

VI



TRANSMISSION

Written Transmission

This distinction between oral and written modes of composition and transmission is blurred in Nabaṭi poetry, where the two modes coexist and overlap. Not only do some Nabaṭi poets know how to read and write, but the two processes of composition and transmission are two independent activities, one preceding the other, just as in a written literary tradition. Whether literate or illiterate, a Nabaṭi poet will polish his composition and review it several times, and may even seek the opinion of a trusted friend to whom he recites the finished work before delivering it to a public audience. With regard to transmission, the illiteracy of the poet does not rule out the transmission of his work in writing, nor does the poet's literacy preclude the transmission of his work orally.

As we shall see in more detail in a later chapter, mention of writing and writing implements constitutes a stock theme of Nabaṭi poetry which has been thoroughly assimilated into the conventional prelude. It is not uncommon even for an illiterate poet to open his poem by imploring a scribe to take down his verses, as in the following examples, the first by Zēd as-Salāmih al-Xwēr (al-Ḥātam 1968:I, 214) and the second by ʿAbdallah al-Wirʿ (Ibn Sayḥān 1965–1969:II, 58).

- 1 I can no longer restrain my passions, O scribe! Bring forth sheets of Syrian paper, white as a crane.
- 2 Bring forth a flask of ink and a reed stem whose end is split with the sharp edge of the blade.
- 3 O scribe, in straight lines arrange the verses I dictate to you while the door of my heart is wide open.

* * *

- 1 Help me, O friend; passions have unlocked the door of my heart; bring forth a flask of ink and Syrian paper
- 2 Along with a discerning and diligent scribe, a connoisseur who is skilled in writing and who fathoms the meaning of my beautiful verses.

A literate Nabaṭi poet would usually collect poems in a *dīwān* which he would inscribe in his own hand. Illiterate poets might also have some of their poems committed to writing in order that they might be sent to a distant relative, friend, patron, antagonist, or to whomever the poem might be addressed. Often, illiterate town amirs and tribal chiefs had their scribes write down their poems and the poems composed in their honor. Furthermore, there have always been some concerned individuals whose appreciation of Nabaṭi poetry has prompted them to seek it out from oral and written sources and to organize their collections into handwritten *dīwāns*.

ʿAbdarriḥmān al-Brāhīm ar-Ribīʿī, who resides in ʿUnaizah, is an outstanding example of a devoted collector of Nabaṭi poetry. He has spent most of his ninety years assiduously collecting this poetry to augment the collection passed on to him by his father, himself an avid collector of Nabaṭi verse. Before he lost his sight a few years ago, ar-Ribīʿī maintained a steady correspondence with Nabaṭi poets and transmitters of Nabaṭi poetry all over the Arabian Peninsula. He made his living by composing panegyric poems, selling copybooks of Nabaṭi poetry, and entertaining people by going to their homes in the evening to chant their favorite poems. Ar-Ribīʿī is considered an authority on the authenticity and attribution of Nabaṭi poems, and disputes regarding these issues are usually referred to him.

Mḥammad al-Ḥamad al-ʿMirī, who resides in Riyadh, is another ardent collector of Nabaṭi poetry. For decades, al-ʿMirī has been energetically collecting texts of Nabaṭi poems, and he has his collection organized into separate *dīwāns*, one for each poet. In addition, he has in his possession old manuscripts and rare printed *dīwāns* which he has managed to procure from different sources throughout the years. Recently, he sold part of his collection to the library of the University of Riyadh—a welcome sign that academic circles in Saudi Arabia are beginning to realize the importance of this poetry.

I have seen many manuscripts of Nabaṭi poetry in ʿUnaizah and in Riyadh. I was told by some people that such manuscripts abound in the towns of Najd, al-Ḥasā, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Abu Dhabi. Some of these manuscripts have found their way to the Western world. Albert Socin (1900–1901:III, 9–27) mentions three manuscripts that were brought from Najd by Charles Huber, and Socin himself bought one manuscript in Sūq aš-Šyūx in southern Mesopotamia and saw in Ḥawrān, Syria, a written collection of the poems of Nimr ibn ʿAdwān, the chief of the ʿAdwān tribe. G. A. Wallin (1852:193) asserts that Nimr ibn ʿAdwān was literate; therefore, it is likely that he wrote down his poems in his own hand. One of the three informants from whom Socin collected

عاشق حیدران الشویع

سنة

نفا	جان صديق واضح عوا	يا ابن خيما افهم جواب نهذيب نبح
نفا	بالصلح انا و اياك من صدقا	من حارب اباك لقدام و تالك
نفا	هكذا ك لايرميك في كحنا	فتراه عاب لك قلب مملك
نفا	مبتوح بغضاك طول نرسا	عدو حيد لك قد سير دارسا
نفا	ماذ ارا حاستار داسما	فلو ناضق دق الصيد منك جابله
نفا	خرب خفيف الروز من ذلا	فاه مل اليم من الر فاقه و لحد
نفا	تحراره صفرا العين من صدقا	ففتح كياش عند ذيب جلال
نفا	عقب الصداقة قطع عظم اجرا	و كوي نيلها ساعة متفرغ
نفا	والضد حذر امن نعيم اجنا	و القرب من نار الصديق غمير
نفا	خربت بفعل للترفين او طرا	الله يجبرك من طبع قبيلم
نفا	و كلت بما هيستافاجير ا	ولا يد لبحر اسما من ساسما
نفا	من قوم بخلا مكرها بلدا	هذي مقوبات الزمان فكتر ا
نفا	وجاجم تصفو عند ايمانا	ما صلح الا بعد جبري حنا
نفا	حق تطيع احلامها هيما	فلا حصل هذا فواسل تيمم
نفا	عيتت دبع طامع من رجا	والضد مخلصا اليلاد يملقه
نفا	قائل و حنا فاضين مكا	يا قوم موسى كان نبي واضحا
نفا	بدو و حنه ما خرين زما	عندي على هذا الحديث جماعه
نفا	ما غنت لور قابر و حنا	اصلا على النبي محمدا

A sample page from a handwritten *dūwān* of Nabaṭi poetry.

