

# WAR AND PEACE IN PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIC POETRY

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*Abstract* - Tribal conflicts, raids and vengeance were the *raison d'être* of pagan Arab Bedouin life. However others preferred 'milk' than 'blood'. These themes are well depicted in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. This paper seeks to explain the motives of the Bedouins' battles as illustrated in their oral poetry together with peace as the theme.

## Introduction

*We whirled as the millstone whirls on its axis  
While our swords smashed upon the fighters' skulls (Antara).<sup>1</sup>*

*If we achieve peace broad and sure by ample  
Giving and fair speaking shall live secure (Zuhayr).<sup>2</sup>*

The purpose of this paper is to examine the element of war and peace in the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, mainly in the *Mu'allaqat*. In the first part of the essay I will attempt to illustrate and explain the significance of battles in the Bedouin life style, and so the following questions shall be dealt with: how did the theme of war evolve in poems and why did the poets sing of war in this way? Somewhat paradoxically, the theme regarding peace shall also be analysed in the poems. Finally a historical and literary evaluation of these themes shall be offered.

In order to understand the theme of war in these poems, one must be knowledgeable about the structure of the Bedouin Arab society in the Arabian Peninsula during the *Jāhiliyyah* or pre-Islamic period (500 A.D. to 622 A.D.). During this period the inhabitants of Arabia fell into two main groups: nomadic Bedouins and the urban folk, the latter group residing mainly in the Southwest of Arabia. Despite these sedentary communities, nomadism was the basis of Arabian society. The socio-political organization of the Bedouin was patriarchal in character and the blood-related families banded together to form tribes. Therefore tribalism was the basis of Arab society in the *Jāhiliyyah* (Hitti 1964: 23). Unlike modern societies, the whole existence of the Bedouin was bound to his/her tribe.

## The Bedouin Arab society

It was within the tribe (like a large extended family all united) that the Bedouin sought shelter through companionship, livelihood or marriage; hence loyalty and obedience to his tribe was compulsory. If a member of a tribe infringed the regulations set by his tribe he would be expelled (Farūkh 1965: 60). In this way, some became outlaws, such as the poets Ta'abbata Sharran and Al-Shanfara.

As nomads, owners of great flocks and herds, dwelling near oases, wandering to and fro looking for pasture in a semi-desert under the scorching sun, living in camel's hair cloth tents, depending on caravan trade routes for booty, they seem to have developed a natural need for making raids, and, in order to survive in these desert conditions, they had to be warriors of great mobility. During the times of drought and famine the nomads were instinctively compelled to either raid the caravans or other tribes for booty. Under such circumstances the Arab Bedouin had to be a man of courage in all situations at all times, a man whose bravery was indispensable especially at the scene of combat. One might ask but why all this blood thirst and fighting? The *Ghazw* or *razzia* according to the French term, is indeed a primitive form of struggle for existence, and to a sedentary society it is regarded as an act of brigandage – flocks of herds driven off, women and children carried away into slavery and now and again a general massacre. To the pre-Islamic Arab of the desert, however, the raid was just a fact of life.

The nomad of the wild desert maintained an irresistible awareness of his 'virtues' such as chivalry, honour and prestige. The tribal code of behaviour was based on the priority of honour, characterised by blood feud and intense jealousy (mainly over womenfolk) and hospitality. It is in this harsh and animated environment that the pre-Islamic verses originated and developed.

