A Critical Review of Modern Scholarship on "Sīrat ʿAntar ibn Shaddad" and the Popular Sīra

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# A CRITICAL REVIEW OF MODERN SCHOLARSHIP ON *SĪRAT ʿANTAR IBN SHADDĀD* AND THE POPULAR *SĪRA*

This essay attempts to review and take critical stock of one part of the modern study of Arabic literature: the scholarship concerning *Sīrat ʿAntar ibn Shaddād*. Although it concentrates its view on the work of modern students of this particular *sīra*, when appropriate it widens its scope to include studies of other popular *sīras*.[1] Simultaneous with reviewing this body of scholarship, it criticizes the use of the methodology that has dominated it: historical philology. This criticism is concerned less with the nature of the methodology itself—like any methodology historical philology has uses and advantages—than with what appears to be scholars' automatic and mechanical reliance on it in areas of study where it is not particularly applicable. My point here is not to suggest the scrapping of one methodology in favor of another, or to chastise past scholars for not using methodologies as yet undeveloped in their day. Rather, it is to clarify the reasons for some of the major weaknesses that have continued to mark the study of popular *sīra* literature until the present day, and, in the process, clear the way for more fruitful lines of inquiry in the future.

## *Nineteenth Century Scholarship*

In 1799 Baron von Hammer-Purgstall—Austrian orientalist, diplomat, and man of letters—set out for a sojourn in Istanbul. Before his departure his friend Baron Thugut, then the Minister for Foreign Affairs for the Imperial Austrian government, asked a favor of him. He asked Von Hammer to obtain for him "at whatever the price" a manuscript of the *Thousand and One Nights* in the original Arabic. This request, coming

[1] In terms of literary classification one must take care to distinguish between the use of the word *sīra* to denominate historiographical, empirical biographies, the most famous being Ibn Iṣḥāq's biography of the Prophet Muḥammad, *Sīrat an-nabī*, and pseudo-historical, fictional narratives such as *Sīrat ʿAntar*. To help maintain this distinction, I call the latter type "popular *sīras*," a term which corresponds to the modern Arabic term for these works (*as-sīra ash-shaʿbīya*). Works that fall within the general spectrum of this genre are: (1) *Sīrat ʿAntar ibn Shaddād*, (2) *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* ( = *Sīrat al-mujāhidīn*), (3) *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, (4) *Sīrat Saif ibn Dhī Yazan*, (5) *Sīrat al-Malik aẓ-Ẓāhir Baibars*, (6) *Sīrat aẓ-Ẓīr Sālim*, (7) *Sīrat Amīr Ḥamza*, (8) *Sīrat Fīrūz Shāh*, (9) *Sīrat Iskandar*. Also closely related to the *sīra* genre are the following *Thousand and One Night* stories: *ʿUmar ibn an-Nuʿmān*, *ʿAli Zaibaq*, and *ʿAjīb wa Gharīb*.

The reader should also note that in the following pages when I refer to the historical figure of the poet ʿAntara ibn Shaddād, I use the classical Arabic form of the name, i.e., ʿAntara. When I refer to the *sīra* and its hero, I use the vernacular form: ʿAntar.

from a diplomat, might strike us as surprising now, but it was not really unusual. Ever since the time of its first translation into French almost a century before, the *Thousand and One Nights* had enjoyed spectacular popularity in Europe. It was perhaps natural that men of culture and education such as Baron Thugut—even those who might not ordinarily have taken an interest in "oriental" literatures—might want an Arabic copy of the work for their libraries.[2] Whatever the reason behind this particular request, it proved impossible to fulfill. Baron von Hammer searched dutifully among the bookstalls and storytellers of Istanbul; but although the *Nights* was well-known, no copy of it was to be had. However, the course of his inquiries did lead the Baron across another work that was, like the *Thousand and One Nights*, a part of the standard repertoire of Arab storytellers: *Sīrat ʿAntar*.

Von Hammer found only a small fragment, but nevertheless it was an exciting discovery for him. ʿAntara ibn Shaddād was already known to European orientalists as a famous pre-Islamic warrior and poet, the composer of one of the long poems of the famous *Muʿallaqāt* anthology. Moreover, Von Hammer recalled that the prominent English orientalist, Sir William Jones, had also seen a fragment of *Sīrat ʿAntar* and had pronounced that:

> It comprises all that is elegant and noble in composition. So lofty, so various, and so bold is its style, that I do not hesitate to rank it among the most finished poems.[3]

There were, in general, three areas of study that dominated the interest of European students of Arabic during Von Hammer's time: the *Thousand and One Nights*, the early history of the Arabs, and the study of pre-Islamic poetry. Here was a work that encompassed all these interests. Like the *Thousand and One Nights* it was a standard narrative of the popular storytellers of the time; its story was set in the historical period of pre-Islamic Arabia; and not only was its protagonist a famous pre-Islamic poet, it was also filled with a great number of poems attributed to him. One can understand Von Hammer's excitement and imagine how avidly the Baron must have searched Istanbul for other parts of the work. To no avail. He was unable to find more of the work. But he was told that it was popular in Syria and Egypt and advised to continue his search there.

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[2] For a description of Europe's reception of the *Thousand and One Nights* as well as a full bibliography of previous research on the subject, see Mia I. Gerhardt, *The Art of Story-Telling: A Literary Study of the Thousand and One Nights* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1963).

[3] William Jones, *Poeseos Asiaticae Commentariorum* (London, 1774), p. 323. Quote translated by Terrick Hamilton, *Antar: A Bedoueen Romance*, 4 vols. (London: John Murray, 1820), 1:xx-xxi.

Two years later, Von Hammer's travels took him to an Egypt just recently evacuated by Napoleon's French expeditionary forces. The Baron had not forgotten *Sīrat ʿAntar* in the intervening years and had, in fact, been able to procure several more portions during a short visit to Jaffa. Now his hopes were high that he would be able to obtain a complete copy in Egypt. At first, he again met disappointment. The coffeehouse storytellers and bedouins he inquired among in Alexandria brought him different fragments of several popular narratives: *Sīrat Iskandar*, *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, but apparently no one possessed, or at any rate was willing to part with, a complete copy of *Sīrat ʿAntar*. Not until he came to Cairo did the energetic Baron finally meet success. Upon the offer of a purse of gold, the Sheikh of the Cairene storytellers produced a complete text bound in six large volumes which, Von Hammer tells us, were parts of two different copies. The first three volumes dated from the fifteenth century while the last three, although complementary to the first part, were of quite modern date.[4] Von Hammer shipped the manuscripts back to the Imperial Library in Vienna and the following year, 1802, he announced his discovery in print:

> This work, which must be reckoned as very instrumental towards learning the manners, dispositions, and habits of the Arabs, seems to us more interesting than the celebrated "Thousand and One Nights"; not indeed with respect to the fictions, in which this work almost entirely fails; but as a picture of true history. There is nothing about genii, magicians, or talismans, or fabulous animals; and if, indeed, the bravery of the hero, who, unwounded, slays hundreds and thousands of the foe, or the swiftness of his generous steed, that outstrips the wind, appear incredible; these are rather the results of a hyperbolic style, than to be considered fabulous figures, which never, in the opinion of orientals, invalidates the truth of history. The whole of this work may be esteemed as a faithful account of the principal tribes of the Arabs, and particularly of the tribe of Abs, from which sprung Antar, in the time of Nushirvan, King of Persia, more faithful in painting manners than in describing events.
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> The style is often flowery and beautiful, mixed with poetry, frequently in a common diction, and sometimes the augmentations and more recent interpolations plainly prove the adulterations of the copyist. (What would that light of oriental literature, Sir William Jones, have thought of the style and merits of this work, who only treated the fourteenth volume, in his Commentaries on Asiatic Poetry.) It chiefly treats of the love of Antar and Abla, and also of their family, down to the death of the hero.

[4] For Von Hammer's account of his discovery of *Sīrat ʿAntar*, see Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, "On Arabian Poetry, Especially the Romance of Antar," *The New Monthly Magazine* (London, 1820), p. 12-14. This is a translation of his German article which appeared in *Jahrbücher der Literatur* (Vienna, 1820), which I have been unable to obtain. For a description of the manuscript that Von Hammer bought in Cairo, see G. Flügel, *Die arabischen, persischen und türkischen Handschriften der Kaiserlich-Königlichen Hofbibliothek zu Wien*, 3 vols. (Vienna, 1865-67), 2:4-9.