البارحة لورد الخد صادفت .
 من كاس كوز مريم له ترشفت
 ونليت عرقه وانصهر لي وقطفت
 وكشفت عن صافي جنبه وبيد
 وعليه في باب المحبة تعظفت
 حيران من عجب الطرب شففت
 ماشوق عطففت النفاك ومضرت
 وانسيت بي من والي العرش ما ضفت
 من عجب ما في في وصالك تشرفت
 يديك في حال من شففت ما لرفت
 الا و اليا النعمة تلطففت
 عنده خبر في قرب وصلك تحففت
 وميت الهوى في كعبة الحب لطففت
 سايه جود الود الودع متصففت

وحياتين بعد التعمه ستا في
 وعليت من صافي ثمانه ثمانا في
 ورد على قد كما الخيزرا في
 سحر الهوى بمنقش الزعفران في
 وانما خلا في كما البهلوا في
 وجاني من سباب الهوا ما في
 راي بدالك يا سبيل الهما في
 يامن بطرفه مريم هندوا في
 بدلك في راي بدالك جرا في
 ومريت روحا يا هيف النما في
 واقفيت ولما والامعزما في
 هذانا الماخول ما حدهما في
 وسليت قلبه البرجا والما في
 وبالعود جبر جادني ولبلنا في

A poem by Mḥammad al-ʿAbdallah al-Gāḍī in his own handwriting.

the poetic texts for his *Diwan aus Centralarabien* carried a manuscript to refresh his memory.

The writing down of a composition does not necessarily confine it to the written page, nor does it prevent it from circulating orally. Many popular Nabaṭi poems originated in writing. For example, love lyrics by al-Hazzānī, Ibn Liʿbūn, and other literate poets are quite popular among the urban masses in Arabia. Two of the most popular poems in the town of ʿUnaizah are by the learned poet Mḥammad al-ʿAbdallah al-Gāḍī; one is about coffee preparation and the other, on death and the hereafter, he composed on his death bed.

Thus a Nabaṭi poem might originate as a written text and later become popular, circulating orally and becoming subject to the variations so common to the oral mode of transmission. Undoubtedly, such a poem will acquire many oral versions as time passes, but its original version is

fixed in writing. The written original ensures the survival of the poem, and also serves to check the oral versions from diverging too widely from the original. If a poem is not written down during or immediately after composition, its precise original version may become lost, and the written versions that might be collected later from oral sources would most likely exhibit noticeable divergences (Socin 1900–1901:III, 5–7).

Oral Transmission: General and Specific

Before the spread of literacy in Arabia (which came about within the last few decades), the vast majority of Nabaṭi poets were illiterate, and the great bulk of Nabaṭi poetry was transmitted exclusively by oral means. While the poet is slowly composing his poem, he is at the same time committing it to memory. When composition is finished, transmission begins. In Nabaṭi poetry we have to distinguish between two modes of transmission: the specific act of transmission from the poet to the particular individual to whom it is addressed, and the general process of transmission, which is the passage of the composition from mouth to mouth and its diffusion through space and time. I shall first discuss this general type of transmission.

The emphasis placed by Nabaṭi poets on vocalization and singing at the time of composition, which we discussed at the end of the previous chapter, underscores the orality of Nabaṭi poetry. It shows that Nabaṭi poets are predominantly oral poets who view poetry as spoken discourse, as a voice. For them, the transmission chain goes from mouth to ear, carried through the air or by the wind, not from hand to eye through the written page. The words of the poem must taste sweet on the tongues of reciters, so they will recite it more often; they must also sound pleasant to the ears of the listeners, so they will demand to hear the poem more often. To praise the beauty of his poem, the poet appeals to the audience's sense of taste and hearing. He praises the crisp rhythm and cadence of his measured rhymes and compares their pleasant sound to the cheerful ringing of pure silver coins in the hand of a man who is in extreme need. He compares the taste of his verses on the lips and tongues of reciters to the sweetness of honey and ripe dates, or to the milk of a camel which nips at the fragrant flowers and succulent shoots in lush desert pastures. A poet of distinction will boast that his poems are spread in all directions by desert travelers who sing them to dispel fatigue or to urge on their camel mounts, and by men who stay up all night by the fire reciting them again and again to fathom their meaning and enjoy their music. He will compare the rapid dispersal of his verses to the blowing of the wind, the flight of arrows, or the fleeing of frightened wild beasts. The verses of an oral poet must spread fast and wide if he is to achieve fame. The very

survival of his poetry depends on its popularity, and the effectiveness of his verses, being mostly panegyric, boastful, and propagandistic, is measured by their diffusion.

In addition to the general transmission there is also the specific act of transmission of the poem to its intended recipient. It is not unusual for a Nabaṭi poet to address his poem to, or compose it in honor of, a particular person who may be separated from the poet by a great distance. How the poem is to be transmitted from its composer to its intended recipient is generally spelled out in the poem itself, and integrated into it as a part of its overall thematic structure. The poet may write down his poem and send it with a courier or a traveling party. In many cases, the poet may traverse the intervening distance to deliver the poem himself; or he may teach it to a deputy (*nidīb*) whom he entrusts to deliver the poem verbatim to the person for whom it is intended. This deputy is chosen with great care; he is described by the poet as an intelligent, alert, bold, and articulate man who traverses desert wastes on a noble camel mount. The deputy never closes his eyes—he might forget the poem if he fell asleep—and he continually urges on his mount by singing the verses of the poem, going over them again and again lest he forget any of them. After describing the deputy, his mount, and the desert road, the poet turns to the main topic of his composition by addressing the deputy thus: “And when you alight by so-and-so [i.e., the intended recipient of the poem], tell him that . . .” In the remaining verses, the poet spells out the poetic message and praises or vilifies the intended recipient, depending on the occasion and the circumstances. In other words, before revealing the message of his poem, the poet has shed considerable light on the process of its transmission.

When the deputy arrives at the place of the person for whom the poem is intended, he is given water, coffee, and food to allay his thirst and hunger. After this routine hospitality, his fatigue dispelled, the deputy is besieged with questions by the hosts and the assembled guests who are always curious to hear fresh news. At this point, after an appropriate introduction, the deputy begins to recite the poem to the attentive assembly, exactly as he learned it from the poet. The deputy will remain with the host for several days and will have many occasions to repeat the poem in the presence of the host, who may have to prepare a suitable poetic response in the same meter and rhyme to send back with the deputy.

We have already seen how poetic correspondence between desert chiefs for the purpose of delivering a threat or declaring war was transmitted in a formal manner. A deputation of well-mounted, gallant riders, whose mounts were of the same breed and exotic color, was dispatched with the poetic message. At other times, a poet addressed his composition not to a particular individual but to a whole group. An example is the poem

entitled *al-xalūj*, which al-‘Ūnī composed to exhort the people of al-Qaṣīm to revolt against Ibn Rashid. In such cases, the transmitter must be an eloquent orator and a gifted reciter so that he can drive home the poem’s message and influence public opinion. He moves from hearth to hearth and from one assembly to another in order to spread the poem swiftly and extensively.

