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Nizar F. HERMES

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NIZAR F. HERMES

THE BYZANTINES IN MEDIEVAL ARABIC POETRY:
ABU FIRAS' *AL-RUMIYYAT* AND THE POETIC RESPONSES OF AL-QAFFAL AND
IBN HAZM TO NICEPHORUS PHOCAS' *AL-QASIDA AL-ARMINIYYA AL-MAL'UNA*
(THE ARMENIAN CURSED ODE)*

Long before the rise of Islam in the seventh century, the Arabs had already established strong relations with *al-Rūm* (the Byzantines), who along with *al-Furs* (the Persians), were considered to be the two most powerful empires of late antiquity. As masterfully demonstrated by Irfan Shahid in a number of studies on Arab-Byzantine relations before Islam, several Arab tribes were satisfied with a passive role, that is to say, accepting of the will of both these imperial powers in *Oriens*, although many of the most influential ones, owing mainly to religious affinities, favored the Christian Byzantines. In fact, mostly sedentary and Christian Arab tribes such as the Tanukhids, the Salihids, and the Ghassanids served as Byzantium's principal *foederati* (allies) in *Oriens*¹. By signing a *foedus* (treaty) in return for *anonna* (allowances), the federate Arabs especially the Ghassanids of the sixth and early seventh centuries, in addition to forming a “buffer zone”, between

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For purposes of consistency, I have used the system of Arabic transliteration adopted by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. With the exceptions of the *‘ayn* and *hamza*, macrons and dots are not added to personal names, place names, or titles of books.

1. I. SHAHID, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, Washington 1984, xvi.

their allies and their most antagonistic rivals the Persians², were expected to repel anti-Byzantine Arab raiders “from the Peninsula outside the *limes* [borders]”³.

Understandably enough, pre-Islamic Arabs admired the Byzantines for their cultural achievements, military might, their “wonderful” artistry, and their excellent craftsmanship. As shown by Ahmad Shboul and Nadia Maria el-Cheikh, the Arabs’ high esteem for Byzantine civilization was even alluded to in imagery used by a number of *jāhili* (pre-Islamic) poets. Indeed, among the most valued of these images were the Byzantine silver coins portraying scarce pools of water in the desert and gold coins depicting beautiful human faces. Other poets used to compare their healthy she-camels to Byzantine bridges and palace arches⁴.

If on the one hand the Arabs were in several important respects aware of the greatness of their Byzantine patrons, the civilized Byzantines, on the other, were equally conscious of their allies’ barbarism. “Whereas the Arabs saw the Byzantines as palace-dwellers and architects and builders *par excellence*,” Shboul tells us, “the Byzantines thought conventionally of the pre-Islamic Arabs as nomads and tent-dwellers”⁵. The “haughty” Byzantine perception of their *foederati* of the deserts would unquestionably change with the advent of Muhammad.

Perhaps it is important to mention from the outset that that in spite of the Qur’an’s initially positive view of *al-Rūm* wherein the nascent Muslim community is divinely summoned to sympathize with the Byzantines by applauding a pending victory of the Byzantine *’ahl al-kitāb* (people of the Book) over the Persian *majūs* (fire worshippers), the physical encounter between Muslims and Byzantines, proved to be

2. This antagonism culminated in the long Byzantine-Sassanid wars (602-628).

3. I. SHAHID, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, Washington 2002, 33.

4. A. SHBOUL, “Byzantium and the Arabs: The Image of the Byzantines as Mirrored in Arabic Literature”, in: *Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times*, ed. M. BONNER, New York 2004, 43-68, and N. M. EL-CHEIKH, “Byzantium through the Islamic Prism from the Twelfth to the Thirteenth Century”, in: *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, ed. A. E. LAIOU and R. P. MOTTAHEDEH, Washington 2001, 53-70.

5. SHBOUL, “Byzantium and the Arabs”, 46.

dramatically *Huntingdonian*⁶. This sympathy would vanish when Muslims and Byzantines found themselves competing for the vast area that makes up the entire modern Middle East and North Africa thereby ushering in a new area of Muslim-Byzantine enmity that would colour their relations until the dramatic Conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453. This was true in spite of intermittent truces, ransoms, exchanges of captives, and the ensuing diplomatic negotiations as well as the latent manifestations of cultural influences represented on the Muslim side in the appreciation of Byzantine craftsmanship, architecture and Byzantine *fe/male* beauty⁷. From the Byzantine side, it was most strongly felt in the Iconoclastic controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries⁸.