> This work, which is generally called a romance of chivalry, though impossible to be translated, owing to the number of volumes, may be gleaned; every part appertaining to history, should be carefully collected, and nothing relative to manners omitted. Such, with God's help, we intend to publish.
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> The author, from beginning to end, appears to be Asmaee, a famous philologist and poet at the court of Harun Rasheed; but sometimes other authors and sources are mentioned, who according to our opinion, appear to have been inserted by the story-teller in the coffee-houses. This is the work, and not, as is generally supposed, the Thousand and One Nights, which is the source of the stories which fill the tents and cottages of Arabia and Egypt; though materials are often supplied from other works of the same kind.[5]

Such was the formal introduction of *Sīrat ʿAntar* to the West. We have quoted Von Hammer's notice in full because it contains interests and viewpoints that have, in one way or another, continued to preoccupy scholars up to our times. Let us review the points that Von Hammer makes.

First of all, Von Hammer appears to value *Sīrat ʿAntar* most as a potential historical source, as a *sittenbild*, an excellent picture of the manners and mores of the pre-Islamic Arabs. He admits that the work is not an historical account in the exact sense of the term, but it is a "picture of true history ... faithful in painting manners." Because of this, he judges the *Sīra* to be superior in every sense to the *Thousand and One Nights*, which is quite unreliable in this regard. Althoug *Sīrat ʿAntar* might possess an "hyperbolic style," it is happily free of "fabulous figures" of any kind. As such, the work should be "gleaned; every part pertaining to history ... carefully collected, and nothing relative to manners neglected."

Along with its merits as an historical source, Von Hammer also feels that the *Sīra* is a fine piece of literature: a "romance of chivalry" with a style "often flowery and beautiful." And if it also contains what appears to be unfortunate lapses into "common diction" as well as other "augmentations," these should only be considered as the recent "interpolations" or "adulterations" of later copyists or storytellers.

Thirdly, Von Hammer is concerned with the question of determining the work's author and date of composition. In this regard, he has no doubts that *Sīrat ʿAntar* was originally composed by the famous Arab philologist and collector of early poetry ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Quraib al-Aṣmaʿī, who died around 208/823.

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[5] Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, *Fundgruben der Orients* (Vienna, 1802), 2:304-6. Translated by Hamilton in *Antar*, 1:xix-xxii. I have changed Hamilton's *ʿIbla* back to Von Hammer's original *ʿAbla*, since that is the correct form of the name.

Finally, the Baron offers his opinion concerning the advisability of attempting to translate the *Sīra*. He declares the work too voluminous to be translated in full, but he does announce his intention to publish an extract of it, and thus, as A. J. Arberry has noted, "In this time-honoured fashion Hammer-Purgstall staked out his claim."[6] In spite of this stated intention, the energetic Austrian soon become involved in a host of other projects. Almost twenty years were to pass before any more was heard about *Sīrat ʿAntar* from Baron von Hammer-Purgstall or anyone else.

In the year 1819, however, the first volume of a projected full translation of *Sīrat ʿAntar* into English appeared in London. This volume, the work of Terrick Hamilton—at that time the British Oriental Secretary in Istanbul—had been rushed into print by an impatient publisher without even the benefit of the translator's introduction.[7] One may describe its reception by the public as marked more by tentative interest than spectacular enthusiasm, but it is safe to say that the book's appearance did not please one party at all.

This incursion into his scholarly territory rekindled the banked fires of Baron von Hammer-Purgstall's interest in the *Sīra*. He promptly fired off an article in which he described the great pains he had undergone to obtain "his" copy for the Imperial Library in Vienna; then, taking advantage of the English translation's lack of introduction, he generously proceeded to offer his own account of the work's origin and nature.[8] This article is much longer than his 1802 notice, but Von Hammer's opinions remain essentially the same. He contrasts the "virile" *Sīrat ʿAntar* with the "effeminate" *Thousand and One Nights* and restates his belief that it was al-Aṣmaʿī who originally composed the work. Furthermore, he introduces the hypothesis that al-Aṣmaʿī wrote it for the subtly panegyrical purpose of currying favor with the Caliph al-Maʾmūn, whose mother, like ʿAntar's, had been a black slave.[9]

Von Hammer also criticizes Hamilton. Hamilton had based his translation on an abridged version of *Sīrat ʿAntar* that he had obtained in Aleppo. Von Hammer remarks, on the one hand, that the Englishman should have abridged his translation even further, noting that "the whole, if continued in the same manner, would make eighteen or twenty similar octavo volumes, the perusal of which is more than can be fairly expected from the patience of the most intrepid romance reader." On the other hand, he criticizes Hamilton for leaving out "many historically and

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[6] A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes* (London: George Allen & Unwin; 1957), p. 154.

[7] Terrick Hamilton, *Antar: A Bedoueen Romance* (London: John Murray, 1819).

[8] Von Hammer, "On Arabian Poetry" (cf. note 4).

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 153-54. Al-Maʾmūn's mother was, by the way, of Persian ancestry, not African, see "al-Maʾmūn," *E.I.*[1], 3:221.

ethnographically remarkable circumstances'' that appear in the full version of the work.[10]

The next year, 1820, Hamilton published a full edition of the first four volumes of his translation (comprising about one-third of the Arabic text of his abridged manuscript) and with it, his own preface.[11] In general, he echoes the opinions voiced by Von Hammer concering the *Sīra*'s nature, authorship, and time of composition. Hamilton judges the work to be ''a most faithful narrative of that mode of life in all its variety ... which prevailed among the Arabs in that 'period of ignorance'.'' But he also admits that al-Aṣmaʿī had not intended ''to compose a faithful history of those times: his view seems rather to comprise in a pleasing tale, numerous isolated facts, and the most striking traits of the manners and usages prevalent in that period.''[12]

Hamilton concludes that it is ''one of the most ancient books of Arabian literature'' and is surprised at the purity of its language considering that it ''has for a thousand years been transcribed chiefly for the use of the Bedoweens, and often by persons who probably did not comprehend one word they were writing.'' He too compares the *Sīra* to the *Nights*, agreeing with what J. L. Burkhardt had written to him: that *Sīrat ʿAntar* was ''in every respect superior'' to the *Thousand and One Nights*.[13] Hamilton also notes the popularity that the work enjoyed in the deserts and coffeeshops of Syria and explains the colloquialisms of the text in the same manner as Von Hammer, as the interpolations of storytellers, going on to mention that:

> It is given to children, who are obliged to copy it out, and thus acquire the habit of speaking elegantly and correctly: and it may be attributed to this cause, that the copies of Antar are generally found written most execrably ill, and abounding in errors of every kind.[14]

In spite of some of the vagaries of critical opinion that exist in his preface, Hamilton's translation of the first part of *Sīrat ʿAntar* is a fine piece of early nineteenth century prose. Unfortunately for the Englishman, Von Hammer's unfriendly article had appeared in English by this time; influenced by so prestigious an authority, English reviewers were less than kind.[15] Disheartened, Terrick Hamilton relinquished any hope he may have cherished of becoming a second Galland and never

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 160-61.

[11] Hamilton, *Antar*, as cited in note 3.

[12] *Ibid.*, 1:xii; xxviii.

[13] *Ibid.*, 1:xxix, xxiv.

[14] *Ibid.*, 1:xviii.

[15] For a description of the public's reaction—such that it was—to Hamilton's translation, see Cedric Dover, ''The Black Knight,'' *Phylon: The Atlantic University Review of Race and Culture* (1954), pp. 52-55.

completed his translation. But partial though it was, his effort did serve to reawaken the interest of European scholars in the *Sīra*.