*I have wandered the far horizons and am content by way of booty  
that I have returned.*

*To all noble qualities has my purpose aspired trying to gain my  
livelihood thereby (Al-Saqqā 1948: 14).*

## What caused war?

The desert environment moulded the nomads' rationality of struggle for survival, according to which might is right. The main causes of wars among the Arab tribes in the pre-Islamic era were their sense of honour, manliness, their intense pride of tribal origin that demanded blood for blood, vengeance to compensate for the slain of one's tribe. This harshly depicted ego was equally marked by great hospitality and generosity towards friends and strangers dating back to the *Jāhiliyyah* and continuing even to our own days. Love and hate, peace and war. Love for their friends and hatred for their enemies. It is reported in the *Book of Songs* by Abū Faraj al-Isfahānī that when the aged poet 'Amr Ibn Kulthum was on his death bed he advised his son that '*the bravest warrior is he who returns to the attack; and the best death is that on the battlefield.*' (Vol. IX, p. 187)

The pre-Islamic Bedouins seemed to be afflicted by excitable warlike temperaments. They fought each other over the right to control the sources of water pasture land and they liked to launch raids on other tribes eagerly in search of food and goods. This practice was brought about by the economic and social conditions of desert life in Arabia, as already mentioned. In the desert, fighting seemed to be

one of the few manly occupations, since raids were the order of the day. As quoted by Hitti (1970) the poet Al-Qutāmi expressed this practice in two verses:

*Our business is to make raids on the enemy, on our neighbour and on our brother.  
In case we find none to raid but a brother (Hitti 1970: 25).*

As wars were part of the Bedouin life, poets composed poems on the theme of war. A poet sang the war tune:

*If an enemy tribe we do not find  
We go to war with a friendly tribe  
And our lust of war is quenched (Hasan 1966: 32).*

Desert desolation, tribal conflicts and pique often led to distrust and defiance, which in turn inspired the poets to chant about the frequent disputes of forbidden pastures or restricted zones:

*That slope of 'Uraytimat'  
And the rough steppe of 'Ayham  
Forbidden for you are  
That we have guarded them ... (Blachère 1964: 406).*

Raiding was regarded as a kind of sport for the Bedouin, and no blood was to be shed except in cases of necessity. But when blood was spilled, blood called for blood: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a vendetta. Vengeance was of the utmost importance in their lives and a sign of their manliness. Many were those poets who vowed to abstain from wine, not pay court to women nor play games until vengeance had been fulfilled:

*Forbidden was wine, but now it is lawful:  
Hard was the toil that made it lawful  
Give me to drink if I bring not in Ghatafan by night  
The marching of a mighty and numberless lost (Donaldson 1963: 11).*

In 'Antara Ibn Shaddad's *mu'allaqa* we encounter a desire for vengeance. As he concludes the poem, he articulates his hope that he may live to slay the two sons of Damdam:

*I greatly fear that death might claim me before war's wheel should turn against  
the two sons of Damdam,  
Who blaspheme against my honour and I have not reviled them,  
Who threaten to spill my blood, if I do not meet them (Arberry 1957: 183-184).*

In many cases revenge would end the matter, but sometimes it led to sanguinary wars that lasted for a generation or even longer, thus involving a great loss of human life (Sharif 1963: 13). But avarice sometimes mitigated this brutal custom: the nearest relative of the deceased war permitted to relinquish the blood-vengeance in consideration for a fine (usually an agreed amount of camels). In the *Book of Songs* we read of the war between 'Abs and Dhubyān when the Dhubyān's sent one hundred camels to the 'Abs as a compensation instead of blood (Arberry 1957: 97) hence the Bedouin's idiomatic expression of preferring milk than blood. In situations of blood feuds and long-aged wars between tribes, poetry used to serve as verbal feuds instead of further bloodshed. Two *mu'allaqat* were composed for such a purpose in front of King 'Amr b. Hind who acted as arbitrator between 'Amr b. Kulum of the Banu Taghlib and Harith b. Hilliza of the Banu Bakr. A fierce blood feud had been going on for years between the two tribes prior to the composition of these two odes.