6. It is worth mentioning here the opening verses of chapter *Al-Rūm* (Byzantines): “*Alif, lām, mīm*. The Byzantines (Romans) have been defeated in the nearer land, and they, after their defeat, will be victorious within ten years, Allah’s is the command in the former case and in the latter and on that day believers will rejoice (1-4)”. Most exegetes of the Qur’an read and interpreted the verses as abovementioned; however, some medieval Muslim scholars provided another interpretation on the basis to a variance in the *qirā’* (reading) of the key words of those verses: *ghulibat al-Rūm* or *ghalabat al-Rūm*. The first would mean that the Byzantines have been defeated and after their defeat they will be victorious. The second would mean that the Byzantines have defeated the Persians and after their victory they will be defeated—by Muslims. For a comprehensive account of this controversy, see N. M. EL-CHEIKH, “Surat Al-Rum: A Study of the Exegetical Literature”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118 (1998) 356-364.

7. V. CHRISTIDES, “Byzantium and the Arabs: Some Thoughts on the Spirit of Reconciliation and Cooperation”, in: *Byzanz und seine Nachbarn*, ed. A. HOHLWEG, Munich 1996, 131-142, aptly spoke of “a *modus vivendi*” and “a constant undercurrent of communication between the two superpowers of the time”, and reiterated his view in “Periplus of the Arab-Byzantine Cultural Relations”, in: *Cultural Relations between Byzantium and the Arabs*, ed. Y. Y. AL-HIJJI and V. CHRISTIDES, Athens 2007, 29-52. In the latter publication he argues that one should not speak of a monolithic Arab attitude towards the Byzantines and *vice-versa*. According to Christides, especially after the tenth century (A.D.), a spirit of reconciliation appeared between Arabs and Byzantines. This spirit, he goes on to explain, was intensified with the Crusades. Nowhere is this more evident than in a plethora of Arabic epic romances such as ‘Umar al-Nu‘man and that of ‘Antar whereby one even comes across a fictitious alliance between Byzantines and Arabs against the crusaders.

8. For two different views on this issue, see G. E. VON GRUNEBaum, “Byzantine Iconoclasm and the Influence of the Islamic Environment”, *History of Religions* 2 (1962) 1-10, and L. W. BARNARD, *The Graeco-Roman and Oriental Background of the Iconoclastic Controversy*, Leiden 1974.

In 750 A.D the Abbasids succeeded in ousting their archrivals the Umayyads. The latter, in spite of their wars with the Byzantines, had initially had strong cultural, diplomatic, and economic ties with them. Indeed, not only had the Umayyad retained Greek as their administrative language, but they had also learned from the Byzantines the arts of civil service and political governance by relying fully on Byzantine “administrative, legal, and numismatic traditions”. In the words of el-Cheikh, “the administrative patterns and the political framework that were chosen by the Umayyad were Byzantine in origin”⁹.

It is, however, in the domains of architecture and craftsmanship that the Byzantines were hailed by Muslims as the unequalled masters¹⁰. To the implied detriment of Byzantine science and philosophy, al-Jahiz’s much quoted statement, for instance, sums it up well: “In the domains of construction, carpentry, craftsmanship, and turnery, the Byzantines have no equal”¹¹. In the example of al-Jahiz, “Arabic authors,” Shboul remarks, “acknowledge this debt in various ways. Reporting traditions about Byzantine material and technical help in the building of some of the great early mosques of the Umayyad period is only one aspect of this”¹².

The Byzantines, contrary to their near defeat by the Umayyad troops who were twice on the verge of conquering Constantinople in 674/78 and 717/18, chose to attack by engaging in offensive skirmishes and, sometimes, by full assaults across their southern borders. The Byzantine peril convinced

9. N. M. EL-CHEIKH, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*, Cambridge 2004.

10. It is interesting, in connection with the above, to add that the Arabs also showed a high interest in Byzantine maritime technology in spite of the latter’s great effort in hiding their military technology. As demonstrated by a number of scholars, nowhere is this better illustrated than in the translation and the ensuing extensive paraphrasing by Arab authors of the work of Leo VI “Naumachica”, part of the *Taktika*. This translation has been preserved by mainly by fourteenth-century Arab scholar Ibn al-Manqali. For more on this subject, see V. CHRISTIDES, “Ibn al-Manqalī (Mangli) and Leo VI: New Evidence on Arabo-Byzantine Ship Construction and Naval Warfare”, *BSI* 56 (1995), 83-96 and T. KOLIAS, “The *Taktika* of Leo VI the Wise and the Arabs”, *Graeco-Arabica* 3 (1984), 129-135.

