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A fragment of Arabic poetry on papyrus

The papyrus collection at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscripts Library contains numerous literary texts,¹ including a fragment of Arabic poetry with the call number P.CtYBR inv. 2598.² The text of this fragment contains three lines of poetry which are also preserved in Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih’s (d. 328/ 940) *al-‘Iqd*, where they form part of an alternating song with three singers. Because of some slight variations to the text in the last hemistich, the fragment has some intrinsic interest, and is presented here.

Description

Light brown papyrus measuring 81 x 149 mm. The right, left, and bottom margins are intact. The recto contains five lines of text, running perpendicular to the fibers, of which the first is not legible. The verso remains blank. The papyrus must have contained at least one more line, because the disambiguation mark of a *ḥā*’ above the first line is clearly visible. There is a lacuna after the end of line three, without loss of text.

The text is written in a rather informal hand with upright strokes slanting towards the right. The style of the script suggests that this text was penned as a private note, not for circulation. At the same time, the

¹ There are approximately six hundred and thirty Arabic items included in the digitized part of Yale Papyrus Collection (<https://findit.library.yale.edu/>); of these, about a dozen fragments contain texts that have been identified of literary works. Some of these texts have been identified with some precision (such as a fragment of poetry by al-Ḥansā’, <http://hdl.handle.net/10079/digcoll/2761757>). Among the published fragments, one can cite Mark Muehlhaeusler, “An invitation to dinner for Abū Nuwās and his friends: An early textual witness on papyrus (Yale P. CtYBR inv. 2597(A)),” *Studia Orientalia Electronica* 4 (2016), p. 24-35.

² Images and metadata are freely available online at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10079/digcoll/2761835> (accessed 6 July 2020).

text displays several features that show it was copied carefully: First, it is almost fully pointed, with diacritical dots on almost every word except in the *basmalah* in line two, *nağl* (line 3), and the *tā'* *marbūṭah* of *muqāsāh* (line 4).³

Furthermore, some vocalization is present in the text. All instances are documented in the transcription of the text below. It is noteworthy that vowel marks appear in several places where they are strictly redundant, for example, before the final *alif* of the third masculine plural form of the perfect tense (*alif al-wiqāyah*). One should also note what appears to be an unusual manner of marking *sukūn*: the context and metre require *fa-yqinū* (l. 4) and *mudliğ* (l. 5), with *sukūn* on the *yā'* and *dāl*, respectively: In both cases, a stroke similar to *fathah* appears above the letter. It may be that this derives from the common use of red lines above the letter to mark *sukūn* in Qur'ān manuscripts, as described by al-Dānī.⁴

Finally, the text contains disambiguation marks (*'alamāt al-ihmāl*), which are commonly used to distinguish unpointed letters from their pointed counterparts.⁵ Hence, one finds *'uyūn* (l. 3) and *'arağū* (l.4) with a disambiguation mark in the shape of a miniature isolated letter *'ayn*, written below the line. In *muḥibb* (l. 4), the mark takes the shape of an initial letter *ḥā'*, whereas the disambiguation mark under

³ In earlier papyri, the use of diacritical dots was relatively rare, see: Andreas Kaplony. "What Are Those Few Dots For? Thoughts on the Orthography of the Qurra Papyri (709-710), the Khurasan Parchments (755-777) and the Inscription of the Jerusalem Dome of the Rock (692)," *Arabica* 55/ 1 (2008), p. 91-112, www.jstor.org/stable/25162268 (accessed 2 January 2021)

⁴ 'Uṭmān b. Sa'īd al-Dānī, K. *al-Muqni' fi ma'rifat marsūm maṣāḥif al-amṣār*. ed. by Muḥammad Aḥmad Dahmān. Dimašq: Maṭba'at al-Šarq, 1940; p. 129.

