1201), The Ultimate Arab Poetry Collection (Muntahā l-ṭalab min ashʿār al-ʿArab), compiled in ten parts between 588/1192 and 589/1193. Ibn Maymūn offers versions of five poems by ʿAntarah, including the “Suspended Ode” (Muʿallaqah). One of these five poems (Poem 28) is only attested in The Epic of ʿAntar, and another (Poem 29) is a considerably enlarged version of a poem that we encounter in the other collections (i.e., Poem 5).43

4. The origins of The Epic of ʿAntar date from the fifth/eleventh and sixth/twelfth centuries. The two extant traditions of the Epic (Cairene and Levantine) contain a great deal of poetry. The Levantine tradition contains a version of Poem 28 in the current volume, one of the five poems by ʿAntarah included by Ibn Maymūn for inclusion in his anthology, thereby attesting to the emergence and development of the ʿAntar legend in the fifth/eleventh century.

Of by far the greatest relevance for the story of the discovery of ʿAntarah in the third/ninth century are text groups one and two, and I will confine my discussion to them. It is hard to know what to make of the passage from al-Jāḥiẓ, for his interest is not in ʿAntarah as such, but rather in the shortcomings of the assessments of those who prefer ʿAntarah ibn Shaddād over ʿUtaybah ibn al-Ḥārith ibn Shihāb. It would be foolhardy to extrapolate from this passage more than a passing indication that by the middle of the third/ninth century interest was being taken in the deeds of ʿAntarah, an inference that is corroborated by the entry on the poet included a decade or so later by Ibn Qutaybah in his Book of Poetry and Poets (Kitāb al-Shiʿr wa-l-shuʿarāʾ). That entry comes in two sections: biography and appreciation. The second section (Appendix §§1.8–13) concerns ʿAntarah’s originality (§§1.8–10) and provides several examples of some choice verses, one example of a verse in which ʿAntarah is criticized for going too far (§1.12), and one citation of some verses in which he boasts of his blackness (§1.13). The first
Introduction

section (§§1.1–7) initially discusses the uncertainty hovering over ‘Antarah's line-
age and proceeds to structure its points according to ‘Antarah's life, from birth
to death: his manumission and recognition by his father, his mother and color,
his involvement in the War of Dāḥis and al-Ghabrā', his emergence as a major
poet with his “Golden Ode,” and his death.

In §1.2 Ibn Qutaybah quotes a sample of the verses of Poem 43 in the pres-
ent volume that ‘Antarah declaims as he charges into battle on the day he
wins his freedom. This quotation by Ibn Qutaybah is significant because these
verses are not included in al-Shantamarī’s redaction of (al-Sijistānī’s? ver-
sion of) al-Aṣmaʿī’s recension, though they are included as the final poem in
al-Baṭalyawsī’s recension. This meager piece of evidence is an indication that
al-Baṭalyawsī’s recension of poems not included in al-Aṣmaʿī’s redaction may in
fact include materials that predate Ibn Qutaybah. Noteworthy are similarities
between comments in Ibn Qutaybah and remarks provided by al-Shantamarī
and al-Baṭalyawsī, suggesting that these poetry narratives may in fact be quoted
from material that also predates Ibn Qutaybah.44 We may even be tempted to
discern in Ibn Qutaybah’s entry a core of the ‘Antar legend in the stress placed
on slavery and birth, and in the story of ‘Antarah’s solitary death, when his ele-
mental life force is reclaimed by nature.