11. EL-CHEIKH, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*, 109. It is worth noting that efficiency of Byzantine engineering is better demonstrated in the practical trade work *Kitab al-Tabassur b-i-l Tijara*, attributed to al-Jahiz. Some scholars have questioned al-Jahiz’s authorship of this treatise. On this, see *Kitab al-Tabassur b-i-l Tijara*, ed. ‘ABD AL-WAHAB, Beirut 1983.

12. EL-CHEIKH, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*, 52.

the early Abbasid caliphs to invest in strengthening their positions along *al-thughūr* through establishing strong “buffer towns”, known in Arabic as *al-‘awāsim* in northern Syria¹³. These efforts were consolidated by powerful caliphs/Ghazis (warriors) such as al-Mansur (754-775), al-Mahdi (775-786), Harun al-Rashid (786-809), al-Ma‘mun (809-833), and al-Mu‘tasim (833-84). The latter’s triumph over the Byzantines in Amorium in 838, for instance, was celebrated by the poet Abu Tammam (d. 846) in a powerful *qaṣīda* (long poem) in the Arabic genre of *madhī* (panegyric-eulogy)¹⁴.

Clearly, throughout the Abbasid era, and irrespective of the internal strife which led to the rise of a number of independent dynasties and principalities, Muslim enmity with the Byzantines had never decreased¹⁵. One is left with no doubt that, at least until the Crusades, medieval Muslims whether rulers or ruled, used to consider Byzantium and the Byzantines as the eternal archenemies of Islam and Muslims. This feeling was no better illustrated at the time than in the much-quoted warning of the Abbasid polyvalent scholar, *kātib* (official scribe), *nāqid* (literary critic) and geopolitical Abbasid strategist Qudama ibn Ja‘far (d.948). In his *Al-Kharaj*, and after reminding Muslims that threats could emanate from all the *umam al-kufr* (nations of infidelity), he singled out the Byzantines as the hereditary enemy of the Islamic faith and the traditional opponents of Muslims¹⁶.

As with Qudama, Abbasid scholars motivated by the generous support of the caliphs engaged in a somewhat thorough study of Byzantium’s

13. M. BONNER, *Aristocratic Violence and Holy War: Studies on the Jihad and the Arab-Byzantine Frontier*, New Haven 1996.

14. The opening hemistich of this *qaṣīda* (i.e. *al-sayfu aṣḍaḡu anba’an min al- kutubi/* the sword is truer in telling than books) has become among the most quoted verses of Arabic poetry. On this poem, see M. M. BADAWI, “The Function of Rhetoric in Medieval Arabic Poetry: Abu Tammam’s Ode on Amorium”, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 9 (1978) 43-56; M. H. HASSAN, *Amorium in Byzantine and Arabic Poetry*, M.A. Th., University of Athens 2004 [in Greek] and his “The Poem of Abū Tammām about the Fall of Amorium in 838 A. D.”, *Journal of Oriental and African Studies* 14 (2004), 33-72 [in Greek].

15. One can cite the Fatimids in North Africa and Egypt and the Buwayhids in Iraq.

16. Qudama was the author of a foundational book on criticism of poetry entitled *Kitab Naqd al-Shi‘r* (Book of Poetic Criticism). For a comprehensive study of this Abbasid scholar, see Paul L. HECK, *The Construction of Knowledge in Islamic Civilization: Qudama b. Ja‘far and his Kitab al-Kharaj wa Sina‘at al-Kitaba*, Leiden 2002.

political, economic and military systems both to comprehend the reasons that made Byzantium impregnable to Muslim armies and to contain any Byzantine danger looming from the *thughūr* region. As El-Cheikh puts it, “Knowledge of Byzantium was imperative for the survival and prestige of the Islamic empire”¹⁷. If seen from the same perspective as that from which Edward Said saw the rise of oriental studies in the West, one might posit that the Abbasid interest in Byzantium and the Byzantines anticipated the western project of Orientalism. In any case, one cannot deny the fact that as Orientalism has actively participated in the construction of the Oriental as the Other of the early/modern European, this older medieval Muslim tradition indubitably bore a similar ideological responsibility in fashioning *al-Rūm* as the Muslim Other.