To illustrate how the manner of transmission is integrated into the poem as part of its thematic structure, here are two short poems by two bedouin poetesses. The first was composed by Mwēḍī al-Brāziyyih, from al-Birzān section of the Mṭēr tribe; it was sent by her to Abu Šwērbāt, the chief of al-Birzān, after his leg was broken in a battle between al-Birzān and al-‘Amārāt tribe under the leadership of their chief, Ibn Haḍḍāl (Ibn Raddās n.d.–1976:I, 130–132).

- 1 Hail, rider traveling through gray mirages on a fawn camel not weakened by a rear rider:
- 2 She started cantering sprightly in the early morning; by the end of the day she began to shed her fat.
- 3 Beautiful are her saddle trappings and the small water bag newly made by the cobbler.
- 4 You [rider] will alight by the chief’s tent, large as a black hill, dismount, and loose your camel to graze.
- 5 Before you are questioned, you will be offered a cup of coffee to refresh you, and a fat sheep will be slaughtered for you.
- 6 Say to the chief: How is your leg? O defender of the retreating horsemen when the battle rages,
- 7 As on the day when you and Ibn Haḍḍāl fought like eagles in the sky, while cowards scurried like rabbits to their burrows.
- 8 Would that your wound were inflicted upon worthless braggarts, so that you might arise and your pains go away.

The second poem was composed by Dīcīr, the daughter of al-‘Wājī, the Chief of the Wild Slēmān section of the ‘Anazah tribe. She sent it to her brother, Frēḥ, after she heard that he had abandoned the noble practice of raiding to live on a government pension. (This was in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Ottoman government was paying subsidies to notable bedouin chiefs in an effort to pacify the nomads and curb their predatory activities.) (Ibid., I:199–201).

- 1 So soothing to my soul is the smooth riding on a fine camel; singing in the saddle relieves my mind.
- 2 Hail, riders on the swift coursing mounts, those graceful thoroughbreds with fancy saddles.

- 3 When you leave at early dawn, take with you my fervent verses.
 4 Your stout mounts are not weakened by your distant journeying;
 they are spirited wild beasts which were startled by their own
 shadows.
 5 Beautiful are the girth marks on their flanks; they rest only when
 they halt to drink from wells on the way.
 6 Their hooves scarcely touch the rugged road; they run like ostriches
 frightened by the sight of hunters.
 7 They will bring you to a noble man who welcomes hungry guests
 to lavish feasts.
 8 Oh my brother, you are the spring season to weary riders whose
 mounts are jaded from long journeys; you give them sweet
 sustenance.
 9 Your coffee pots are black as ravens; they are constantly boiling
 beside your blazing hearth.
 10 What keeps you away, O brother, from the verdant pastures? Only
 base men live on subsidies.
 11 Noble men live by the sword; your thunderous voice chasing enemy
 mares still rings sweet in my ears.

In addition to friendly poetic correspondence and poems of defiance, exhortation, and incitement, we must also consider eulogies. Among Nabaṭi poets, there are some professionals who make their livings or supplement their sources of livelihood by composing panegyric odes in honor of tribal chiefs, town amirs, or any wealthy patron willing to pay for their laudatory verses. A panegyrist may confine himself to one patron, or he may be an itinerant poet who wanders from camp to camp or from town to town in order to deliver his odes himself and receive the rewards for them. He journeys to the court of the amir or the tent of the chief and asks permission to deliver his poem. After permission is granted he declaims his verses in a loud voice or, if he has a pleasant voice, he may chant them. In the opening verses, the poet describes his jaded camel, the difficult journey, and the vast, waterless desert wastes that he had to traverse to come to the patron. He does this in order to arouse the sympathies of the patron and evoke his generosity. The poet concludes with a line or two in which he asks the patron for a gift.

To illustrate how an itinerant panegyrist delivers his poems and receives his rewards, I shall relate the following two anecdotes (the poems will be omitted) which I recorded as my grandfather related them to me. The first concerns Ibn Hd̲el, a farmer from the settlement of Šbēḥ who lived in the second half of the nineteenth century. One year, the camels he used to draw irrigation water from the well died from a camel sickness called *as-slāg*. As a result, his crops withered and died. This double

loss drove Ibn Hdēl into extreme poverty, and his creditors made life unpleasant for him. Since he was a poet of repute, he decided to try his luck at panegyricizing chiefs and princes in the hope of receiving generous rewards from them.

First, he went north to the tribal territory of al-ʿAmārāt to praise their chief, Ibn Haḏḏāl. Šbēḥ is separated from the territory of al-ʿAmārāt by a very great distance; therefore Ibn Hdēl sought a man of the Ḥarb tribe to carry him to Ibn Haḏḏāl and to serve as his guide (*dilīlib*) and road companion (*xawiy*). Having reached the camp of Ibn Haḏḏāl, Ibn Hdēl delivered his panegyric ode to the chief. After the poem was finished, Ibn Haḏḏāl took off a tattered vest he was wearing and tossed it to Ibn Hdēl as his reward. Ibn Hdēl was shocked by the uncharacteristic stinginess of this nomadic chief and said: “What can I do with a tattered vest full of lice? I can hardly carry the clothes I already have on! But see this man of Ḥarb whom I hired for ten riyals to bring me to you; give him his fee, and as for me I shall seek the bounty of another chief.”

Ibn Hdēl then went to Ḥāyil to deliver a panegyric ode to Muḥammad Ibn Rashīd, who rewarded him with a thoroughbred camel mount. On his way back to Šbēḥ, Ibn Hdēl came across a camp of Ḥarb tribesmen, so he composed a panegyric ode in honor of their chief, Niga aš-Šṭēr. At the end of this poem Ibn Hdēl praised ar-Ribāʿen, the chiefly family of the ʿTēbih tribe who were the kin of the wife of Niga aš-Šṭēr (it is common for a poet praising a nomadic chief to praise also the family of the chief’s wife; the implication is that the chief is a noble man who marries only into noble families, and that his offspring will be of noble blood on both sides). While Ibn Hdēl was reciting his poem, the wife of Niga aš-Šṭēr was leaning against the pole separating the men’s section of the tent from the women’s, listening to his words, and she heard his praise of her family. After he finished his poem, Niga aš-Šṭēr told him: “The ʿIggar herd is couched over there; go and pick the camel you like.” (The ʿIggar is a herd of black thoroughbred camels owned exclusively by the Ḥarb tribe which has never been seized by other tribes.) Upon hearing her husband’s words, the wife shouted from the women’s section of the tent: “Were the horsemen of the Bani Šaxar tribe to charge at the ʿIggar herd they would not be able to lead one camel away from its companions, so let the man take two camels.” Thus Ibn Hdēl received two camels. The poem he composed in honor of Niga aš-Šṭēr is so exquisite that when it was recited by a transmitter to Ibn Rashīd, he said: “Had he composed this poem in my honor, I would have made him rich for the rest of his life.”