For the next few decades *Sīrat ʿAntar* became an object of scholarly interest among orientalists, the main arena of debate being the pages of *Journal Asiatique*.[16] In 1883, A. Caussin de Perceval published a translation of the episode that describes the death of ʿAntar and accompanied it with short notice about the work as a whole. In this note he ascribes to the *Sīra*:

> A style, various and elegant, reaching sometimes to the sublime; characters drawn with force and skillfully sustained, render this work eminently remarkable; it may be termed the *Iliad* of the Arabians.[17]

Caussin de Perceval agrees with Von Hammer, Burkhardt, and Hamilton that the *Sīra* is a much finer work than the *Thousand and One Nights*, quoting the remark of the Prophet Muḥammad to the effect that the only Arab of the past he wished he had met was ʿAntara.[18] He also shares the opinion that the colloquialisms of the text were due to interpolations on the part of the storytellers, but suggests that they changed the wording purposely so their audience could better understand the narrative. But Caussin de Perceval does not agree with his predecessors on the question of who authored the work. He disputes the notion that al-Aṣmaʿī was its true author, observing that one manuscript attributes the work to one Sayyid Yūsuf ibn Ismāʿīl, who, he supposes, might have collected materials that had been gathered by al-Aṣmaʿī and other early philologists and from them created the *Sīra*. Finally the Frenchman, judging from the style of rhymed prose in which the work is composed, conjectures that it was written sometime in the fifteenth century.[19]

The next person to enter the discussion was Fulgence Fresnel. In one of his "highly curious letters from Jiddah, on the history of the Arabs prior to Islam,"[20] Fresnel had—in contrast to the scholars we have en-

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[16] For an excellent bibliography of the studies, translations, and texts related to *Sīrat ʿAntar* that appeared during the nineteenth century, see Victor Chauvin, *Bibliographie des ouvrages arabes ou relatifs aux Arabes, publiés dans l'Europe chrétienne de 1810 à 1885*, 12 vols. (Liège, 1892-1922), 3:113-26.

[17] A. Caussin de Perceval, "Notice et extrait du Roman d'Antar," *Journal Asiatique* (August, 1833), p. 99. The translation is from "The Romance of Antar," *Asiatic Journal*, n.s. (September, 1838), 27:57, note 2.

[18] Caussin de Perceval, "Notice," p. 98. For the text of Muḥammad's remark, see Abu l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, 24 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub; al-Hai'a al-Miṣrīya al-ʿāmma, 1927-70), 8:243 (= Būlāq, 7:101). Flattering as it is, one should perhaps not give too much credence to the authenticity of Muḥammad's remarks. Such comments by the prominent religious figures of early Islam regarding pre-Islamic or early Islamic poets are a stock formula of poets' biographies.

[19] Caussin de Perceval, "Notice," pp. 99-106.

[20] "Romance of Antar," p. 57.

countered so far—some rather harsh words concerning *Sīrat ʿAntar*. He remarks that the work was proscribed by the Islamic "clergy" and adds that "as the style is flat, and the poetry homely, the literati of the country do not include it amongst the works which compose the literature of Arabia".[21]

In the face of this attack, Von Hammer rushed once again to defend his discovery. In his reply to Fresnel he presumes that the latter has not seen an original copy of the *Sīra* but only a "disfigured" version from the hand of some common storyteller. He goes on to say that "if the Ulemas of Cairo depreciate at the present day this chief of Arabian romances, as Mr. Lane tells us they do, it tends to prove the decay of Arabian literature."[22] But even as he counter-attacks, the Baron retreats. He no longer asserts that al-Aṣmaʿī is the *Sīra*'s author; now he places the date of the work's composition in the twelfth century and announces that he has discovered its real author in an article of Ibn Abī Uṣaibiʿa's biographical dictionary of famous physicians. One of the entries of this work concerns one Ibn aṣ-Ṣāʾigh al-ʿAntarī who, Ibn Abī Uṣaibiʿa says, had obtained his nickname because in his youth he had written stories (*aḥādīth*) about ʿAntar al-ʿAbsī. This Ibn aṣ-Ṣāʾigh, Von Hammer decides, must be *Sīrat ʿAntar*'s true author. In spite of this retreat, Von Hammer still declares the *Sīra* to be a masterpiece of Arabic literature, a work only subsequently surpassed in rhetorical brilliance by the works of Ibn ʿArabshāh. He ends his article with the remark that since it had been he who had had the privilege of bringing to Europe the first complete manuscript of the work thirty-six years before, it was only fitting that it was also he who thus discovered its true author.[23]

In spite of Von Hammer's protestations, scholarly opinion regarding the literary merits of *Sīrat ʿAntar* was metamorphosing. By the middle of the nineteenth century enthusiasm for the work had visibly decreased. As more was learnt about the *Sīra* and Arabic literature in general, the European orientalist community began to feel that perhaps Fresnel's estimation of the work was closer to the truth than Von Hammer's. The shift in attitude may be clearly seen in H. Thorbecke's study of the life of the historical figure ʿAntara ibn Shaddād, published in 1868.[24] A. Perron

[21] Fulgence Fresnel, *Lettre sur l'histoire des Arabes avant l'islamisme* (Paris: T. Barrois & B. Duprat, 1836), pp. 41-43.

[22] Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, "Sur l'auteur de roman de chevalerie arabe Antar," *Journal Asiatique* (1838), p. 384. Translation from "The Romance of Antar," p. 57.

[23] Von Hammer, "Sur l'auteur," p. 386-88. See Ibn Abī Uṣaibiʿa, *ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbāʾ*, 2 vols., ed. A. Müller (Königsberg, 1884), 2:290-97. The Ibn ʿArabshāh Von Hammer refers to is the fifteenth century Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿArabshāh, secretary, historian, and *littérateur*, see *E.I.*², 3:711-12.

[24] Heinrich Thorbecke, *Antarah: Des vorislamischen Dichters Leben* (Heidelberg: Fr. Basserman, 1868).

had published a translation of the biographical account of ʿAntara contained in *Kitāb al-aghānī* as early as 1840.[25] But in his study, Thorbecke published the text itself and then added a full analysis of the information it and other early sources provide concerning the life of ʿAntara. Finally, at the end of his monograph, he offered a short description of the *Sīra*.

It is obvious from this account that *Sīrat ʿAntar*'s reputation as the *Iliad* of the Arabs has completely evaporated. Thorbecke harbours no doubts that the narrative is a piece of popular literature, not a work of belles-lettres. He cites Lane's description of recitation of romances in Egypt and lists other works that also refer to popular storytelling in the Middle East. He reviews the various theories concerning the identity of the *Sīra*'s author, ending with Von Hammer's final proposal of the twelfth century Ibn aṣ-Ṣāʾigh, but then he concludes, "Is he really the author? More probably only an arranger, revisor, editor."[26] Thorbecke ends his description with the following words:

> But for one reason is it an important piece of literature for us, deserving thorough consideration: it is the national and therefore authentic representation of that bedouin life that has remained the same through the centuries ... the knowledge of which is a necessary key for the understanding of ancient Arabian poetry. *Sīrat ʿAntar* is the best means of obtaining this knowledge.[27]

In other words, *Sīrat ʿAntar* is only interesting on that level that had particularly excited Von Hammer and Hamilton in the first place. It is an historical source that "must be reckoned as very instrumental towards learning the manners, dispositions, and habits of the Arabs." And, Thorbecke adds here, for understanding their ancient poetry.

Thorbecke's dry and matter-of-fact tone in discussing *Sīrat ʿAntar* is not a voice in the wilderness. It is echoed by other orientalists who discuss the work throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, or indeed, up to this very day. What had happened to the enthusiasm that had typified the earlier discussions? Had Fresnel's opinion carried such weight that it by itself had won the day? In fact, this change of attitude can be attributed to the authority of one scholar, but it was not Fresnel. It was not even someone who had a particular axe to grind.

In 1836, Edward William Lane's account of the *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* first appeared in print. The result of years of residence in Cairo, this work is still a classic of sociological observation. Balancing a mass of detailed information with an evenhanded depth of perception, this work provided details and points of information concern-

[25] A. Perron, "Lettre sur Antar," *Journal Asiatique*, (1840), pp. 1-15.
[26] Thorbecke, *Antarah*, p. 32.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

ing everyday life in Cairo that were revelations, not only for scholars that had never visited Egypt, but even for many that had. And in his work, Lane devoted several chapters to a type of event that was still a commonplace of everyday life, but which had never been described in any detail: the public recitation of romances.[28]

We shall not discuss the details of Lane's remarks. It is sufficient to note here that Lane gave European scholars a much fuller picture of the social context into which *Sīrat ʿAntar* fit than they had previously had. His account of *sīra* recitation in Egypt, combined with a rapidly increasing level of sophistication which study of other types of Arabic literature was causing, made it clear that the *Sīra* was truly a piece of popular literature, not a work of belles-lettres fallen upon hard times. For one thing, Lane revealed that it was only one of several romances publicly recited in Cairo—and not even the most popular one at that! Preceded as it was by the consensus that the *Sīra* was not the composition of the ninth century al-Aṣmaʿī but originated from a much later time, Lane's description of the work's common nature dampened scholarly interest considerably.