No wonder then that a close look at medieval Arabic literature and Arabic poetry in particular will convince us that *al-Rūm*, interchangeably called *banū al-aṣṣār* (the Yellow Ones) –and derogatorily *‘ulūj*, plural *‘ilj* (barbarians, unknown, and by derogative implication, especially in some Arabic varieties, ‘bastards’)- are depicted as *al-akhar* (the Other) *par excellence*¹⁸. Not only was medieval Arabic poetry the favorite ideological apparatus of the Abbasid state, but also, of the common Muslim east and west of *dār al-Islām* wherein the colloquial words *rūmī* (masculine) and *rūmiyya* (feminine) in many Arabic dialects especially in the Maghrib still denote the “non-Muslim European Other” whether German, French, Italian, Spanish, English, or Scandinavian. Abbasid literature, certainly in its Hamdanid branch, and poetry in particular, waged an ideological war against political and military archrivals. Anti-Byzantine poetry in the words of Shbouh, “may be seen as an interesting illustration of Muslim public opinion, with no small amount of the mass media flavor especially when one considers the Arabs’ appreciation of poetry”¹⁹.

Throughout these times, a highly emotional type of poetry that encompassed almost all the classical genres such as *madīḥ* (eulogy-panegyrics), *hijā’* (lampoon-invective), *munāqadhāt* (polemics-debates), *rithā’* (elegy), *fakhr* (praise), *ḥanīn ila al-auṭān* (homesickness) became so

17. EL-CHEIKH, *Byzantium viewed by the Arabs*, 102.

18. In some Arabic dialects, the word *‘ilj* is still used to denote a person with an unknown parent.

19. SHBOUL, “Byzantium and the Arabs”, 46.

culturally and politically à *la mode* that court poets competed ferociously to come up with the most impressive *madīḥ* of Muslim notables who had engaged in fighting the Byzantine “infidels”. “The preoccupation with the Byzantines as the Arabs’ chief enemy”, Shboul asserts, “is particularly reflected in Arabic poetry of the late seventh, eighth, and tenth century. This poetry is mainly in praise of Muslim caliphs, emirs or generals who waged war against the Byzantines and restored the prestige of Islam”²⁰.

This war-poetry came to be known in most medieval Arabic critical circles as *Al-Rumiyyat* (poems about *al-Rūm*), and *Byzantinesques* in my view, could be an excellent translation²¹. Other critics, however, preferred to describe it with the no less suggestive appellation of *al-thughūriyyāt*, or poems about borders. Although this type of poetry deals predominately with the *gesta* of Muslim leaders who engaged in jihad against the Byzantines, many of the poems written in this tradition focus on the “common people” and deal directly either with the life of Muslims in *mudun al-thughūr*, or the border towns especially Tarsus or narrate the plight of *al-asrā al-muslimīn* (Muslim captives), as is the case with the majority of Abu Firas al-Hamdani’s *Rumiyyat*.

In several important respects, the middle of the ninth century witnessed an increasing decline in the central power of the Abbasid caliphate over its vast territories. This led to the rise of a number of independent and semi-independent dynasties and principalities. Chief among these was the Emirate of Aleppo founded by the Hamdanid prince Sayf al-Dawla in 944. In addition to his patronage of learning and poetry, which made his court a magnet for the greatest poets of his time such as al-Mutanabbi, Abu Firas, and others, Sayf al-Dawla is mostly remembered for his wars with the Byzantines. Because of his principality’s proximity to the Byzantine frontiers, Sayf al-Dawla, as we are told by Mahmud Ibrahim, “found himself playing the role of defending the lands of Islam against Byzantium, the historical enemy of the Muslims since the days of Heraclius”²².

20. SHBOUL, “Byzantium and the Arabs”, 55.

21. M. CANARD, “Abu Firas”, in: A.A. VASILIEV, *Byzance et les Arabes*, vol. 2/2, Brussels 1950, 349-370, translated them as “Les Greques”.