The entry on ‘Antarah in al-Iṣbahānī’s Great Book of Songs (Kitāb al-Aghānī
al-kabīr) (Appendix 2), a sweeping panorama of Arabic court culture, musical
history, and poetic creativity across the ages, may be longer and somewhat more
involved than that of Ibn Qutaybah, but it shares the same basic structure, with
the addition of recapitulations and alternative versions of key incidents, as well
as notes on musical performances of ‘Antarah’s verses and sections explaining
difficult, obsolete, and obscure vocabulary. Interestingly, al-Iṣbahānī’s version
of the seduction of ‘Antarah by his father’s wife, so reminiscent of Zulaykhah’s
attempted seduction of Joseph in the Qurʾān (Q 12 (Yūsuf)), is quoted by
al-Baṭalyawsī.45

More significant, however, is a narrative given by both al-Iṣbahānī and
al-Baṭalyawsī: the incident in which ‘Antarah’s valor incurs the animosity of
Qays ibn Zuhayr.46 Al-Iṣbahānī’s source is Abū ‘Amr al-Shaybānī; al-Baṭalyawsī’s
is Ibn al-Sikkīt, from whom he also derives the obscure tale of ‘Antarah’s
brothers and their colt, which according to al-Iṣbahānī originates with both
Ibn al-Aʿrābī and Abū ‘Ubaydah (via al-Sukkarī and Ibn Ḥabīb).47 The tale of
‘Antarah’s death is also shared by both sources.48 Al-Baṭalyawsī gets his version
Introduction

from the Egyptian grammmarian Ibn al-Naḥḥāṣ (d. 338/950), al-Iṣbahānī his version from Abū ʿUbaydah and Ibn al-Kalbī. This brief comparison suggests that al-Baṭalyawsī may have had access to sources that included a range of material possibly originating from the first century of the discovery of ʿAntarah.

ʿAntarah’s poetry survived because of the amazing fifth/eleventh century efflorescence in Arabic philology that characterized al-Andalus, the Muslim-controlled regions of the Iberian peninsula. Al-Shantamarī was born in Shantamariyyat al-Gharb (modern-day Faro in Portugal) in 410/1019 and died in Seville in 476/1083. He studied Arabic language, lexicography, grammar, and classical poetry in Cordoba, and wrote extensively on grammar and lexicography. He so excelled in these subjects that he was given the honorific “the Grammarian.” He notes in the introduction to his magnum opus, his recension of and commentary on the six pre-Islamic poets, that his transmission of this text goes back through the scholars of his native al-Andalus to al-Sijistānī (d. 255/869) and ultimately to al-Aṣmaʿī. It is, however, not clear whether al-Aṣmaʿī, at the beginning of the chain, or al-Shantamarī, at the end, or any of the seven links in the chain, was responsible for the actual collection in one book of the recensions of the work of these six poets. Al-Shantamarī’s commentary is largely confined to lexical and grammatical problems and only rarely offers any variant readings or mentions his sources.

In all likelihood, the bringing together in one collection of al-Aṣmaʿī’s disparate recensions of these six poets is the work of his pupil Abū Ḥātim al-Sijistānī, an assumption we are encouraged to make by the inclusion of compositions by ʿAntarah not sanctioned by al-Aṣmaʿī. Al-Sijistānī, an expert on Arabic poetry and its lore, prosody, and vocabulary, was a pupil of both Abū ʿUbaydah and al-Aṣmaʿī and the teacher of Ibn Durayd (the third link in al-Shantamarī’s chain). While it is not clear whether this collection contained any commentary, be it by al-Aṣmaʿī or al-Sijistānī, what is clear is that al-Aṣmaʿī was a rigorist when it came to assessing the attributions of poems to poets, prone to err on the side of caution and with a distinct preference (in the case of ʿAntarah) for poems composed in the classical meters, and a tendency to exclude pieces composed in the more popular, improvisatory meter of rajaz.

Al-Baṭalyawsī (d. 494/1101) was an official from Baṭalyaws (Badajoz) working in the law courts of the Berber dynasty of the Aftasids (r. 413–87/1022–95). While his collection of the six poets contains the poetry of the same six poets to whom al-Shantamarī devoted his commentary, in the case of ʿAntarah the range
of poems is more extensive than those of his predecessor, for it includes many of
the more occasional, shorter, improvisatory pieces composed in rajaz. Perhaps
al-Baṭalyawsī intended his version of the six poets to supplement the version
made famous by al-Shantamarī. This would imply that al-Baṭalyawṣī himself
compiled the collection out of various redactions of the poetry of the six poets, a
supposition that might be corroborated by the diligence with which he indicates
his authorities, but this is outright conjecture.