This was perhaps a natural reaction. After all, orientalism was still very much in the exploratory stage of its development; there were still many other literary masterpieces waiting to be "discovered" and investigated. One may doubt whether much more attention would have been lavished on *Sīrat ʿAntar* even if Lane's work had not appeared. As it was, the topic of its literary greatness was quietly dropped; such interest as the work inspired returned to that dimension that had interested scholars in the first place. If it had been proven that *Sīrat ʿAntar* was not a lofty epic masterpiece of classical Arabic literature, if it had been shown that it was not of early date or famous authorship, if it had not achieved even a faint shadow of the enormous popularity the *Thousand and One Nights* enjoyed in Europe and had even ceased to be compared to it, then at the very least the *Sīra* could still be considered a reliable picture of the life and ideals of the bedouin Arab, whether of pre-Islamic or later times. And it was this aspect that drew scholars to read the work during the next half century—to the extent that it was read at all.

The last nineteenth century orientalist who paid significant attention to *Sīrat ʿAntar* used it for exactly this purpose. Ignaz Goldziher used the work for philological ends. For the most part, he did not address himself to the problems of the narrative itself but rather used it as a secondary source in order to obtain a picture of the ideals and values of the pre-Islamic Arabs. And the good effect to which, in careful hands, the *Sīra*

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[28] Edward W. Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London: Dent, Everyman's Library, 1966), chapters 21-23, pp. 397-430.

may be thus used is revealed by the frequent references to it Goldziher makes in his masterly essays on Islamic culture contained in the two volumes of *Muslim Studies*.[29]

Ironically, the myth of *Sīrat ʿAntar*'s literary greatness, created by orientalists in the first decades of the nineteenth century and then quietly let to lie, continued to live on outside the scholarly circles that had created it. After all, the *Cantar de mio Cid* had only been first published in 1799, and the Oxford manuscript of *Chanson de Roland* in 1837. Excited by these discoveries, scholars of European literature were more than happy to have an Arabic epic join company with their newly found European ones. Moreover, the first part of the nineteenth century saw the high-water mark of the Romantic movement, and at least one prominent romantic, the French writer and poet Alphonse de Lamartine, found in the figure of ʿAntar an ideal of nomadic nobility. Here, proclaimed Lamartine, was a hero who had been completely free of the social ties and bonds that an increasingly mechanized and regimented European society was creating within itself.[30] As late as 1903, H. Taine continued to rank ʿAntar as one of high epic literature's greatest heroes, placing him along side of Roland, the Cid, Rustam, and Achilles.[31]

Another group influenced by the early orientalists' effusions over *Sīrat ʿAntar* were the educated classes of the Arabs themselves. Arab writers, from medieval times on, rarely deigned to mention such works as *Sīrat ʿAntar* or the *Thousand and One Nights*, but the few opinions that they did express indicate that they considered such works to be, at best, low forms of crude entertainment and, at worst, dangerous distortions of historical fact that misinformed and misled society's ignorant and unsophisticated masses.[32] One can only imagine the surprise members of the educated

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[29] Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammedische Studies*, 2 vols. (Halle, 1889-90), English translation: *Muslim Studies*, 2 vols. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967-71), especially vol. 2, see index for references. See also his "Ein orientalischer Ritterroman" in *Jubilee Volume in honor of Bernhard Heller on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday*, ed. A. Scheiber (Budapest, n.p., 1941).

[30] Alphonse de Lamartine, *Vie des grandes hommes*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1856), 1:267-345; also *Voyage en Orient*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1875), 2:473-507.

[31] Hippolyte Taine, *Philosophie de l'Art*, 2 vols., 3rd ed. (Paris: Hachette, 1881), 2:344-45.

[32] Ibn an-Nadīm (4th/10th century) calls the *Thousand and One Nights* (as it existed in his time) "truly a coarse book, without warmth in the telling [hackneyed]," (Muḥammad ibn Ishāq ibn an-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-fihrist*, ed. Gustav Flügel [Leipzig, 1871; rep. Beirut: Khayyat, 1967], p. 304. Translated by B. Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: a Tenth Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, 2 vols. [New York: Columbia University Press, 1970], 2:714). For examples of Muslim religious scholars' reactions to popular stories and storytellers, see Johannes Pedersen, "The Islamic Preacher: wāʾiẓ, mudhakkir, qāṣṣ," *Ignaz Goldziher Memorial Volume*, ed. S. Löwenger and J. Somogyi (Budapest: n.p., 1948), 1:226-51; and also his "The Criticism of the Islamic Preacher," *Die Welt des Islams* 2 (1953):214-231; see

and cultured classes of eighteenth and nineteenth century Arab society must have felt when they were informed by European acquaintances that the *Thousand and One Nights* was considered a masterpiece of world literature in Europe; they must have considered it as but one more telltale sign of the cultural inferiority of the West. Be that as it may, in the first part of the twentieth century several of the very best Arab writers created works that were based upon the story of ʿAntar, a change of critical opinion that can be at least partly attributed to the acclaim which Von Hammer and his contemporaries had lavished on the *Sīra*.[33]

*Remarks on Nineteenth Century Scholarship*

We cannot claim that the corpus of scholarly literature we have reviewed in the preceding pages still his great relevance to the task of furthering our understanding of *Sīrat ʿAntar*. In terms of their content, most of the studies we have named here have long been outdated. Still, these investigations are worth reviewing, for although they have lost their importance in regard to *Sīrat ʿAntar* itself, they offer prototypes of many of the misconceptions and methodological confusions that have continued to mark many subsequent studies of the Arabic popular *sīra*.

As we have seen, early nineteenth century discussions of *Sīrat ʿAntar* revolved around four main points: (1) the *Sīra* was valued as a masterpiece of "high" art, (2) the question of the identity of its author and the

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also I. Goldziher, *Muhammedische Studien*, 2:161-166; and Pellat, "Ḥikāya," *E.I.*², 3:371.

One fifteenth century Morrocan *qāḍī* (judge) went so far as to forbid the telling of or listening to such works as *Sīrat ʿAntar* and *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, see H. Pérès, "Le Roman dans la litterature arabe des origines à la fin du Moyen Age," *Annales de l'Institut d'Etudes Orientales* 16 (1958):33. But it was probably much more customary for these works to be held up to ridicule than to be officially censured; for several satiric anecdotes concerning *sīra* enthusiasts, see Peter Heath, "The Thirsty Sword: Structure and Composition in Sīrat ʿAntar ibn Shaddād" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1981), pp. 93-94 and p. 104. (One must remember, of course, that educated Westerners had much the same attitude towards their own popular literature, see Victor E. Neuberg, *Popular Literature: A History and Guide* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977), especially pp. 161-62 for nineteenth century attitudes.)

There were exceptions among Muslim scholars concerning the general disdain for popular literature; the most prominent of these was the great historian/sociologist Ibn Khaldūn, who devoted several chapters of his famous introduction to history to the popular poetry of his time, see Ibn Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-ʿibar*, 7 vols., vol. 1 comprising the author's introduction (*al-Muqaddima*) (Beirut: Maktabat al-madrasa wa-dār al-kitāb al-Lubnānī, 1968), 1:1124-69; translated by F. Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, 3 vols., Bollingen Series 43 (New York: Pantheon books, 1958), 3:412-80.

[33] Cf. Chekri Ghanem, *Antar, Pièce en cinq actes* (Paris: n.p., 1910); Aḥmad Shauqī, *ʿAntara* (Cairo: Dār al-kutub al-Miṣrīya, 1932); and Maḥmud Taimūr, *Hawwāʾ al-khālida* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-istiqāma, 1945). For a list of attempts at modernizing the *Sīra*, see Fārūq Khūrshīd, *Aḍwāʾ ʿala s-siyar ash-shaʿbīya* (Cairo: al-Maktaba ath-thaqāfīya, 1964), p. 53.

date of its composition was discussed, (3) it was generally agreed that, because of its realism, the *Sīra* was a valuable historical source, and (4) it was suggested that at least parts of the work should be translated (because of point one), and all of it should be studied and analyzed (because of point three).