22. M. IBRAHIM, *Songs of an Arab Prince: Verses from the Poetry of Abu Firas al-Hamdani*, Baghdad 1988, 17.

The challenge, was daunting since the Byzantines he was confronting were already enjoying an unprecedented military resurgence which reached its apogee with Nicephorus Phocas (d. 969), the very personification of the “Byzantine Other” in medieval Arabic-Islamic poetry, *hijāʾ* (invective/lampoon) in particular, as will be seen in a number of Abu Firas’ poems and in al-Qaffal’s and Ibn Hazm’s poetic responses to the vituperative assault on Islam in the poem attributed to him known in some Muslim chronicles as *Al-Qasida al-Arminiyya al-Mal’una* or the Armenian Cursed Ode.

1. Abu Firas’ *Al-Rumiyyat*: or the Byzantines Are Coming!

As Shboul correctly observed, it is misleading to think that the majority of professional poets of *Al-Rumiyyat*, who wrote predominately in the *madḥ* (eulogy-panegyric) genre, “[I]n praise of caliphs, emirs, or generals”²³, were ideologically engaged and wholeheartedly committed to their patrons’ divine mission of defending the *thugūr* of *dār al-Islām* from the Byzantines and their *ṭawāghūt*, or their ungodly leaders²⁴. Many of them, if not the majority, “used and abused their muses” to gain their livelihood and provide for “their bread and butter”, to borrow A.F. L. Beeston’s phrase with which he describes the setbacks that *badiʿ* (innovative) poet Bashar (d. 784) had to face because of his challenge to many of the prevailing norms of poetry in the early Abbasid period through his extensive usage of new rhetorical devices and poetic styles invented by him and other later *muḥdath* (modern) poets such as Abu Tammam and Ibn al-Muʿtaz (d. 908)²⁵.

It would be apposite to affirm, however, that some of those poets, especially the ones who were not in dire need of patronage, which is the case of prince/poet Abu Firas al-Hamdani (d. 968), found themselves deep in the

23. SHBOUL, “Byzantium and the Arabs”, 55.

24. The word *tawāghūt* (singular *taghūt*) is the most common word that medieval Muslim writers used to refer to the Byzantine emperors. In essence, it is a Qur’anic word, which designates all types of idols worshipped other than or in addition to Allah (God). Thus, it is synonymous either with *kufr* (infidelity) or *shirk* (polytheism). However, in the context of medieval literature and contemporary jihadist rhetoric, it denotes more than its original theological meaning. Today, it is commonly translated as “tyrant”.

25. A. F. L. BEESTON, *Selections from the Poetry of Bashar*, Cambridge 1977, 3.

mayhem of Arab-Byzantine rivalry. This does not mean, however, that this second type of poets of *Al-Rumiyyat* was engaged through literature in the modernist sense of *l'engagement littéraire* especially as delineated by Jean Paul Sartre, for it cannot be denied that those poets “*restent quand même des poètes*”, in a culture that traditionally adores poets. This is certainly true of Abu Firas, contrary to the majority of the panegyrists such as his archrival al-Mutanabbi, who were characteristically covetous of money and power²⁶. Abu Firas wrote his *Al-Rumiyyat* to record the excruciating experience of captivity at the hands of those he consciously called *akhwālī* (my maternal uncles) in reference to his Byzantine mother who after giving birth to him was manumitted through gaining the legal status of *um-walad*, which literally means the mother of a child²⁷.

Abu Firas was born most probably in the city of Mosul in northern modern Iraq in 932. He belonged to the famous Arab tribe of Bani Hamdan, who came to legendary fame through the poet's cousin, mentor and brother-in-law Sayf al-Dawla, founder of the Hamdanid dynasty and one of the most admired emirs in medieval Arabic war-poetry for the impressive bravery he showed during his numerous struggles with the Byzantines²⁸.