The second story, which deals with the encounter of Šāliḥ ibn ʿAwaḏ, a poet from al-Shinānah, with Ibn Saʿūd, was told to my grandfather by the poet himself. In the initial phases of his campaign against Ibn Rashīd in al-Qaṣīm, Ibn Saʿūd once camped in al-ʿĀzli, a plain near al-Shinānah;

Ibn ‘Awaḍ went to see him and deliver a poem he had composed in his honor, hoping to receive a camel mount as a reward. Ibn ‘Awaḍ greeted Ibn Sa‘ūd and said, “May your life be long, give me permission to recite to you a few words I composed in your honor.” Ibn Sa‘ūd replied, “This is not the appropriate time for panegyrics. As you see, every three of my men share a mount, and we cannot spare any camels to reward you.” Ibn ‘Awaḍ said, “But these few verses which I have brought with me are intended for you. I shall deliver them to you and depart in peace.” Ibn ‘Awaḍ delivered his verses and Ibn Sa‘ūd promised him a camel.

Some time later, Ibn Sa‘ūd raided the encampment of Fayṣal al-Dawīsh, the paramount chief of Mḩr, and won tremendous booty. On his way back from this raid he camped at al-Malḩa. Ibn ‘Awaḍ came to see him again with a second panegyric ode, at the end of which he reminded him of his earlier promise. After Ibn ‘Awaḍ had delivered his poem, Ibn Sa‘ūd said, “Our mounts are couched over there; go and choose one and bring it here and I shall have my men saddle it for you.” Ibn ‘Awaḍ went and picked out the very mount which Ibn Sa‘ūd himself was riding. The guards tried to drive him away from it, but he said, “Ibn Sa‘ūd told me to choose the one I liked, and this is the one that struck my fancy.” Ibn Sa‘ūd told his men, “Leave him alone. I told him to choose what he liked, and I cannot go back on my word.” The camel was fitted with a new saddle, new saddlebags, new saddle cushions, and even a halter and a rattan cane for driving it.

Panegyric poems are not only composed by professional poets seeking material reward. When a desert chief performs a chivalrous act, he becomes the object of praise by the recipient of his magnanimous deed, though he may be his tribal enemy, and by the poets of his own tribe, who praise his deed as an honor to the tribe. A panegyric poem of this sort is usually transmitted by the poet himself, who journeys to the camp of the chief to pay his respects and give his poem as a sort of public declaration of appreciation and admiration for the chief. The chief’s tent is always thronged with guests, including tribal heroes and notables as well as dignitaries and chiefs of other tribes. When the poet stands up and praises the chief in front of this large assembly of noble men, this is the most eloquent expression of gratitude. The chief will be respected the more by his tribal equals, the foreign visitors will carry the poem back with them to their tribes, and thus will the poem become popular and the chief famous.

The Role of Memory in Oral Transmission

Although a great deal of Nabaḩi poetry is composed and transmitted orally, the orality of this poetic tradition is distinctly different from that

of the oral epics of Yugoslavia described by Albert Lord in *The Singer of Tales*. Each Nabaṭi poem has an original version by an original composer. For some time after it is composed, a poem will remain fresh in the poet's mind, and will circulate among his friends and associates. The poet will have many occasions to spread his poem and recite it in public and to his close friends. A newly born poem usually arouses public interest, and the poet's friends are always eager to learn his compositions from his own mouth. Musil wrote that among the nomads "A poem is but rarely written down. As a rule the poet's friends learn it by heart, and others learn from them" (1928:283). A popular poet will most likely have his entourage of admirers who memorize his poems and spread them in distant territories. In this way, a poem passes from mouth to mouth and spreads very quickly over a wide area. This is especially true with respect to the nomads, with their patterns of migration and constant movement.

A newly born poem goes through an active stage of transmission during which the poetic text rarely changes. Whether the reciter is the poet himself or someone else, recitation of the poem is never a recomposition but an attempt to reproduce a memorized original faithfully. It is important to keep this fact in mind—that both poets and transmitters have a conception that there is an existing and correct, original version of each poem; hence, the emphasis is on memorization of the poem word by word, rather than on recomposing it as is the case with the Yugoslav epics. The brevity of the Nabaṭi poem and the strict pattern of its rhyme and meter facilitate its memorization and, hence, its preservation and stabilization for an appreciable period of time. There is always a demand by the audience and an attempt on the part of the reciter to recall and reproduce the original word for word. When the reciter is caught or catches himself making a mistake, such as forgetting a verse or replacing an original word with a different one, he will always stand corrected. The original composer will not tolerate any tampering with his poem, and the audience, some of whom may already know the whole poem by heart, will challenge any gross departure from the original. The transmitter of the poem may be the poet himself or some other person, in which case he tells the audience who the original composer is. Attributing the poem to its original composer is an essential part of the transmission process, and the audience is always eager to know the name of the author of a new poem (see Musil 1928:283).

By observing closely the transmission process of Nabaṭi poetry, the unmistakable signs of rote memorization, such as pausing, hesitation, and attempt to recall, will immediately become apparent. It is common for a reciter to admit that he has forgotten this hemistich or that verse, or to say that the poem is long and he can remember only a few verses.

Even poets sometimes forget their own compositions (see Musil 1928:283–284). Because of such lapses of human memory, an orally transmitted poem is bound to become subject to various changes and may eventually be heard in various versions. The length of the poem as well as its composer, subject, importance, exquisiteness, and originality are all factors that affect the survival and stability of the poem. Poems of sufficient interest and exceptional beauty not only gain wide distribution and long life but often remain true to the original composition.

Nabaṭi poets are painfully aware that oral transmission can alter, even destroy, a beautiful poem. The poets are especially contemptuous of incompetent reciters. In one anonymous but very famous verse, a Nabaṭi poet declares that he keeps many beautiful verses jealously hidden in his breast undivulged to the public lest they be ruined by careless and ignorant reciters. A poet's concern for the correct recitation of his poems and his abhorrence of careless and incompetent reciters ruining his compositions is expressed in the following anecdote told about Rākān Ibn Falāḥ Ibn Hiṭlēn, the paramount chief of the al-ʿIjmān tribe. Rākān once heard one of his poems on the lips of a shepherd who mangled its verses and changed their order. This perturbed him so much that he gave this incompetent reciter a gift and asked him to pledge never to recite a poem unless he knew it well (al-Firdaws n.d.:185). On this occasion Rākān composed these lines:

- 1 When I make an exquisite ode, I do it as a gift for discerning men,
to sing it and pass the time.
- 2 But then indiscriminate churls begin to meddle with it, shortsighted
men who do not understand the true value of words.