By the end of the century, however, changes of attitude had occurred. When it became clear that *Sīrat ʿAntar* was not the work of the famous early philologist al-Aṣmaʿī but the product of ordinary storytellers, point one was quietly dropped. Point two, resolving the question of the identity of the *Sīra*'s author and the time of its composition, was still left open to research, but one senses that not much hope was entertained for success in this area. Thus all that remained of earlier interests and aspirations concerning the *Sīra* were types of investigations centered upon points three and four: using *Sīrat ʿAntar* as a kind of historical document, and translating those parts of it relevant to that purpose. This, in brief, is a description of the general direction of nineteenth century research concerning the *Sīra*. But now we must turn to a short discussion of the underlying attitudes and methodological principles—or lack of such—that guided these scholars in their work.

First of all, it is difficult to understand or appreciate the excitement early scholars felt about *Sīrat ʿAntar* unless one views it within the context of the enormous success the *Thousand and One Nights* had met in Europe. From the time that A. Galland first translated the *Nights* into French in the early years of the eighteenth century, the story collection has enjoyed a popularity that is all the more spectacular in that no other work of Islamic literature has even approached it. Indeed, the *Thousand and One Nights* is more than a literary success; it has become a living part of Western culture, a complex of ideas and associations that even now continues to regenerate itself in a multitude of forms: from children's storybooks to popular motion pictures, from erotic imitations in glossy magazines to the literary experiments of gifted authors. It would have been impossible for such early scholars as Von Hammer, himself in character as much an enthusiast and popularizer of Islamic studies as a scholar, not to have been influenced by the popularity of the *Nights* during the course of his explorations into the largely unmapped (in Europe, that is) territories of Islamic literature.[34]

[34] Both Von Hammer and Caussin de Perceval, for example, published continuations of the *Nights* (Chauvin, Bibliographe, 4:89, 162 and 4:97, 150 respectively), while Von Hammer also engaged in heated debate with Silvestre de Sacy over the origins of the *Nights* at the same time he was defending *ʿAntar*'s literary greatness so vigorously (Chauvin, *Bibliographe*, 4:1-3).

There is little doubt that it was the enticement of discovering a new *Thousand and One Nights* that made Von Hammer persist in his pursuit of a complete manuscript of *Sīrat ʿAntar*. And once he found it, comparison with the *Nights* became a constant theme in the early studies of the *Sīra*. *Sīrat ʿAntar* is "more interesting than the *Thousand and One Nights*," proclaims Von Hammer. It is "in every respect superior to the *Thousand and One Nights*," says Hamilton, repeating the opinion of the famous Arabian explorer Burkhardt. "*Sīrat ʿAntar* is the *Iliad* of the Arabians," asserts Caussin de Perceval.

Are not these accolades founded to a large degree upon the hope and expectation that *Sīrat ʿAntar* would equal—if not surpass—the success the *Thousand and One Nights* had enjoyed? Is there not more than a hint of disappointment in Von Hammer's early admission that the *Sīra* was "impossible to translate," owing to its great size? Would Hamilton have even considered his ambitious translation attempt if he had not been enticed by the popular success of the *Nights*? And finally, would Von Hammer have responded so quickly to the appearance of Hamilton's translation, and done so with a "feline review, remarkable for its blend of insinuation and special knowledge,"[35] if he had not been panicked by the thought that this poaching in what he had marked out as his own special territory might result in a popular success?

The instincts of these early scholars were not at fault when they compared *Sīrat ʿAntar* to the *Thousand and One Nights*. Although there are significant differences between the two works, both are products of the Arabic tradition of popular storytelling. Unfortunately, early European critics were praising the *Sīra* precisely because they thought that it was not a product of popular storytellers, but rather a piece of early classical Arabic literature that had somehow become incorporated into the storytelling repertoire. About the time of Lane's description, however, enough had been learned about Arabic literature in the West that some awareness of the *Sīra*'s popular provenance and literary context had developed. And with Lane's own remarks about the public recitations of romances he had witnessed in Cairo, it seems that European students of the *Sīra* finally came to realize that it was not the belletristic masterpiece they had assumed it to be. Suddenly it became clear to them that the "augmentations and interpolations" of the storytellers that they had formerly complained of consisted not just of a few colloquialisms or grammatical mistakes or a few blatant hyperboles in the work's narrative action but, in reality, of the work as a whole. Once they recognized and

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[35] C. Dover, "Terrick Hamilton: A Forgotten Orientalist," *Calcutta Review* (1954), quoted in J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, p. 156.

admitted this, they lost interest in the *Sīra*, or at least relegated it to a compartment of literature that they considered much less deserving of critical attention: folklore.

Several reasons caused scholars to lose interest in *Sīrat ʿAntar* once they declared it a popular or folk work. First of all, there is the prejudice that many educated people have against popular literature. When one spends one's time judging the merits of works of "high" literature, works of popular literature are often deemed to be completely beneath notice. Because it became an immediate popular success, the *Thousand and One Nights* escaped this fate. *Sīrat ʿAntar*, however, met no such response in Europe, so orientalists could put it aside in good conscience.

Another, perhaps more important, reason that scholars neglected the *Sīra* is that once they discovered that it was a popular work, they really had no methodology with which to study it. After all, even European folk narrative did not really begin to attract scholarly attention until the Grimms published their collection of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in 1812. Early students of *Sīrat ʿAntar* were scholars, men of letters steeped in the literary traditions of their time. For them works of literature were written artifacts composed by single authors who worked within specific literary genres for the private edification of their circles of readers. These men had little knowledge of, and probably less interest in, the traditions of popular or oral narrative that existed in their own countries; it would be unreasonable to expect that they could have understood the conditions and dynamics of such traditions in a foreign culture. Also, in this age of print it is easy enough to forget about the difference of attitude and approach towards literature that existed among men who lived and wrote in the age of manuscript; it requires an even greater leap of critical imagination to do justice to narratives that are the products of popular traditions in which processes of oral composition often play a large role. Nineteenth century students of *Sīrat ʿAntar* had no folkloristic methodology or scholarly tradition to help them make such a leap.

If nineteenth century orientalists were hampered in their study of *Sīrat ʿAntar* by the lack of methodologies not yet developed, they were also ill-served by the one they had. The dominant methodology of almost all orientalist research (as well as a great part of the literary, religious, and linguistic research) of that century was a complex of ideas and methods that is commonly termed historical philology. Although this is not the place to launch an extended criticism of this scholarly methodology, a few brief remarks are necessary for our argument.

The development of historical philology was one of the great scholarly achievements of the nineteenth century. Much of the modern scholarly disciplines of linguistics, folklore, history, anthropology, archaeology,

comparative religion, and comparative literature is founded upon the techniques of this methodology. Orientalism was almost totally a product of it. As its name implies, this methodology combined the two disciplines of history and philology, often with the idea that the one equalled the other. Nineteenth century scholars of the humanities were obsessed with the idea of tracing the genesis and historical development of ideas, languages, religions, cultures, and types of literature. To a large extent this was due to the fact that with colonial conquests and ever-increasing links with foreign cultures, Europe rediscovered its own history in the new context of world history. Of course, its historical viewpoint was highly ethnocentric (and still is, for that matter), but with the "discovery" of Sanskrit and the idea of the Indo-European language group, Europe suddenly discovered previously unknown or unrecognized links with Eastern cultures. Scholars eagerly began the task of examining and comparing languages, ideas, literary motifs, etc., so that they could build up a picture of the original state of things—whether it was the original Indo-European language, sets of racially "typical" religious ideas or world views, or even original versions and places of origin of folk tales.

Philology is also founded on the idea of discovering original form, in its case the original form of a text. And since nineteenth century scholars often had to depend on defective or suspect texts for their new lines of research, it was natural that they also became philologists: masters of the techniques of textual criticism that had been developed in Europe since the Renaissance. Besides pure textual criticism—the comparison of manuscripts—diachronic concerns also are an integral part of philology. Beyond establishing his text, the conscientious philologist attempts to construct a picture of its history, both in the sense of reconstructing probable manuscript stemmata and also by collecting exterior information concerning the text's author and time of composition.