At a very young age, Abu Firas demonstrated extraordinary aptitude in the arts of poetry and war. As A. el-Tayib points out, “In appreciation of his valour and brilliance” his cousin Sayf al-Dawla appointed him governor of the town of Manbej when he was only sixteen (317)²⁹. It is in this town that he fell captive to the Byzantines. This captivity at the hands of his *akhwāl* represented the turning point of his short life for he died in 968 at the age of 34. In fact, captivity was the impetus behind his most famous

26. See A. HĀMORI, *The Composition of Mutanabbi's Panegyrics to Sayf al-Dawla*, Leiden 1992.

27. This refers to the legal privilege given by the Shari'a law to a concubine-slave who bore a child (son or daughter) to her master. With the status of *um-walad*, it becomes illegal for her master to sell her or give her away. Upon her master's death, she would be automatically freed.

28. As CANARD, “Abu Firas”, 350, once phrased it, Abu Firas belonged to “une des rares de l'ancienne aristocratie arabe syro-mésopotamienne qui ait joué un rôle politique au xe siècle”.

29. A. EL-TAYIB, “Abu Firas al-Hamdani”, in: *Abbasid Belles Lettres*, ed. J. ASHTIANY et al., Cambridge 1990, 315-27.

poems known as *Rumiyyat*. “It is the so well documented captivity of 962”, observes el-Tayib, “that we owe the group of *qasā'id* [poems] called *Al-Rūmiyyāt*, in which is to be found some of Abu Firas’ finest poetry”³⁰.

It comes as no surprise then, that in addition to the emotional thrust that inspired Abu Firas to produce some of the finest poems of the period, the experience of captivity at the hands of the Byzantines also supplied the poet with the ideological mindset that made him stereotypical in his portrayal of the Byzantine as not only the Hamdanids’ military archrivals but as the *umma*’s (Muslim nation) religious Other *par excellence*³¹. The impact of the poet’s captivity in Constantinople and its literary manifestation invokes in many ways not only that of Cervantes’ much talked about five-year captivity in Algiers and his description of the Moors in *El Trato de Argel* and *Don Quixote*, but also, and regardless of the heated debate over the authenticity of his account, the Byzantine John Cameniates, who was captured by the Arabs in 904 during their sack of Thessaloniki³².

Needless to say that in Abu Firas’ *Al-Rumiyyat* one can find a plethora of poems that succinctly illustrate the captive’s feelings of estrangement in the Byzantine lands. The two texts *Mother of the Captive* and *the Cooing of a Dove* are the most moving in their description of the emotional turmoil inflicted upon the captive. In my view, however, it is Abu Firas’ *qīṭa*’ (short poems) such as *A Captive’s Suffering*, *Separation*, both love poems, *The Byzantines are Coming*, a *taḥrīd* (literally instigation, call to revenge), and *How Dare you Claim*, a *hijā*’ (invective-lampoon) of the Byzantine emperor Nicephorus Phocas, that should draw our attention if we want to explore the poet’s anti-Byzantine rhetoric of alterity.

Very simple in structure and economical in diction, yet rhetorically and thematically robust, in *A Captive’s Suffering* and *Separation*, the poet has successfully utilized a number of conventional *topoi* of the classical Arabic *qaṣīda* in his effort to depict *’arḍ al-Rūm* (the land of the Byzantine)

30. EL-TAYIB, Abu Firas al-Hamdani, 317.

31. This is true for his best known love poem “*Arāka ‘aṣiyya al dam’i*” brought to unprecedented fame by Arab singer Um-Kulthum.

32. See *Ioannis Caminiatae De expugnatione Thessalonicae*, ed. G. BÖHLIG. Berlin 1973, and for an English translation, *The capture of Thessaloniki*, ed. D. FREND et al., Perth 2000.

as not only inherently foreign and unfamiliar, indubitably in the negative sense, but also as a space of *ightirāb* (alienation) and *firāq* (separation):

In captivity, a lover suffers in disgrace
 And tears flood down his lonely face.
 In Byzantine land, his body must reside
 Though in Syrian land his heart does still abide.
 A lonesome stranger and out of place!
 Where none with love may him embrace³³.

And:

In the past, separation, I could not withstand.
 Although with a camel's swiftest space,
 At will, it was easy to find your trace.
 But now, what separates us is Byzantine land.
 And hope of reunion never looms in my face!³⁴

Unlike the traditional *nasīb* or introductory passage of the *qaṣīda* in which poets would conventionally weep over *al-aṭlāl* (abandoned campsites) of their absent beloved in a nostalgically laden setting evocative of the western *ubi sunt* formula, Abu Firas, while keeping the nostalgic mood of the *nasīb* by referring to his captivity at the hands of the Byzantines, has opted not only for a more realistic and historical setting, but also for a highly political content³⁵.