The most graphic war scenes come to us from 'Antara Ibn Shaddad, truly a warrior poet, the knight of the 'Abs and the Bedouin Achilles. His name was later to serve the popular story tellers of the *Romance of 'Antar*, who was portrayed as the incarnation of the virtues ascribed to the wandering paladins of the heathen tribes. 'Antara was a mulatto, the son of an Abyssinian slave, and his lower lip was split. In spite of this social setback, his personal bravery won him reputation as warrior and advanced him from his state of slavery to the position of Shaddad's acknowledged son. He witnessed and participated in the terrible war arising out of the rivalry between the stallion Dahis and the mare Gharba. Treachery alone prevented the famous corsair from winning the race, and, in his vengeance, Qays, chief of the tribe of 'Abs, waged bitter war against his Dhubyāni enemies. 'Antara was rhapsodist of these long fights.

In his *mu'allaqa* one can read the most vivid and animated descriptions of battle scenes, bloodshed, slaughter and other atrocities typical of this Bedouin poet whose *raison d'être* was to fight for his honor and for his only lover 'Abla. His *qasīda* is one of the finest specimens of pagan Bedouin poetry in which he boasts of the heroic feats he accomplished for his tribe and relates his love for 'Abla in the most sentimental manner:

*Many's the bristling knight the warriors have shunned to take on,  
One who was not in a hurry to flee or capitulate,  
My hands have been right generous to which the hasty thrust of  
A well-tempered, strong-jointed, straightened spear  
Giving him a broad, double-sided gash, the hiss of which guides  
In the night-season the prowling, famished wolves;  
I split through his accountments with my solid lance  
(For even the noblest is not sacrosanct to the spear)  
And left him carrion for the wild beasts to pounce on,  
All of him, from the crown of his head to his limp waists.*

*So I thrust him with my lance, then I came on top of him with  
 A trenchant Indian blade of shining steel,  
 And when the sun was high in the heavens I descried him his  
 Fingers and his head as it were dyed with indigo – a true hero, as  
 If her were a clothed sarha-tree,  
 Shod in shoes of tanned leather, no weakling twin (Arberry 1957: 97).*

This warrior poet perished while fighting. His death was the signal for peace and the end of the long-drawn hostilities. Despite the tribe's desire to avenge its hero and its bard, a compensation of a hundred camels was accepted for the murder of one of its scions. 'Antara certainly sang the praises of 'Abla, but a good fight was always the favourite subject of his lay. He remained a popular hero in Arabia, and one may compare him to Roustem, the Persian hero, and to the legendary French hero Roland.

### War theme verses

War theme poems were highly effective among Bedouins. Arabs preferred poets to warriors because the effect of a sword would disappear as soon as the battle was over, but the impact of panegyric or satirical poem would be immortalised. For the pre-Islamic Arabs a good poet would bring victory, fame and respectability to his tribe ('Abd al-Mu'imm 1973: 196-197):

*In battle his tongue was as effective as his people's bravery.  
 In peace he might prove a menace to public order by his fiery harangues  
 (Hitti 1970: 94).*

Therefore the war theme had a functional aspect for the pre-literate *Jāhiliyyah* society; an oral poem was an essentially more important weapon than the spear or the sword.

War poetry was employed at various stages of combat. But generally the custom was that certain verses were declaimed before the beginning of hostilities to raise the morale of the warriors and then verses were poured again after the battle. Finnegan (1970) argues that war poetry was applied to challenge another clan to fight at an appointed place as well as to insult the enemy before the battle while at the same time, bolstering the morale of one's own warriors. Similarly, one can mention that other war verses recited in the thick of battle can be recalled from Homer or the Norse sagas, although these seem more a sort of verbal illustration rather than a record of actual practices like those the Arab verses depict. However, from the *mu'allaqat*, one can say that the bulk of war poetry was declaimed on the return from the battlefield. If the warriors had been successful, poetry would magnify their victory, if not the defeat would be minimised and future vengeance promised – an element of boast and propaganda.

The real names of those that were killed or participated in the forays are frequently encountered in the *mu'allaqat*.