Inspired, but also enthralled, by the methodology of historical philology—which developed and became more and more dominant as the century went on—nineteenth century orientalists really had no methodological base from which to study a popular work such as the *Sīra*. Their approach was based upon historicism: the study of objects, events, or trends in the realm of time. Their object was to cut away the encrustment of time in order to get back to the "original," to examine the influence of time upon certain ideas and trends, to compare the development of ideas, historical forces, or literary movements at different points of time. And the foundation stone of this brand of hermeneutics was philology: the study, comparison, and evaluation of texts through which time was defeated, the layers of history peeled, onion-like, away, and the

original state of affairs—whatever that may mean—revealed in all of its pristine glory.

As is needless to say, historical philology, used on the right occasion and in a careful way, is a highly useful and very important scholarly tool. And in those areas where its use was applicable, nineteenth century scholars made valuable contributions to the study of *sīra* literature. They sought out manuscripts. Once they obtained them, they compiled catalogues that are still invaluable tools of research. They compiled bibliographies. They combed sources in order to delineate the history of *sīra* works. It would be ungracious not to be thankful for these contributions.[36]

This having been said, one senses that once they had done this, these scholars did not really know what to do with works such as *Sīrat ʿAntar*. A work grown out of an anonymous folk tradition, there was no one author to be identified and studied nor very many external references from which to construct a picture of its historical development. What is more, because it was a folk work, scholars could not even establish an original text for it; each redaction was just as original and authoritative as any other. Little wonder that what scholars did most regarding the *Sīra* in the second half of the nineteenth century was to ignore it. This they could do in good conscience—after all, it was only a crude popular story.

What these scholars did not do and, as we have tried to show, could not do was to think about *Sīrat ʿAntar* on its own terms or study it for its own sake. They were completely absorbed in exterior concerns. They inquired into the question of the narrative's authorship and history; they remarked its usefulness as an historical or ethnological source; they compared it to the *Thousand and One Nights* and, in accord with the nineteenth century preference for realistic literary portrayal, they found the *Sīra*'s "true picture of history" superior to the *Nights*' "fabulous figures." But they never thought to examine the *Sīra* as a work of imaginative literature with its own aesthetic and rhetorical interests and purposes, nor try to take into account the ramifications that its popular nature and origin entailed.

### *Twentieth Century Scholarship*

We have examined the nature and methodological underpinnings of nineteenth century scholarship at such length because once provided with

[36] Two reference works that deserve special notice are Chauvin's *Bibliographe* (see note 16) and W. Ahlwardt's impressive résumé of *sīra* literature in the eighth volume of his catalogue of the Arabic manuscripts in the Royal Library in Berlin: *Verzeichniss der arabischen Handschriften der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin*, 10 vols., volume 8: *Die Grossen Romane*, (Berlin: A. Asher, 1896).

this background, the process of reviewing and judging twentieth century scholarship becomes all the easier. In reviewing this more recent body of scholarship, we shall widen our scope to include the most important studies of other Arabic popular *sīras*, both to increase the relevance of this by now lengthy exposition and to show that our remarks concerning the scholarship of *Sīrat ʿAntar* are, for the most part, equally applicable to modern studies of other *sīras*.

The first scholar to study *Sīrat ʿAntar* in the twentieth century was Bernhard Heller. A student of Ignaz Goldziher and no doubt prompted by his teacher's interest in the *Sīra*, Heller published three studies concerning the work. All of these studies run along similar lines, well summed up in Heller's article "Sīrat ʿAntar" in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*.[37]

Heller's inquiries take two directions. First, he undertakes the study of the *Sīra*'s history. Although he is unable to uncover much new external evidence regarding this subject, relying on interior philological and literary evidence he delineates four main thematic levels which, he feels, contributed to the work's composition. The first is the pre-Islamic level, from which comes the figure of ʿAntar,[38] the bedouin setting of the narrative, and many of its main characters. Next is the Islamic contributions: to this belong the story of the prophet Abraham that serves as a prologue in many versions of the *Sīra* and the repeated references to Muḥammad and Islam that occur throughout the narrative.[39] The influence of Islam is also apparent in that the *Sīra* does not end with the death of ʿAntar, but continues until the time of Muḥammad's preaching and ends with the conversion of those characters still alive at that time. The third influence is that of Persian history and saga, with its concomitant ideal of kingship "by the grace of God," typified in the *Sīra* by the representation of the court of Shah Anūshirwān. Finally, there is the European influence: the intrusion of the Crusaders into the narrative and the representation of the Byzantine court, along with references to monks and the trappings of Christianity.

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[37] Bernhard Heller, "Der arabische ʿAntarroman," *Ungarische Rundschau* (1916), 5:83-107; *Der arabische ʿAntarroman: Ein Beitrag zur vergleichenden Literaturgeschichte* (Hannover, 1927); *Die Bedeutung des arabischen ʿAntarroman für die vergleichenden Literaturkunde* (Leipzig: Herman Eichblatt, 1931); and "Sīrat ʿAntar," *E.I.*², 1:518-521. I have been unable to obtain the second of Heller's works, but the similarities in content and approach of his other studies concerning *Sīrat ʿAntar* suggest that it was largely subsumed into his third study. All of Heller's studies on the *Sīra* are essentially continuations and enlargements of his first study.

[38] Heller, "ʿAntarroman," pp. 84-86. See especially, *E.I.*², 1:519.

[39] Only about half of the manuscripts of *Sīrat ʿAntar* have the Abraham story. For a list and brief descriptions of these manuscripts, see Heath, "The Thirsty Sword," Appendix I, pp. 393-401.

Heller's second interest is concerned with what he terms comparative literature. Here he takes other heroic works, mostly medieval European epics and romances, and compares incidents and motifs that they share with the *Sīra*. Thus he points out that the incident in the *Chanson de Roland* where the dying Roland tries to break his sword so that no one will use it after him also appears in *Sīrat ʿAntar*, where the dying warrior al-Ḥārith ibn Ẓālim also tries to break his sword.[40] Considering the size of the *Sīra* and the number of works that Heller uses as a base of comparison—ranging from Shakespeare to the *Shāhnāma*, from Icelandic Sagas to the Bible—it is not surprising that Heller succeeds in finding numerous motifs and incidents that the *Sīra* shares with other works.

The problem with Heller's first line of research is that his four sets of thematic elements are based less upon an analysis of the *Sīra* than upon sets of externally imposed criteria. Although one cannot dispute that there are ingredients in the *Sīra* that might be termed pre-Islamic, Islamic, Persian, and Byzantine, and Western, they do not really represent chronological strata or individual thematic levels. Islamic civilization was full of pre-Islamic, Islamic, Persian and Greek influences; it would be somewhat surprising if a long pseudo-historical work such as *Sīrat ʿAntar* did not reveal some trace of them. But studying influences is only important to the extent that such study throws light upon the synthesis that emerges. Heller looks at the *Sīra* only from the point of view of external influences, not from the point of view of their synthesis within the work itself.

For example, when ʿAntar faces an opponent, the latter is identified by nationality and often by religion. The Arab warrior swears by his tribe, the Persian by fire, the Byzantine or Frank by the cross (sometimes the Arab swears anachronistically by Muḥammad) in their battle cries. Does that show the influence of these different culture groups? One wonders? The code of action of each warrior is basically the same, the descriptions of the ensuing battles are quite similar, ʿAntar's attitude towards his opponents is depicted uniformly, no matter who they are. Furthermore, although racial and religious differences are noted, there are no particular overtones of any deep-rooted antagonisms. ʿAntar willingly helps Arabs against Persians, Persians against Byzantines, Byzantines against Persians, Byzantines against Franks, Franks against Franks, Persians and Arabs against Indians, Arabs against Sudanese and Abyssinians (why has Heller no Indian or African thematic levels?), and of course Arabs against Arabs. The point is less that of which thematic elements

[40] Heller, *Die Bedeutung*, pp. 99-100.

appear than the question of how the *Sīra* uses them to create its story. Heller does not even begin to ask this question, much less answer it.