The *nasīb*'s nostalgic emphasis on the lovers's *ghiyāb* (absence), *firāq* (separation), and the longing for *wiṣāl* (reunion), which represent the gist of this *topos*, is powerfully captured by Abu Firas' rapid reference to his captivity in the *ṣadr* (literally front), or the first hemistich of the first *bayt* (literally tent), or couplet of the first *qiṭ'a*. In the second poem, it is strongly centralized also through the powerful imagery of the camel in *al-ʿajuz* (literally back), while the second hemistich of the second *bayt* of the second *qiṭ'a*, is most commonly used in Arabic literature to denote *al-safar* (travel), *al-rahīl* (leaving), and *al-maut* (death).

33. *Diwan Abu Firas al-Himdani*, ed. ʿAbbas ʿABDULSATIR, Beirut 1983, 31. Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

34. ʿABDULSATIR, *Diwan Abu Firas al-Himdani*, 31.

35. For an excellent study, see J. STETKEVYCH, *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasib*, Chicago 1993.

The traditional metaphorical use of *nasīb* imagery is of paramount importance in these two poems especially when it comes to Abu Firas' playing on the concepts of *al-zamān* (time), *al-makān* (place), *ḥuḍūr* (presence) and *ghiyāb* (absence), and *al-shi'r* (poetry) itself, in particular when one remembers that the Arabic word is derived from *al-shu'ūr*, which means emotions, whose power is, by itself, a hymn to *al-'anā*, the 'I' or the 'self'.

Most of the time, the metaphors of *al-māḍi* (past) are driven by the mnemotopic power of the Arabic language itself, which is forcefully translated in the linguistic *jiāns* (paronomasia) that connects a number of lexical items belonging to the semantic fields of memory, such as *al-tadhakkur* (the faculty of memory), *al-dhākira* (memory) and *al-dhikrā* (souvenir or remembrance). The outcome for the reader, or at least what S. B. Yeats would call "the discerning reader", would be to find himself/herself consciously or unconsciously a captive of the poem's antithetical fluctuation between *al-wāqi'* (reality) and *al-khayāl* (fiction/illusion) especially when the love poem through its intermittent flashbacks dramatizes the poet/lover's fear of *al-nihāya* (end) of his *ḥayāt* (life) owing to his *shakk* (doubt) concerning *al-wiṣāl* (reunion) with his beloved.

The absence of the loved one is the thematic leitmotif that provides the perfect mood for the *ḥanīn* (nostalgia) for the known land, i.e. *dār al-Islām* and Syria in particular. Of rhetorical importance in this regard, is the poet's reliance on *ṭibāq* (antithesis) between physical existence and emotional states. The striking thing, however, is that the poet moves so quickly to emphasize the fact that, unlike the conventional absence of the loved one in such poems which denotes an eternal absence, the lover in this poem is aware that absence is temporary.

In other words, the abode of the beloved could be regained in reality, if the poet/lover succeeds in convincing his cousin Sayf al-Dawla to ransom him. Contrary to the conventional *nasīb* of love poems wherein the physical place represents the poetic locus, it is clear, and owing to the strong *ṭibāq* between body/heart and Byzantine/Syrian lands, Abu Firas' emphasis here falls rather on the excruciating experience of *ghurba* (foreignness), which is in essence a temporary experience. Whereas the physical locus of conventional love poetry is a place that is well known and familiar, in these

love poems, the foreignness and unfamiliarity of *al-makān* adds surely to the poet's depression and alienation.

By virtue of the rhetorical importance of *taḍmīn* (implication of meaning) –which refers to the fact that the accurate meaning of the current *bayt* is to be found in the following one– in both *qīṭa'*, the poet appears to juxtapose masterfully the traditional *'udhāl* (adversaries/enemies) of the poet/lover (in)famous in classical Arabic love poetry to the historical enemies of the captive/lover³⁶. This dramatizes the antagonistic nature of *al-makān* and the people (*al-Rūm*) who are implied to represent the prime cause of *firāq* (separation).