A transmitter other than the poet himself may learn his version either directly from the poet or through a chain of transmitters. To give his version more credence, the reciter-transmitter will explain to the audience how and by whom the poem was passed on to him. Needless to say, there are transmitters who are more gifted than others and who have better memories. The qualifications and authority of some transmitters are publicly recognized. Disputes between qualified transmitters concerning the authenticity and wording of a particular poem are common. Musil writes:

As we sat there together, the Prince recited many ditties and poems to us, which Ġwād and I jotted down. I was much interested in the manner in which he defended the originality of particular words and refused to concede that Ġwād's version might be better; for the latter also knew many poems and songs but frequently differed

with the Prince as to the position of the words in sentences and as to the phraseology.

“Even if that word does fit better there, still it does not belong there,” the Prince would declare. “As I say it, thus I have learned it, and I do not wish that anything be changed.” (1927:191–192)

*A Poem by Swēlim al-ʿAlī an-Nwēṣir as-Sahali:
A Close Look at Transmission*

Swēlim is an illiterate Nabaṭi poet who is counted among the best and most representative of contemporary Nabaṭi poets. Five of his poems are published in Ibn Sayḥān (1965–1969:II, 208–214). Among these is one of thirty-six verses which begins with the line *yā-xūy tāb al-kēf lih w-at-taʿālīl//ṣadriḥ wisīʿ w-la tijīḥ al-hmūmī*. The form and content of this poem testify to the richness and complexity of the Nabaṭi poem and demonstrate the close affinity of Nabaṭi poetry to ancient Arabian poetry. The topic of the poem is the departure of the lady with whom the poet is in love. It opens with two lines in which the poet compares his state of mind with that of his brother. The brother is in a good mood because the lady he loves is nearby and he can see her and send her messages. The poet, on the other hand, is distressed because his lady has departed with her tribe to a distant land that messengers cannot reach. The poet describes the tribal procession of his lady, which appears and disappears in the distance as it goes over the hills and through the valleys. He goes on to speak of love and its effect, and curses whoever might blame him for feeling the way he does. In the rest of the poem, the poet laments the departure of his lady, and describes his grief in two extended metaphors, one drawn from nomadic life and one from settled life.

The extended metaphor is a well-established compositional device in Arabic poetry which allows the poet to expand any of the themes in his poems through the suspension of the thematic development and the embedding of a short narrative or descriptive episode in the poem. This technique was employed frequently by the classical poets (see Gibb 1968:17), and it has been preserved and further developed in Nabaṭi poetry. The extended metaphor can be expanded and embellished in various ways. In some cases it forms only a small segment of the poem; but in other cases, as in this poem by Swēlim, it is elaborated on and makes up the major portion of the poem.

To illustrate the gravity of his situation, Swēlim first compares his grief to the grief of a noble and well-to-do nomad reduced to poverty and humiliation following the plundering of his camel herd by a raiding party of the al-ʿIjmān tribe. The battle between the raiders and the nomad is described in detail; the nomad loses, not because he lacks courage, but

because his horse is shot dead. The raid leaves him so destitute that he can no longer continue his honorable practice of entertaining guests; in the desert, failure to entertain guests is a shameful act that strips a man of his honor and plunges him into social disgrace that passes on to his children and his children's children.

This metaphor closes with a verse that serves to link it masterfully to the second extended metaphor, in which the poet compares his grief to that of a farmer who plants seed on his land and works hard to irrigate it, using two shifts of four strong camels to draw water all day long and a good part of the night. The farmer works hard and his expectations are high; but just before harvest time, his crop is totally destroyed by a hailstorm. Such a catastrophe would put an Arabian farmer at the mercy of the landlord who owned the land and shared the yield with the farmer, and the creditor who lent him money to hire help and to buy farm animals and seed. This extended metaphor closes with the farmer bewailing his fortune as he stands watching his crop being carried off by the current.

- 1 My brother, you are merry and joyful; your contented heart is not beset by grief.
- 2 You may rejoice, for you can see your love and send her messages; but woe to me, mine has gone to a distant land that messengers cannot reach.
- 3 Her people are striking camp; intent on moving, they rush around with fluttering sleeves
- 4 To load their luggage on sturdy pack-camels; some have already started to move, while some are still loading.
- 5 The loaded camels travel fast, going up and down the distant hills and slowly disappearing behind the ridges.
- 6 I watch them go from the lofty peak of a forlorn cliff.
- 7 I watch the ladies in their litters move west; she moves with them, the beautiful one.
- 8 I may never again behold her lovely eyes; I may never see her undulating figure again.
- 9 Woe to my heart should she stay away from me for long; I shall run around aimlessly all day long, every day.
- 10 Like a lonely camel lost from the herd on a dark night, the herd that was driven to distant water.
- 11 Love is calamity, it pains the heart and causes madness; were it not for shame, I would rend my garment and run naked.
- 12 May God inflict whosoever blames me with misfortune; O wretched blamer, may you be struck by misery and bad luck.
- 13 May you live in poverty and in the hereafter may you be cast into hellfire.