Heller's second concern, comparing incidents and motifs from *Sīrat ʿAntar* with those of other works, seems even more questionable. Nothing can enlighten us more about a work of literature than an insightful and apt comparison. Moreover, comparing works that belong to the same genre or to closely related genres is very often a useful way of gaining insight into the literary processes and conventions of both individual works and the genres to which they belong. Heller, however, is completely promiscuous in his comparisons. He is ready to compare the *Sīra* with any work of literature without taking into account generic, chronological, or cultural differences which often exist. Not surprisingly, the only conclusions that Heller draws are negative. It is extremely unlikely, he concludes, that *Sīrat ʿAntar* influenced the traditions of European epic or romance or that they influenced it. Any similarities of motif or outlook that do exist are merely the result of the use of folk motifs common to both cultures and to social and military structures that resembled each other in many ways.[41] The only works to which Heller does not compare *Sīrat ʿAntar* are those with which comparison might have been of some use: other Arabic *sīras* or works of popular literature, or the heroic works of the popular traditions of other culturally related linguistic groups, such as the Persians and the Turks.

Heller also shares his nineteenth century predecessors' ignorance of folkloristic methodology—much less excusable in his time. It is clear that for him folklore is not understood as a literary process but rather as a set of concrete thematic elements. Thus he says at one point, "There is remarkably little folk-lore in the *Sīrat ʿAntar*."[42] He also shares his predecessor's empirical prejudice. He mentions that Nöldeke saw a "decline" when he compared *Sīrat ʿAntar* to earlier accounts of pre-Islamic Arabia: "We see once again how little the *Romance of ʿAntar*, the *Banū Hilāl*, and so forth have in common with the authentic *akhbār al-ʿArab*."[43] Here is the philologist's preference for the "original," the oldest version of any phenomenon. And yet Heller's defense of the *Sīra* is just as telling as Nöldeke's criticism:

> Yet there is unjustness in this comparison of the *ʿAntarroman* with the *Banū Hilāl*. The *ʿAntarroman* stands higher than the *Banū Hilāl* or the *Romance of Saif ibn Dhī Yazan*, with its endless wonder stories.[44]

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[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 183-84.
[42] Heller, "Sīrat ʿAntar," *E.I.*², 1:519.
[43] Quoted by Heller in *Die Bedeutung*, p. 187.
[44] *Ibid.*, p. 187.

In this case the defence is as damning as the attack because it reveals how little both these scholars perceived such works as *Sīrat ʿAntar* as works of imaginative fiction operating, for all of their pseudo-historicity of tone and atmosphere, on a non-historical and non-empirical plane. What would one think of someome who criticized *Chanson de Roland* as being poor literature because it does not portray a close picture of historical events and then found it defended by someone who said, "Oh yes, but it is better than *Hamlet* because it does not have ghosts"? The example is extreme but the mode of thinking is very much the same.

In view of the historicism implicit in their inherited methodological base, it is not surprising that much of the energy of twentieth century students of *sīras* has been directed towards historical pursuits. In fact, the usefulness of many studies of *sīras* is basically equivalent to the extent to which their authors have concentrated on purely historical concerns. Thus the most useful parts of Heller's studies on *Sīrat ʿAntar*, Paret's study of *Saif ibn Dhī Yazan* or—to include a closely related genre—the legendary *maghāzī* literature, Grégoire and Canard's studies of *Dhāt al-Himma*, Wangelin's study of *Sīrat Baibars*, or Udo Steinbach's recent analysis of, again, *Dhāt al-Himma* is when these scholars investigate the problem of the history and development of the work involved.[45]

Similarly, the use of *sīras* as historical sources has been fruitful to a certain degree. We have noted that orientalists from Von Hammer's time on have valued *Sīrat ʿAntar* as a potential historical source from which one could gain an idea of the ideals and manners of desert Arabs, and we have seen that Goldziher, in his careful manner, used the work to good effect in this regard. In the earlier part of this century, R. Paret again pointed out the usefulness of *sīras* in general as sources from which scholars could gain impressions of the attitudes and historical perceptions of the general masses of medieval Arab society.[46] Later Paret himself analyzed the legendary *maghāzī* literature from this methodological point of view. A large part of Steinbach's work on *Dhāt al-Himma* is also devoted to this end. One cannot gainsay the importance of this kind of

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[45] Rudi Paret, *Sīrat Saif ibn Dhī Yazan: Ein arabischer Volksroman* (Hannover: Heinz Lafaire, 1924); M. Canard, "Delhemme, épopée arabe des guerres arabo-byzantines," *Byzantion* 10 (1935): 283-300; idem., "Delhemma, Sayyid Battal et Omar al-Noʿmān," *Byzantion* 12 (1937): 183-88; H. Grégoire, "Comment Sayyid Baṭṭāl, martyr musulman du VIII siècle, est il devenue dans la légende le contemporain dʿAmr ( + 863)?", *Byzantion* 11 (1936): 571-75; Helmut Wangelin, *Das arabische Volksbuch von König ezZāhir Baibars* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1936); and Udo Steinbach, *Ḍāt al-Himma: Kulturgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu einem arabischen Volksroman*, Freiburger Islamstudien, No. 4 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1972).

[46] R. Paret, *Die Geschichte des Islams im Spiegel der arabischen Volksliteratur*, Philosophie und Geschichte, no. 13 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1927).

study. On the other hand, one must offer the caveat that there is a certain danger in studying these works in terms of how they represent such preselected categories as Christianity, Islam, *jihād*, or the Caliphate unless one has a firm grasp of the literary conventions and artistic ideals of this type of literature. Nor should one entertain the misapprehension that this kind of analysis falls into the realm of literary criticism instead of the field of social history to which it is proper.[47]

The farther away that scholars have moved from purely historical questions in their studies of *sīra*, the less useful their researches have become. Their methodological inability to deal with the more purely literary aspects of *sīras* is indicated by the fact that although scholars have often recognized the need for extensive interior literary analyses of popular *sīras*, and have at times even promised them, their efforts of literary analysis have usually ended up as a kind of heavy-handed comparativism. Not unexpectedly, one favorite area of comparison is with the historical events that the *sīras* purport to portray. Unfortunately, the only thing that this line of research tends to tell us is that these works are woefully bad history. Alternatively, attempts at literary comparison are rarely more successful than Heller's was. In her study of the *Arabische Bahrām-Roman*, for example, M. Pantke compares the Arabic popular version of the story to historical accounts of the Bahrām story, to a Persian folk version of the story, and to Niẓāmī's high literary version of the story in his *Haft Paykar*. This was an interesting and ambitious project, perhaps overly ambitious given Pantke's lack of any firm methodological framework. The only conclusion she draws from her comparisons is that sometimes these different versions agree in certain points and sometimes they do not. Similarly, N. Ibrāhīm has undertaken a comparison of *Dhāt al-Himma* and the Byzantine epic *Digenes Akritas*. After studying the history and contents of both works, she comes to the illuminating conclusion that apart from their common concern with the Arab-Byzantine wars of the region in which both stories are situated, they have nothing concrete to do with one another.[48]

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[47] R. Paret, *Die legendäre Maghāzī-Literatur* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1930), and Steinbach, *Ḍāt al-Himma*.

[48] The calls for further analysis of these works are common enough, see for example Paret, *Saif*, p. 93, or more recently F. Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), p. 189, but not always fulfilled, see for example M. Canard, "Les principaux personages du roman du chevalerie arabe Ḍāt al-Himma wa-l-Baṭṭāl," *Arabica* 8 (1961): 160.

Mechthild Pantke, *Der arabische Bahrām-Roman*, Studien zur Sprache, Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients, n.s., no. 16 (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974); Nabīla Ibrāhīm, *Sīrat al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma* (Cairo: Dār al-kitāb al-ʿArabī, n.d.), pp. 253-54. Comparison to historical events and other works of literature also forms a part of Wangelin's *Baibars* and Steinbach's *Ḍāt al-Himma*.