⁵ See the lemma "Unpointed letters" in Adam Gacek, *Arabic manuscripts: A vademecum for readers*, Leiden, Brill, 2009; p. 286.

buḥl (l. 5) has the shape of an isolated letter *ḥā'*, but without a dot. The 'alāmat al-ihmāl above *sīn* in *muqāsāh* (l. 4) may at first glance look like *fathah*, but it clearly has three teeth, and therefore serves as disambiguation mark for the consonant below, in the shape of an initial letter *sīn*.

Since the text contains poetry, the reader might expect some form of verse marking. Indeed, the end of each verse is marked by a *hā'* with a flourish curving to the right. This use of *hā'* is common in later codices; its use in papyri has been documented by Grohmann.⁶

Text

traces

1. [.....] ت وجد قد [...] ب
2. [[بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم]] سقاما
3. ماذا على نجل العيون لو انهم. { } او موا إليك فسلموا أو
4. عزجوا هـ امنوا مقياساة الهوم فايقنوا ان المحب
5. عداه ببخل مدلج هـ

Pointing

1. فد -- 2. بسم \ الرحمن -- 3. بجل -- 4. مقياساه

Vocalization

⁶ Adolf Grohmann, From the world of Arabic papyri, Cairo, Al-Maaref Press, 1952; pp. 91-93.

3. اوموا | فسلموا | او – 4. عرجوا | امنوا | مقاساه | الهوم | فايقنوا | المحب – 5. عداه | بيخل | مدلج

Notes on the text

l.2: *basmalah* crossed out; *siqāmā* / *saqā mā* (?) appears to belong to the previous line – **l. 3:** *‘uyūn* has disambiguation mark (*‘alāmat al-ihmāl*) under *‘ayn*, and underlining under the dots of *yā’*; *awma’ū* appears to have a redundant double *alif* at the beginning (to indicate *hamzah?*) – **l. 4:** *‘arağū* with disambiguation mark under *‘ayn*; dito in *muqāsāh* above *sīn*; *hā’* with tail bent to the right serves as verse marker here and in the last line; *āmanū* appears to have a redundant stroke above *wāw*; *muḥibb* with disambiguation mark below *ḥā’* – **l. 5** *buḥl* is not expected here, but there are clearly two dots for two consecutive *bā’*; there is a ḍammah above *buḥl*, and a disambiguation mark under *ḥa’* which is distinct from the one under *ḥa’* in *muḥibb* in the line above; finally, the *lām*, though partly lacking its upright stroke, is clearly similar to the final letter of *nağl* above; the first letter of the last word in the line cannot be a *yā’*, since it lacks the upward stroke that is clearly seen in the line above; the stroke is remarkably thick, and resembles *mīm* in *āmanū* just above.

Translation

1. [...]
2. In the name of God, the Merciful, the Benevolent [...]
3. What does it matter to the wide-eyed ones if they beckon you, then greet, or
4. turn away / Let yourselves not be troubled by worries, and know that a lover
5. bothers not with avarice, and sets out at night //

Discussion

As mentioned above, the verses in lines three to five also appear in Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih’s *‘Iqd*. This *adab* work is an anthology of earlier writings in a broad range of fields, arranged by theme in a strict symmetrical scheme, like the stones in a necklace (hence the name). Although compiled in al-Andalus, it contains no literary material from the Islamic West, a fact for which the work was criticized by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih’s contemporaries.⁷

In *al-‘Iqd*, the verses from our papyrus form part of a long, alternating song by the singers Masdūd, Zanīn, and Dubays, who take turns to begin by singing a few verses, whereupon the two others continue with verses ending in the same rhyme.⁸ The anecdote that frames this musical exchange is set in Iraq, presumably in Samarra, in the house of Abū ‘Īsā b. al-Mutawakkil.⁹ The text of the 1953 edition of *al-‘Iqd* by Muḥammad Sā‘d al-‘Aryān has an alternative ending in the second hemistich of the last verse:¹⁰

aminū muqāsata ‘l-humūmi wa-yqinū / anna ‘l-muḥibba ilā ‘l-aḥibbati yudliḡū //

⁷ Carl Brockelmann, “Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih”, *El²*

⁸ Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *al-‘Iqd al-farīd*, ed. Muḥammad Sa‘d al-‘Aryān, Cairo, Maṭba‘at al-Istiqāmah, 1953; vol. 7, p. 34-41.