- 14 My grief over my departed lady is like the grieving of a noble man,
the owner of a camel herd grazing in the lush pastures:
- 15 A herd of fat camels, some pregnant and some with calves; he
guards them astride his noble horse.
- 16 The herd was spied by well-mounted raiders of the al-ʿJmān tribe;
the backs of their mounts are bald [from the saddles] and their
sharp eyes are the size of lemons.
- 17 The raiders are fearless youths who have proven their valor many
times before. They covet the herd and they are not to be blamed
for seeking booty.
- 18 They charged the herd riding their swift horses, and were met by
the owner of his fiery horse.
- 19 He gallops his horse to meet the raiders. He is a tenacious man,
the progeny of noble ancestors.
- 20 He sees them drive off his herd but will not let them despoil the
wealth that is rightfully his own.
- 21 He charges against them and his horse is enveloped by dust; the
thick dust raised by the galloping horses and camels resembles the
clouds.
- 22 He is concerned lest he be accused of cowardice, so he fights val-
iantly, dispelling any doubt about his courage.
- 23 [But] a sharpshooter aims and shoots at his horse, and it falls on
its back, its shod hooves up in the air shining like stars.
- 24 He turns around, humbled, fleeing across the soft sands and rubbing
his hands against each other, with the bitter taste of defeat filling
his stomach.
- 25 After a life of glory and good fortune with plenty of coffee beans
and cardamom and fat sheep to be slaughtered for guests,
- 26 Now he stays up the long nights, alone and silent, with his heart
full of sadness.
- 27 This is my grief, the grief of the owner of a camel herd: the herd
was broken up, the raiders having divided it amongst themselves.—
- 28 Or the grief of the farmer who employs four waterwheels. He starts
to work at early dawn,
- 29 Irrigating four hundred *sāʿ* of pure red seeds of wheat with the help
of strong camels,
- 30 Four camels with another four to relieve them, all muscular and
robust, drawing water in large buckets.
- 31 When the wheat is fully grown and the grain in the ears is ripe, a
dark cloud gathers and begins to rain hailstones as large as the
heads of baby lambs.
- 32 The cloud rains gently on the desert pastures, but on parts of the
settled country it rains large hailstones.

- 33 What is left standing of the wheat stalks is swept away by the
current, the ears of the wheat floating with the debris like old rags.
- 34 The farmer is left wailing and sobbing; he has been deprived of the
toil of his hands.
- 35 May Allah protect us from the evil of rainstorms and grant us only
the benefits of rain, for He is beneficent.
- 36 Thus end the verses I composed for the sake of a lady, charming,
virtuous, and no gossip she.

This poem first came to my attention in the fall of 1977 when a good friend of mine who works at the radio station in Riyadh and who had access to the station's archives taped several Nabaṭi poems on a one-hour cassette tape which he sent to me here in the United States. The poems on the tape were culled from taped segments of the popular radio program *Min al-Bādiyah*, which were stored in the archives of the radio station. Among the recorded poems was this one by Swēlim, which he had recorded in his own voice. He delivers from memory this poem of thirty-six verses, plus four verses repeated for dramatic effect, in three minutes and twenty seconds; each verse consists of twenty-four syllables (six short and eighteen long), nearly five syllables per second. In this recorded version Swēlim gives a superb performance. The delivery is effective and dramatic. It gives power to the words and life to the images. The smooth thematic progression and compositional development are accentuated by subtle changes in intonation and voice quality.

While I was doing field work in Saudi Arabia in the fall of 1978, I tried to get in touch with Swēlim but was unable to do so. However, Muḥammad Abū Salīm was generous enough to allow me to tape from his private archives six poems by Swēlim in his own voice, including the one under discussion. These poems had been recorded by Abū Salīm to be broadcast on his popular radio program, *Alwān Shaʿbiyah* which, like *Min al-Bādiyah*, is broadcast from the National Radio station in Riyadh. In other words, this poem by Swēlim exists in at least one written version, published in Ibn Sayḥān, and two oral versions, one recorded for *Min al-Bādiyah* and one for *Alwān Shaʿbiyah*. The three versions are nearly identical in content, but the two oral versions are different in performance, even though both are recorded by the poet himself. In the version I recorded from Abū Salīm, the performance is not very inspiring. There is an obvious attempt to recall. There is also one clear instance of hesitation and one case of error where the poet has to repeat the hemistich and correct himself. The delivery on the second recording was slow and took nearly four minutes, with five instances of verse repetition.

In terms of content, the two oral versions are identical, word for word, and the written version contains one instance of obvious scribal error

and two instances where a word common to the two oral versions is replaced by a different word which gives the same meaning and has the same syllabic structure. Despite my repeated inquiries, I was unable to determine the exact dates on which the oral versions were recorded; but Abū Salīm assured me that the version recorded for *Min al-Bādiyah* was earlier than the one he had recorded for his own program, *Alwān Sha‘bīyah*. Thus we have three independent instances of transmission or, actually, three versions of a fairly long poem separated from each other by long or short lapses of time; yet the three versions are virtually identical. In other words, each is a faithful reproduction of an original which the poet had composed and memorized.

The Profile and Repertory of a Transmitter: A Case Study

The following is a case study of a transmitter whom I know intimately: my grandfather, Mḥammad as-Slēmān as-Ṣwayyān. My purpose is to show how an illiterate transmitter acquires his repertory of poems and narratives throughout his lifetime. This, I hope, will provide a clearer perspective on the process of oral transmission in Nabaṭi poetry.

My grandfather was born at the close of the last century in al-Shinānah, a flourishing agricultural hamlet near al-Rass in the district of Qaṣīm in central Arabia. He was born into an extended family consisting of “forty souls eating from the same pot,” as he puts it. They lived on a big farm called Fōzih with palm trees and fruit trees of all kinds. It should be recalled that at the beginning of this century ‘Abdal‘azīz Ibn Sa‘ūd had left Kuwait to restore the Saudi rule over Arabia. After recapturing Riyadh and occupying the southern districts, Ibn Sa‘ūd turned northward and by the end of 1904 had wrested the whole district of Qaṣīm from the control of Ibn Rashīd. After his defeat at the battle of al-Bukairiyah by Ibn Sa‘ūd and his Qaṣīmī allies, Ibn Rashīd marched against al-Shinānah where he camped for nearly a month. In the struggle between Ibn Rashīd and Ibn Sa‘ūd over the suzerainty of Qaṣīm, the people of al-Shinānah leaned toward the latter, and one of their poets by the name of Ṣālḥ an-Nāṣr al-Ballā‘ composed a poem cursing Ibn Rashīd and lauding the victories of Ibn Sa‘ūd. Therefore, Ibn Rashīd was exceptionally cruel in punishing the people of al-Shinānah. His guns reduced the mud houses of the town to rubble and he killed several important men, including two uncles of my grandfather and Nāṣr al-Ballā‘, killed in place of his son Ṣālḥ, the aforementioned poet, who had fled al-Shinānah before the arrival of Ibn Rashīd. Ibn Rashīd also confiscated all the camels, sheep, and cows of al-Shinānah, distributing them among his troops to slaughter for meat. His troops let loose their horses and camel mounts to graze on the

farm crops and, after looting the fruits of the palm gardens, Ibn Rashīd had all the palm trees cut down. In the words of my grandfather, “Not a single frond was left standing.”