These somewhat harsh remarks should not be interpreted as a condemnation of comparative research *per se*; conducted in the proper way, comparison is an essential tool of literary research. The trouble with Pantke and Ibrāhīm's approaches is that they seem to feel that finding similarities or links among different works is an end into itself, instead of a process of illuminating certain facets and aspects of the work(s) under study. J. Oliverius, for example, has used both comparative and motif analysis techniques in his studies of *az-Zīr Sālim* to excellent effect because his purpose in employing these techniques is to cast light upon the work itself, rather than to move away from it in pursuit of external concerns. Similarly, ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Yūnis investigated historical sources in order to present the historical background of the *Banī Hilāl* cycle, but he kept this part of his researches separate from the more purely literary and folkloristic inquiries of the second part of his work. Yūnis's study, by the way, was a pioneer work. Although some of his sociological and psychological concerns seem dated now, he was the first, and in general is still the only, scholar to attempt the study of a *sīra* from the general viewpoint of a folklorist. One regrets that neither he nor anyone else has as yet followed up in greater detail the folkloristic fieldwork that he initiated.[49]

We do not wish to paint a completely black picture of *sīra* scholarship. One work that deserves positive mention is Mūsā Sulaimān's *al-Adab al-qaṣaṣī ʿind al-ʿArab*.[50] Although this work is more interesting than successful, Sulaimān's division of Arabic imaginitive narrative into five categories, of which the second, the heroic, is typified by such works as *Sīrat ʿAntar*, is at least an attempt to view this literature in a comprehensive fashion. And happily, the appearance of Oliverius's aforementioned studies on *az-Zīr Sālim*, S. Pantůček's and, more recently, B. Connelly's studies of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, and such general introductory works such as Fārūq Khūrshīd's *Aḍwāʾ ʿala-s-siyar ash-shaʿbīya* indicates that the veil of historical philology is beginning to fall away and more purely literary and folkloristic lines of study are coming to the fore.[51]

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[49] J. Oliverius, "Aufzeichnungen über den Basūs-Krieg in der Kunstliteratur und deren Weiterentwicklung im arabischen Volksbuch über Zīr Sālim," *Archiv Orientalni* 33 (1965): 44-64; and "Themen und Motiv im arabischen Volksbuch von Zīr Sālim," *Archiv Orientalni* 39 (1971): 129-45.

ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Yūnis, *al-Hilāylīya fi t-taʾrīkh wa l-adab ash-shaʿbī* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Jāmiʿat al-Qāhira, 1956).

[50] Mūsā Sulaimān, *al-Adab al-qaṣaṣī ʿind al-ʿArab*, 4th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-Lubnānī, 1969). In spite of this work's virtues, it is also a good illustration of the spread of certain unfortunate Western prejudices among Arab scholars. Sulaimān relies on nineteenth century European scholarship concerning *Sīrat ʿAntar* and accordingly ends up wanting to find in the *Sīra* an "Arabian *Iliad*," see pp. 100-138.

[51] S. Pantůček, *Das Epos über den Westzug der Banū Hilāl* (Prague: Academia, 1970); B. Connelly, "The Structure of Four Banī Hilāl Tales: Prolegomena to the Study of *Sīra*

But students of Arabic literature in general and Arabic *sīras* in particular have not yet completely escaped from the influence of their orientalist predecessors, and this is why I have examined this body of scholarship in such detail here. A decade ago, at an international conference on epic literature, A. Abel delivered a paper on *Sīrat ʿAntar* that was based upon and included all of the methodological misapprehensions of B. Heller's studies.[52] Moreover, in order to give an idea of how far we yet have to go, it will be illuminating to quote some of the most recent remarks that I have been able to find concerning Arabic *sīras*, written by on of the most prestigious Western authorities of Arabic literature of our time:

> There are popular epics and they are in prose, so these would fall under the specifications of this paper. But I am afraid I shall have to take the point of view of the medieval Arab *littérateur*, which is another way of saying that those lengthy and repetitious tales lack the dignity that would qualify them for my notice, the Arabic being overly simple, not to say defective, their images vulgar, and their composition disheveled.[53]

And so G. E. von Grunebaum, at a conference entitled, *Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, and in a paper entitled, "The Hero in Medieval Arabic Prose," went on to offer observations concerning Arabic belles-lettres, the tone of medieval Arabic religious feeling, specimens of autobiographical literature in Arabic, and the ideal typologies of rulers and saints—in other words, about almost everything except the hero and heroic literature in Arabic. But then again, why should he? Arabic literature could offer him only half a dozen major works of popular heroic literature and the same number of minor works, a corpus of some thirty thousand pages; works composed, transmitted, and transcribed by members of the Arab masses for their own and their fellows' entertainment, and forming only one genre of a corpus of medieval popular literature which is one of the richest and most fully preserved of any culture in the world. Professor von Grunebaum's attitude towards Arabic *sīras* says more about his literary preconceptions and prejudices—and those of the scholarly tradition that produced him—than it does about the works themselves.

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Literature," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 4 (1973): 18-47; and Farūq Khūrshīd, *Aḍwāʾ ʿala s-siyar ash-shaʿbīya*. See also ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Yūnis, "Sīrat ʿAntara: Malḥama shaʿbīya ʿalamīya," in his *Difāʿ ʿan al-fūlklūr* (Cairo: al-Haiʾa al-Miṣrīya al-ʿāmma, 1973).

[52] A. Abel, "Formation et constitution du roman d'Antar," *La poesia epica e la sua formazione* (Rome: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1970), pp. 717-30.

[53] G. E. von Grunebaum, "The Hero in Medieval Arabic Prose," *Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, N. T. Burns and C. J. Reagan, eds. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), p. 84.

Finally, we should mention the most recent study of *Sīrat ʿAntar*, H. T. Norris's *The Adventures of Antar*.[54] This work falls into two parts. It offers a translation (about one hundred pages long) of the part of the *Sīra* that describes ʿAntar's campaign into the Yemen and Africa. Besides this, Norris offers a general introduction to the history of the *Sīra* and commentary and analysis of various parts of it (another one hundred and fifty pages).

Norris's study has several strengths. It reveals a general awareness of the literary context within which *Sīrat ʿAntar* lies (i.e., that of Arabic popular narrative); it offers a measure of literary analysis by tentatively delineating some aspects of narrative structure shared by various *sīras* (cf. Norris, *Antar*, pp. 29-35); and perhaps not least important, it views *Sīrat ʿAntar* from a perspective of genuine appreciation and affection. Unlike Von Grunebaum, Norris is willing to read and enjoy the *Sīra* on its own terms.

On the other hand, Norris mainly studies the *Sīra* from the general methodological perspective of historical philology and ends up demonstrating once again this scholarly tradition's limitation in regard to works stemming from largely anonymous traditions of popular narration. Norris apprehends the *Sīra* almost solely in terms of external connections and criteria. He studies it in terms of its possible sources, in terms of medieval African history, in terms of possible connections with European romances and *chansons de geste*, in terms of other *sīras*. While these are all topics of potential interest, their investigation faces two problems. First, since Norris uncovers little definite evidence concerning them, much of his analysis ends up being highly speculative. Some of his speculation seem likely, some less so; much of it is interesting. But speculation it remains. The second problem is an extension of the first. When one removes everything from Norris's work that relates to questions of genesis and linkage, little remains. Much is studied surrounding the *Sīra*, but the work itself remains practically unexplored.

This is the danger of relying exclusively or overmuch on historical philological techniques to study such works as *Sīrat ʿAntar*. Too often the hope of identifying sources and proving connections proves mirage-like. Enticed by externalities—the mirage of the other, the far-off, the possible, the potential—one ends up neglecting what lies immediately before oneself, the literary work itself.

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[54] H. T. Norris, *The Adventures of Antar*, Approaches to Arabic Literature, no. 3 (London: Aris & Phillips, 1980).

## Conclusions

Two main conclusions emerge from the preceding review. The first is that although much important groundwork has been done, serious study of *Sīrat ʿAntar* and other Arabic popular *sīras* has barely begun. If the present discussion helps to draw scholars' attention to this literature, then its purpose will have been amply served.

The second is that at the present stage of study it does not appear appropriate to rely exclusively—or even mainly—on an historically grounded methodology such as historical philology to study this literature. This is not a criticism of the methodology itself. Although recent scholars often appear to have used it in a clumsy or mechanical fashion, historical philology itself remains a valuable scholarly tool, one that will doubtlessly make useful contributions to the study of *sīras* in the future. At the moment, however, it does not seem that the particular questions it asks are those most in need of answer. In this regard, the questions posed by other methodologies, such as literary criticism or folklore, for example, appear far more pertinent. In my view, the present belongs to scholars who wish to study this literature from these latter points of view. The process of undertaking this study, however, is only in its initial stages.

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