⁹ For a discussion of another singing contest in the presence of Abū ‘Īsā, see Agnes Imhof, “Traditio vel Aemulatio? The singing contest of Sāmarrā’, expression of a medieval culture of competition,” *Der Islam* 90/1 (2013), p. 1-20. This anecdote from the K. al-Aḡānī is set between CE 847 and 861, and the anecdote in *al-‘Iqd* may have originated at around the same time.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 39

This text appears to be somewhat superior, as it scans correctly, and offers a straightforward ending to the couplet.

That said, it is impossible to assert that the text of the papyrus is a fragment, or portion of a longer anecdote; It does not provide an attribution of the verses, nor is there any indication that the papyrus once contained other verses related to the anecdote in *al-ʿIqd*. The traces of line 1 may contain the remains of a verse, but the words do not appear to relate to the text as preserved by Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih. Indeed, the *basmalah* may indicate that the verses in the papyrus were intended to stand by themselves; on the other hand, the fact that the *basmalah* is crossed might also suggest that it was intended as the head of a letter, and later discarded.

Despite these caveats, papyrus CtYBR inv. 2598 provides some evidence for the circulation of the verses it contains in the Middle East during (or near) the lifetime of Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih: Although the precise provenance is unknown, the overwhelming majority of papyrus documents hail from Egypt, and one may therefore state with some degree of certainty that Egypt is also the place of origin of the Yale papyrus.¹¹ What is more, this particular papyrus is part of a larger group of papyri which were acquired by Yale from Hans P. Kraus in 1965.¹² A

¹¹ Raif G. Khoury, “Papyrus”, *El²*, and Petra M. Sijpesteijn, “Arabic Papyri and Islamic Egypt”, *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 452-472 (DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199843695.013.0019; accessed 8 July 2020).

¹² See the “Guide to the Yale Papyrus Collection” at <https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/research-teaching/doing-research-beinecke/introduction-yale-papyrus-collection/guide-yale-papyrus#Language> (accessed 18 November 2020).

number of papyri in Kraus' collection originated from al-Bahnasā or al-Fuṣṭāṭ, which in turn suggests that the present papyrus may hail from one of those locations. Tillier and Vanthieghem have argued that the ruins of al-Fuṣṭāṭ, in particular, have yielded a good number of literary papyri.¹³ Furthermore, while there is no evidence to establish an exact date, the script is clearly similar to that of texts of the late ninth/early tenth century CE.¹⁴

This, in turn leads to two conclusions: first, that material from Iraq circulated freely, through Egypt, to al-Andalus. This is hardly surprising; indeed, it was one of the criticisms raised against al-ʿIqd that it contained only Eastern material, even though its compiler was Andalusian.¹⁵ Second, that the papyrus preserves an Eastern source for a text that presumably originated in Iraq, but which was hitherto only known through its inclusion in an Andalusian compilation.

¹³ Mathieu Tillier and Naïm Vanthieghem, "Une œuvre inconnue de Wakī b. al-Ġarrāḥ (m. 197/812 ?) et sa transmission en Égypte au IIIe/IXe siècle," *Arabica* 65/5-6 (2018), p. 675-700, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700585-12341510> (accessed 18 November 2020); in particular, see p. 676, and n. 4.

¹⁴ Werner Diem, *Arabische Briefe des 7. Bis 13. Jahrhunderts aus den staatlichen Museen Berlin*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997; for example, see plates 13 and 51, both dated by Diem to the third/ ninth century.

¹⁵ Carl Brockelmann, "Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih", *EF*²