*When in the midst of the battle-dust I heard the cry of Murra  
Ascend shrill, and the two sons of Rabi'a,  
And all Muhallim were striving beneath their banner and death  
Stalked beneath the sons of Muhallim's banner, then I knew for  
Sure that and when the issue was joined with them such a blow  
Would fall as to scare the bird from its snuffling chicks* (Arberry 1957: 183)

*We kept the right wing in the great encounter and on the left  
Wing stood our blood-brothers;  
They loosed a fierce assault on their nearest foemen,  
They returned with much booty and many captives,  
We returned leading the Kings in fetters.  
So beware, you Bani Bakr, beware now ...* (Arberry 1957: 206-207).

### **Bedouins' beliefs and peace theme verses**

Despite the raids, plundering and war activity that mainly occupied the Bedouins' lives, they became acquainted with urban traditions by observing the holy truce: the prohibition of fighting during the sacred months (Hitti 1970: 102). The custom of setting apart certain months of the year, during which all warfare was unlawful, seemed to have served as a wholesome check upon the slaughterous disposition of pre-Islamic nomads. During these four months of peace and ritualistic observations, offerings at the Ka'ba took place while caravan routes and trade activities were safe (Hitti 1970: 102). Here one may recall the *Treuga Dei* and the *Pax Regis* of the Middle Ages that were similar, in object but not in observance, to the sacred peace months of the ancient Arabs.

Judged by their poetry the pagan Bedouins of the *Jāhiliyyah* had little religion. The majority of them were indifferent to spiritual norms. They only conformed to tribal tradition. The hedonistic Bedouin character was too much absorbed in immediate issues of life, readily found in the *mu'allaqat*, to devote much thought to religious or peaceful beliefs. Great poets like 'Antara b. Shaddad, Ta'abbata Sharran, Al-Shanfara and Tarafa expressed violent, barbaric, savage and satiric chants in their poems which were very typical of their times. But whilst the majority of the pre-Islamic poems treated war scenes, thus showing the individual's or the tribe's courage and heroism, we still find other poets who unlike their counterparts opposed war or spoke of generosity, kindness and moral issues, which somehow reflect a religious ethic. A celebrated poet who condemned war is Zuhayr b. Abi Sulma of the tribe of Muzayna. Zuhayr is considered one of the great four poets of the *Jāhiliyyah* along with 'Imru'u'l-Qays, 'Ashā' and Nabi'a. Zuhayr did not have the impetuous temperament of the Bedouins that was so characteristic of some of

his *mu'allaqat* counterparts. His reputation was that of a high born and wealthy man of gentle manners, marked by seriousness, by a sententious and didactic tendency, all of which are profusely interwoven with aphorisms. His *mu'allaqa* and other poems are rich apophthegms and moral sayings much more than the chants of any other Arab poet. In fact, his *mu'allaqa* praises the peaceful outcome of the long war between 'Abs and Dhubyān. Zuhayr avoids savage expressions or self-praise but instead he applies gentle vocabulary. It is said that Zuhayr would never praise someone in his poetry unless one deserved it. Abū Manasūr al-Tha'alibi in his *Kitāb al-Khāss* says that Zuhayr 'surpassed all the poets as his verses show superior quality, they convey the largest number of ideas in the fewest words, contain the largest number of proverbs, and especially his *mu'allaqa* resembles the words of some prophet and God's blessings' (Pellat 1950: 46). This moralist poet composed his *mu'allaqa* towards the end of the *Jāhiliyyah* era in which the violent and savage traditions were being replaced by milder characteristics. His religious influences can be judged by his poetry in which he preaches forgiveness, peace between tribes and considers war as ignominy. Again in this original theme of his Zuhayr is profoundly distant from the fiery bellicose of his colleagues.