The order of the poems in al-Baṭalyawsī’s recension is completely different
from the order in al-Shantamarī. Al-Baṭalyawsī is careful to note variant read-
ings, and wherever possible identifies his authority for an item of information
or a reading. His favorite source for variants is Abū ʿUbaydah, but he also men-
tions Abū ʿUbayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām (d. 224/838), al-Mufaḍḍal (d. 90/784),
Ibn al-Sikkīt (d. 244/858), and Ibn Qutaybah.

Al-Baṭalyawsī’s redaction contains an excerpt quoted by Ibn Qutaybah in
his entry on ʿAntarah but not included by al-Aṣmaʿī/al-Sijistānī–al-Shantamarī.
My hypothesis (a large claim based on scanty evidence) is that the forty poems
recorded by al-Baṭalyawsī represent the range of poems that were available to
al-Aṣmaʿī, who omitted those poems that his rigorism found problematic or
deemed suspect. I also think it is possible that this range of poems preserved by
al-Baṭalyawsī was derived ultimately from one of the works of Abū ʿUbaydah via
Ibn al-Sikkīt.51

In sum, we owe what we know of ʿAntarah’s poetry to two scholars who lived
some five centuries after he did, and who wrote their commentaries on the Ibe-
rían peninsula, thousands of miles away from the highlands of Arabia where
ʿAntarah achieved fame. It is a remarkable story of the literate continuities of
Islamic civilization and Arabic scholarship during its classical era, and of the
imaginative hold that pre-Islamic Arabia exerted over successive generations of
readers and scholars.

The Epic of ʿAntar

The Epic of ʿAntar represents the last stage of the discovery of ʿAntarah in the
premodern Arabic-speaking world. It is an enormously popular epic, and one of
ten or so similar epics that have survived.52 In its printed versions, it can run to
some five thousand pages and mixes things real and imagined, pseudo-historical
and phantasmagoric, in a universe of moral consistency offered by the resolute
Introduction

chivalry and bravery of its eponym, as ‘Antar overcomes the disadvantages of his slave birth and color, and emerges as the most celebrated warrior of the age, vanquisher of emperors and kings, winning the hand of his beloved ‘Ablah.53

The origins of the Epic date to the fifth/eleventh and sixth/twelfth centuries: the earliest written copy dates from 872/1466, and was at one stage in its long history kept in the Ottoman imperial library. It survives today in two main versions: Cairene and Levantine.54 While its written tradition was relatively stable, the Epic was principally the prerogative of semiprofessional storytellers who recounted the exploits of ‘Antar in the marketplace, coffeehouse, or village square.

The action takes place on a global setting, in some arenas that are real, such as Arabia, Africa, Byzantium, and Persia, and in others that are patently unreal, and where enchantment looms large, such as the Kingdom of al-Wāḥāt, a realm protected by a Greek statue that ‘Antar must first overcome before he can gain entry. Nevertheless, the Epic’s claim on historical veracity is strong. It is ostensibly narrated by al-Aṣma‘ī, but this is a long-lived al-Aṣma‘ī who knew ‘Antar personally, and who is four hundred years of age when the Jāhiliyyah comes to an end. The characters of the Epic, be they Sasanian emperors or Crusader knights, are mostly historical personages, and ‘Antar has a son by a Frankish princess: this son is called Jufrān, an echo of Godfrey of Bouillon (d. AD 1100), one of the leaders of the First Crusade.