Like all significant events in the history of Arabia, what Ibn Rashīd did to al-Shinānah and its citizens was woven into a long narrative, usually referred to as *gaṭʿat aš-šnānih*, “the cutting of [the palm trees of] al-Shinānah.” These atrocities were witnessed by my grandfather, who was a young boy at the time, and they left a lasting impression upon him. From what he had seen with his own eyes and from what he heard later from older men and relatives, he created his own version of the narrative, which describes the events that took place with such eloquence, emotion, and historical accuracy that it has always held the attention of his listeners throughout its telling. The narrative is interspersed with poems relating to the various incidents of this saga, such as the poem by Šālḥ an-Nāṣr al-Ballāʿ mentioned above, and the poem composed by Saʿad Abu Ḥjāb lamenting the destruction of al-Shinānah and expressing satisfaction at the final defeat of Ibn Rashīd by Ibn Saʿūd. Appended to the story of the “cutting of al-Shinānah” is a constellation of episodes from the wars between Ibn Saʿūd and the house of Āl Rashīd. My grandfather relates these episodes as background for five poems he knows: three by Xwēlid Ibn Sābil of al-Bukairiyah and two by Šālḥ Ibn ʿAwaḍ of al-Shinānah. These are panegyrics praising Ibn Saʿūd and extolling his victories against his foes such as Ibn Rashīd and Fayṣal al-Dawīsh, the paramount chief of the Mṭēr tribe.

Most of my grandfather’s narrative repertory consists of factual accounts of things that happened to him personally or that he witnessed with his own eyes, like the story of the cutting down of the palm trees of al-Shinānah. After that catastrophe, the people of al-Shinānah were dispersed in all directions. My grandfather, his father, his brother, and other men from the ʿas-Šwayyān family went to al-Madinah on foot, a distance of over five hundred miles. After working on the Hijaz railroad for a few months, he enlisted in the Ottoman army for four years. Then he left the Ottoman army to enlist in the army of Sharīf Ḥusayn of Hijaz, where he served for another four years. All this time, until the outbreak of World War I, he was stationed in or near al-Madinah. After Britain gave Sharīf Ḥusayn promises of Arab independence, he declared the Arab Revolt against Turkey and sent his Arab Army to Palestine and Syria to wrest those regions from Turkish control. The Qaṣīmi contingent (usually called ʿGēl or ʿGēlāt) of the Sharifian army, to which my grandfather belonged, was stationed at al-Shōbak just south of the Dead Sea in the push against the Ottoman troops when he decided to desert from the army, and go back home to al-Shinānah. How he made his escape through rugged mountains, desert wastes, Sharifian military posts, and

the territories of hostile tribes—not to mention the fact that he was a renegade soldier crossing Sharifian territory into the territory of Ibn Sa‘ūd, the arch enemy of Sharīf Ḥusayn—makes up a long adventure story which my grandfather is always proud to tell with zestful eloquence.

The years my grandfather spent in the military were the most carefree in his life and, in his words, “the pay was good.” During these years he had plenty of leisure time to sit and listen to older men and poets from Qaṣīm who were his comrades in arms, first with the Ottoman and then with the Sharifian army, narrate anecdotes and recite poems dealing with the affairs of Najd in general and Qaṣīm in particular. During this period he accumulated a large repertory of poems and narratives, and he polished his natural gift for narration and poetic recitation and developed it into a remarkable skill. He is an excellent raconteur with an elegant style, and possesses an exceptional ability to enliven his delivery with vivid metaphors, grand gestures, and dramatic tones. The exotic people, novel customs, and curious incidents he encountered in the lands of Hijaz and Palestine make up a sizable collection of short episodes, some of which are quite hilarious and delightful.

After leaving the military service, my grandfather became a farmer, until he retired about twenty years ago. First he was a farmer in al-Badāyi‘, about fifteen miles east of al-Shinānah, his birthplace; later he moved permanently to ‘Unaizah, about ten miles farther east. Unlike military service, farming was extremely hard work. The only respite farmers in Arabia have is a month or two in the summer, after the wheat harvest. My grandfather is fond of reminiscing about how during that part of the year he and his friends, some of whom were poets of repute, would stay up every night until early dawn talking and reciting poetry. They would also invite poets from neighboring settlements to share with them their compositions. Summer, it should be recalled, is also the time when the nomads congregate around agricultural settlements. My grandfather and his friends would go occasionally to the nomads’ camp to enjoy their company and to participate in *al-mzayyan* (also called *al-mṣanna*), which is a night activity involving singing and poetic competition. The villagers with their poets form one line and the nomads with their poets form another. The two lines face each other standing up and two poets, one from each side, engage in poetic composition. Their verses are sung by the two lines, who accompany their singing with hand clapping. At the same time, a bedouin beauty is chosen to be *ḥāṣī* (also called *jilūbih*). The *ḥāṣī* unplaits her hair and dances between the lines holding a rattan cane in her hand. Her beauty and graceful steps inspire the poets and fill the hearts of the singers with enthusiasm.

From the time he moved to ‘Unaizah, my grandfather stopped making any significant additions to his store of poems and narratives. All the

poems and narratives he knows he acquired while a young boy at al-Shinānah, a soldier in al-Madinah, and a farmer in al-Badāyī^ʿ. As has been mentioned already, most of the narratives are direct reports and firsthand accounts of significant events and unusual incidents which he witnessed or that happened to him personally. But of course his repertory includes other narratives told to him by other narrators, which he thought of sufficient interest to be passed on. The same is true of the poems: some he received directly from their composers, and others he learned through other transmitters. His repertory of poems may not be the most prodigious, but he does know a great deal of poetry. He is a true *rāwī* (transmitter) in the sense that he, and only he, knows the compositions of some poets, who are his relatives and close friends, along with some interesting details about the poets' lives. I asked him repeatedly how he came to know so many poems. His answer was consistently that in his youth his memory was so good that whenever he heard a poem he liked recited a few times it became imprinted in his mind.

Among the poets that my grandfather came into direct contact with were Ṣālīḥ Ibn ʿAwaḍ and his twin brother, Ḥamad, and Ṣālḥ an-Nāṣr al-Ballā^ʿ and Saʿad Abu Ḥjāb. These four poets were all from al-Shinānah and, like my grandfather, served in the Sharifian and Ottoman armies. While a farmer in al-Badāyī^ʿ, my grandfather became a close friend of ʿĀyid ad-Dimnih. Today, the poetry of ʿĀyid, I suspect, survives only on the lips of my grandfather and in my notebook. Also while in al-Badāyī^ʿ, my grandfather made the acquaintance of ʿAbdallah Ibn Ḥṣeṣ, the blind poet of ʿUnaizah, and Xwēlid Ibn Sābil, the blind poet of al-Bukairiyah. Every summer after the wheat harvest, Xwēlid Ibn Sābil would travel from al-Bukairiyah to al-Badāyī^ʿ to receive gifts of wheat from his farmer friends there. During his stay in al-Badāyī^ʿ, he would spend most of his evenings with my grandfather.