*War in nothing else but what you've known and yourselves tasted,  
It is not a tale told at random, a vague conjecture;  
When you stir it up, it's a hateful thing you've stirred up;  
Ravenous it is, once you whet its appetite; it bursts aflame, then  
It grinds you as a millstone grinds on its cushion;  
Yearly it conceives, birth upon birth, and with twins for issue –  
Very ill-omened are the boys it bears you, every one of them the  
Like of Ahmar of Ad; then it gives such, and weans them.  
Yes, war yields you a harvest very different from the bushels  
And pieces of silver those fields in Iraq yield for the villagers  
(Arberry 1957: 116).*

In his *mu'allaqa*, Zuhayr does not only condemn war but he also plays the role of an arbitrator, showing his detachment from the problem but at the same time enforcing the lessons of conduct and morality:

*Whoever refuses to yield to the ends of the spear's iron heels  
Shall surely bow to the sharp tips mounted on their upper shafts.  
Whoever keeps his word goes unblamed; he whose heart is set  
On the sure path of piety needs not to fear of falter.  
Whoever is in terror of the ways Death may come, Death shall  
Yet slay him, Though he aspire to mount to heaven on the rungs of a ladder.  
Whoever, being in abundance, grudges to give on his abundance  
To his own folk, shall be dispensed with and reviled (Arberry 1957: 117).*

Labid's *mu'allaqa* also does not contain violent and fierce vocabulary like the poems of 'Antara, Al-Shanfara or Ta'abbata Sharran, and although the greater part of it is pastoral description, peace is among its important themes. Labid was a true Bedouin, and in his verses we encounter charming fresh pictures of desert life and scenery. Like Zuhayr he had a sense of religious sentiment as is shown by many passages in his *Diwān* (poetic register). Upon reading his pastoral descriptions and the beauty of nature one is not triggered with rage or spite like the verses of Al-Shanfara or 'Antara. On the contrary one is carried away by the peaceful serenity of picturesque desert life. On comparing Labid's chant to 'Antara's, one can easily read of peaceful moods in the former's:

*The star-bourne showers of Spring have fed them, the outpouring  
Of thundercloud, great deluge and gentle following rain,  
The cloud that travels by night, the sombre pall of mourn,  
The outspread mantle of eve with muttering antiphon.  
Then the branches of aihakan shot up, and the ostriches and  
Antelopes brought forth their young on both valley-slopes,  
And the great-eyed cows that had lately calved stand over their brood*  
(Arberry 1957: 142).

In his verses there is kindness, generosity and disapproval of blood-revenge:

*...and the guest and the poor stranger must have thought themselves  
Come down upon Tabala, whose valleys are even green.  
To the shelter of my tent-ropes comes every forwearied woman  
Starved as a tomb-tethered camel, her garments tattered and shrunk.  
When the winds blow into each other's teeth, they crown canals  
Of heaped-up platters, and the orphans hurl themselves on them.*

*...Thick-necked men, ranting together of blood-revenge like very  
Devils of Al-Bādī, feet planted firm,  
I've disowned the wrong, and boldly maintained the right*  
(Arberry 1957: 146-147).

Although there is self-praise in such verses, nowhere does Labid value the exploits of war, like 'Antara, but rather he praises generous deeds. His *mu'allaqa* is among the latest of the *Jāhiliyyah* era, and upon embracing Islam, he renounced poetry (Nicholson 1988: 119).

Another poet of the pre-Islamic era, Ibn al-Khātīm of Azd located in Yathrib (Medina), composed verses against war. Although his poem is not famous like the *mu'allaqat*, it is worth quoting the peace element in certain verses:



*I demanded indemnity, offering peace;  
They shrugged; I gave the lance is head,  
Reluctant to call for War ...*

*I had striven hard to avert it until  
From aversion only the closer it drew (Greville 1985: 111).*

The poet here is referring to the tribal war between Aus and Khazraj, both of which, later after accepting Islam, became the Prophet's chief supporters (*Ansar*) (Greville 1985: 16).

From Abū Tammām's *al-Hamāsa* in the section of pre-Islamic short poems we encounter a poem by Al-Fadel Ibn Al-Abbas addressed to a kindred tribe at variance with the one to which this poet belonged. In it he expressed his animosity to tribal conflicts and blood feuds.