The Epic of ‘Antar is basically a quest narrative in which a hero is given a series of challenges. ‘Antar, the son of Shaddād and Zabībah (an Ethiopian slave who turns out to be the daughter of a Sudanese king), falls in love with ‘Ablah, the daughter of his paternal uncle Mālik, who promises, and then breaks his promise, to marry her to ‘Antar, demanding a dowry of one thousand camels bred only by al-Mundhir, the Nasrid king of al-Ḥīrah. Before he can set off on his quest, however, ‘Antar must first become a knight. By guile and trickery, he gains possession of the fabulous black stallion al-Abjar. And as a reward, he is given an equally fabulous black sword, known by the epithet “Thirsty,” a weapon fashioned from a rare black stone.

In this way, the request of a dowry becomes the pretext for ‘Antar fighting, both for and against the masters of the civilized world. The rambling narrative, with its regular climaxes and stereotyped battle scenes, is ultimately given coherence and stability by its protagonist, who time and again demonstrates that chivalry and devotion to justice are what help make sense of life.
Poetry is one of the *Epic*’s principal vehicles for exploring the psychology of chivalry and the nobility of sentiment of its hero. According to Peter Heath, the *Epic* contains some ten thousand verses. We do not know who the composer or composers of this cornucopia of poems were, or when they were composed. This raises a number of questions that we are unable at present to answer with any confidence. Are the poems the work of the semiprofessional narrators of the *Epic*? Or were they the product of a higher social class, men of culture adept at formal Arabic? Can we hear different “authorial” or compositional voices in the poems? Can we glean any clues or answers from the Arabic of the poems? Did these compositions somehow find their way into the corpus when it was collected, existing perhaps in disparate anthologies or popular works? Or did they constitute an integral part of the *Epic* from its earliest beginnings? What is the exact relationship between those poems found in the redaction of al-ʿAṣmaʿī (such as Poems 5 and 27), and the expanded and extended versions of them preserved in later collections (i.e., Poems 29 and 50 respectively in the present translation). And, perhaps most obviously, how should we refer to the “author” of these poems, what name should we use: ‘Antar, or the ‘Antar poet/s, or the Sirah poet/s?

The few examples of this poetry that we have included in our translation and edition were part of the original selection of poems made for the Library of Arabic Literature by Peter Heath. Peter’s knowledge of and love for the *Epic* shone through his selection. However, my own rather “purist” (or perhaps puritanical?) tendencies as a scholar of pre-Islamic poetry were initially challenged when we were called on to work with the selection. I found it difficult to engage with these poems as “poems,” as compositions of aesthetic worth and appeal in and of themselves. But at one point in my work, I realized that the poems of the *Epic* are in fact themselves acts of translation, part of a complex poetic and cultural process in which later poets invoked and sought to inhabit, through the vehicle of imagination, what Peter Cole refers to as that other “time which is always past, yet somehow now.” It was how these poets heard and experienced the ḥāhiliyyah. So in order to be true to them as poems I could not think of them simply as pastiches, but rather had to listen for the voice of ‘Antarrah that these poets were hearing and invoking and to which they sought to be true.

My own quest to find a voice for ‘Antarrah across all the poems and my act of listening were a turning point that led me to a nuanced appreciation of these poems as poems. In a certain way, I started to hear them as kinsfolk of, say,
Introduction

Catullus’s Latin versions of Sappho’s Greek lyrics, and of how generally Roman poets inhabited Greek models. So, without wishing to dismiss the plethora of questions that the poems in The Epic of ‘Antar raise (about authorship, provenance, history, context), the significance of this poetic corpus lies for me not in the conundrum of authorship but in the presence of imagination, voice, and translation.

The centuries-long “discovery” of ‘Antarah is far from over. His popularity in the Arabic-speaking world has never waned, and movies, TV shows, comics, and cartoons in Arabic abound. He is also on the cusp of reaching an English-speaking audience in a new comic-book series titled Antar the Black Knight, with scripts by the prize-winning Nigerian-American novelist Nnedi Okorafor and artwork by Eric Battle.55