The poems that my grandfather received directly from their composers include: (1) a love poem of thirteen lines by his maternal grandfather, Mḥammad al-Ḥishḥūs, (2) a poem of nine lines by his cousin Mḥammad al-Brāhīm as-Ṣwayyān about his unsuccessful marriage to a bedouin lass called Jōza, (3) a poem of eight lines by another relative by the name of Abu Marwih lamenting the sudden death of his only two sons, (4) a love poem of twelve lines by ʿĀyid ad-Dimnih, (5) another poem of eight lines by ʿĀyid, (6) a third poem of nine lines by ʿĀyid about a humorous incident, (7) a poem of eighteen lines by Xwēlid ibn Sābil recounting the victories of Ibn Saʿūd against Ibn Rashīd, (8) another poem of seven lines by Xwēlid praising the people of al-Khabra for their courageous stand against Ibn Rashīd, (9) a third poem of three lines by Xwēlid defending the people of al-Bukairiyah who were accused by the people of ʿUnaizah of siding with Ibn Rashīd, (10) a poem of four lines by Ṣālḥ an-Nāṣr

al-Ballāʿ cursing Ibn Rashīd and praising Ibn Saʿūd, (11) a love poem of four lines also by Šālḥ al-Ballāʿ, (12) a third poem of nine lines by Šālḥ al-Ballāʿ about a violent incident between some men of al-Shinānah and some men from Shammar tribe, (13) a poem of nine lines by Šālīḥ Ibn ʿAwaḍ praising Ibn Saʿūd, (14) a poem of six lines by ʿAbdallah Ibn Ḥṣṣ about his unsuccessful marriage to Hēlih.

Many of the poems my grandfather knows are not published anywhere, nor have I ever heard them on the lips of other transmitters. These include the poems mentioned above as well as the following poems: two love poems by Mašʿān al-Htēmi (one of twelve and the other of ten lines); three love poems by Nahār al-Mūrzi (of eight, six, and four lines); a love poem of eight lines by an anonymous poet; a love poem of eleven lines by Abu Ršed; a poem of nine lines composed by Ibn ʿAskar and addressed to Ibn Sbayyil; and *alfīyah* poem of fifty-six lines by Ibn Māni; a poem of six lines composed by Ibn Saʿūd and addressed to Ibn Rashīd in the form of a threat; a poem of nine lines by an ancient poet describing the encounter of his tribe with the tribe of Bani Šaxar; three panegyrics by Ibn Hdēl of Šbēḥ (one of eleven lines in which he praises Ibn Haḍḍāl, the paramount chief of al-ʿAmārāt tribe, one of nine lines in which he praises Muḥammad Ibn Rashīd, and the third of five lines in which he praises Niḡa aš-Šṭēr of the Ḥarb tribe).

My grandfather also knows other poems and parts of poems which appear in various printed anthologies, though with occasional divergences between his versions and the printed ones. Included in this category are parts of five love poems by the famous poet ʿAbdallah Ibn Sbayyil which are published in his *Dīwān* (al-Faraj 1952:I, 205–211, 220–223, 223–225, 253–255, 259–260) and a love poem by Fhēd al-Mijmāj which appears in Ibn Raddās (A.H. 1398:32) and in al-ʿUtaybi (A.H.1390:56). Five of the poems that my grandfather knows appear in a two-volume published anthology dedicated to the poets from the town of al-Rass and its neighboring settlements, such as al-Shinānah, al-Dulaimiyah, and al-Nabhaniyah (al-Rashīd 1965–1972). The five poems are (1) a love poem by Srūr al-Aṭraš (I:33), (2) a love poem by Mbārak al-Badri (I:36), (3) another love poem by al-Badri (I:38), (4) a love poem by Ḥamad Ibn ʿAmmār (I:87–89); and (5) a poem by Ḥamad Ibn ʿAwaḍ in praise of Ibn Saʿūd (II:27–28).

According to the compiler of this anthology, the poems were collected from oral sources (I:10). Therefore, the published versions of the five poems just mentioned are actually oral versions recorded on paper. In contrast, the versions I collected from my grandfather are other oral versions which I have recorded on tape. It is instructive to compare the printed versions with the taped ones and examine their divergences. In the first poem, there is a slight divergence in wording, and the taped

version is five lines longer than the printed one, which consists of only seven lines. With regard to the second poem, there are divergences in the number of lines, wording, and even attribution. The printed version is attributed to al-Badri, but the taped version is attributed to a poet by the name of Šimahlil. The printed version consists of twelve lines whereas the taped version consists of only eight, but one of these eight lines does not appear in the written version. The third poem is short; therefore the divergence between the two versions is not as great as in the case of the other poems. There is no difference in wording; but although each version consists of four lines, the third line in the taped version does not appear in the printed version, and the fourth line in the printed version does not appear in the taped version. The fourth poem is much longer in print, seventeen lines as opposed to ten lines on tape. There is also a slight difference in wording and in the arrangement of lines, and the taped version is misattributed to Ibn Sbayyil. The fifth poem attributed to Ḥamad Ibn ‘Awaḍ in print is attributed to his twin brother, Šāliḥ, on the tape; the printed version consists of only six lines whereas the taped version consists of eight lines, but my grandfather forgot the second hemistichs in lines four and eight.

These observations illustrate the extent and nature of divergences which an orally transmitted poem undergoes in its various versions. These divergences include misattribution, commutation of lines, omission of lines, and replacement of a word or phrase with another one of the same meaning and syllabic structure. Here, however, I must reiterate a point made earlier, namely, that such changes are inevitable in oral transmission. I must also add that the divergences I have just discussed are not so radical when we consider the fact that some of the poets, like Srūr al-Aṭraš, have been dead for nearly two centuries. Furthermore, such divergences may demonstrate the fallibility of human memory, but they do not negate its role in the transmission of Nabaṭi poetry. I taped from my grandfather most of the poems he knows, and the taping was done on various occasions and in different performance contexts at intervals of two and three years. On several occasions he complained to me that he no longer had a chance to exercise his recitation skills because people today are not interested in his type of poetry. Yet, despite this lack of practice and despite the length of time intervening between the various recordings I made, and regardless of the performance context, the texts of the poems he recited never changed—not even with respect to a single word. This clearly shows that although a Nabaṭi poem may in fact exist in several versions, each transmitter will have his own version, which he regards as the correct one, and which is fixed and seldom changes.