*Why thus to passion give the rein?  
Why seek your kindred tribe to wrong?  
Why strive to drag to light again  
The fatal feud entombed so long?*

*Why thus to passion give the rein?  
Why seek the robe of peace to tear?  
Rash youths, desist! Your course restrain;  
Or dread the wrath you blindly dare! (Clouston 1881: 102)*

## Themes of kindness and generosity

It seems that most of the pre-Islamic poetry dealt explicitly with chivalry, honour, vengeance and warfare. These were the required social and poetical norms of the time. Thus the form and content of a *qasīda* were limited within these bellicose zones in order to please their nomadic audience. Nevertheless, if one analyses closely the *mu'allaqat* or other pre-Islamic poetry, one discovers that those poets who did not approve of the warlike temperament avoided the issue by expressing themselves in another form-content that still satisfied their desert society. Poets such as 'Imru'u'l-Qays, Labid or Hatim Tayy focused on the themes of love, kindness and extreme generosity. Thus while ignoring battle scenes of rancour and vengeance they complied with other conventional norms: namely, those of erotic love and generosity. In this manner, these poets expressed their ideas of peace symbolically. In other words, there were poets who conveyed the message of peace through another medium without infringing upon the fashionable principles of the era.

Nowhere do we find any reference to blood feuds and hatred between enemy tribes in 'Imru'u'l-Qays *mu'allaqa*. It only deals with his pleasures and love adventures, which prove that he was such more inclined to heathenism than tribal wars.

*In the morning the grains of musk hang over her couch,  
Sleeping the forenoon through, not grided and aproned to labour.  
She gives with fingers delicate, not course; you might say they  
Are send-worms of Zaby, or tooth-sticks of shil-wood.  
At eventide she lightens the black shadows, as if she were the  
lamp kindled in the nigh of a monk at his devotions.  
Upon the like of her the prudent of man will gaze with ardour  
Eying her slim, upstanding, frocked midway between matron and maiden.  
(Clouston 1881: 102).*

Hatim Tayy, a poet and an Arabian chief, lived before the rise of Islam. He is celebrated for his generosity and his poems express the charms of beneficence:

*We took pot luck, were rich by turns,  
From both cups drank at hand of fate;  
Rich, we never oppressed the poor;  
I in poverty never degraded our name.  
And those I protected never feared  
For being defenceless thrown on my hands (Greville 1985: 112).*

Most of the pre-Islamic poets, Zuhayr b. Abi Sulma being an exception, were not prepared to dismay (or perhaps did not wish to dismay) their social milieu by composing unacceptable thematic poetry. Zuhayr's *mu'allaqa* was favourably accepted perhaps because of its rich vocabulary, morality and style, also because his new theme of peace appeared in the appropriate time before the promulgation of Islam.

## Conclusion

Ancient Arab poetry has historical importance as source material for the study of the period in which it was composed, for it throws light on the major aspects and attitudes of pre-Islamic life. The Arab Bedouins had been born into a *ghazw* condition and thus habituated to raid, plunder and fight as well revealed in their verses. The authors of the *mu'allaqat* were all men of high poetical genius. They were 'natural' poets, whose illiteracy was fully compensated by a masterful sense of rhyme and rhythm and the ability to express clearly and vigorously in their rich and copious language what they thought and felt. They were impulsive children of the desert, nomads, whose passions had the scope for good and evil, who were capable of the most tender affection and of the most bitter hatred, whose strong feelings found vent in flowing verses of war and peace – the extremes which reflect perfectly the ancient Arab Bedouins.

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#### Notes

1. Antara b.Shaddad was a pre-Islamic poet who lived in the sixth century A.D. The introductory verses have been translated from a poem of his, which bears no title.
2. Zuhayr b. Abī Sulmā was another famous pre-Islamic poet who died in 607A.D. The introductory verses have been translated from his collection of verses.

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