If the apparent dominant theme is the recurring love motifs of lost happiness, lovesickness, and longings for *al-maḥbūb* (the beloved), the poet's implied emphasis on the Byzantine lands as the barrier between him and his beloved makes it clear that there is more than the traditional *topos* of *firāq* in these poems. Likewise, the archetypal enmity of *al-ḥabīb* (the lover) to *al-'udhāl* who strive to ruin his relationship with his *maḥbūb*, is brilliantly transfigured to depict the captive's *karāha* (hatred) towards his captors. By implication, the Byzantines are plotting against Muslims in the same way that *al-'udhāl* plot against lovers.

If lovers in the classical *qaṣīda*, however, are most of the time alert to the plots of their enemies, Muslims in the poet's view, are not. It is his duty, therefore, to remind them of the danger looming from these foreign and inimical lands. This is the explicit and straightforward message of the following lines:

As many a Byzantine troop is rolling towards your land.
 Cheering infidelity and raising crosses in the hand.
 Their horses carry nothing but injustice full of hate.
 And injustice is man's most destructive trait.
 They are staunch and committed! So you must understand!
 For the unprepared, only their like can them withstand!
 If you do not rise in anger for God's true faith,
 No swords for its sake shall be drawn³⁷.

36. For more details on the meaning of *taḍmīn* and its place in classical Arabic literature, see A. GULLY, "Tadmin, 'Implication of Meaning', in *Medieval Arabic*", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117 (1997), 466-480.

37. 'ABDULSATIR, *Diwan Abu Firas*, 51.

Conspicuous as it is, this powerful *tahrīd* (instigation to revenge/war) is replete with expressions of *mubālagha* (hyperbole) and *ziyādāt* (exaggerations) especially when it comes to the number of the Byzantine troops and their diabolical plots to invade Muslim lands and destroy the *dīn* (religion) of Allah (God).

Of rhetorical importance here is the effective and appropriate *tikrār* (repetition) of the word *ghayy* (injustice/wrong/transgression), which the poet deliberately employs as a *kināya* (metonymy) not only to depict the Byzantines' deeds but also to describe their most idiosyncratic feature. Certainly, the striking *majāz* (metaphor) of Byzantine horses carrying their masters' *ghayy* to the Muslim land, in addition to the powerful *ḥikma* (aphorism) "And injustice is man's most destructive trait", prove extremely effective in conveying this message. In this way, the Byzantine Other becomes an allegory of Otherness. He represents all that is contrary to the Muslim Self. He is depicted as the agent of *kufr* (infidelity) and he is associated with *sharr* (evil) and *fasād* (corruption).

Abu Firas' "hyperbolic accounting", to use Jonathan Burton's phrase³⁸, of the Byzantine forces finds a strong echo in western medieval and early modern depictions of the raging Saracen and Turkish armies. As a matter of fact, it is unexpectedly expressed by Elizabethan dramatist Christopher Marlowe in *Tamburlaine*. The following lines are comparatively speaking, analogous:

As many circumcised Turks we have,
And warlike bands of Christians renied,
As hath the ocean or the Terrene sea
Small drops of water, when the moon begins
To join in one her semi-circled horns³⁹.

Certainly Abu Firas' hyperbolic description of Byzantine troops in his effort to warn Muslims of the impending "Yellow Peril" is comparable to Marlowe's description of the Turkish Bajazeth's Muslim troops as "the drops of the ocean" in his attempt to alert Europe to "the raging and expansionist Turk"⁴⁰.

38. J. BURTON, *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579-1624*, Newark 2005, 73.

39. Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine*, ed. J. W. HARPER, New York 1992, 17.

40. BURTON, *Traffic and Turning*, 73.

Abu Firas' stress upon the religious identity of the approaching Byzantine troops through the figure of the Cross, the principal icon of Christianity is very similar to Marlowe's foregrounding of the figures of the circumcised Turk, the Christian renegades, and the crescent moon. This, according to Jonathan Burton not only "confirm[s] European fears of immense Ottoman armies, but it steadily broadcast" Bajazeth's Islamism and his threat to European Christendom"⁴¹.

Abu Firas' deep belief in the "Manichean division" between Muslims and Byzantines and his stereotypical demonization of the Byzantines would become especially evident in his *hijā'* of Nicephorus Phocas, one of the most loathsome figures in medieval Arabic-Islamic writing. The opening lines of this *hijā'* are a challenge:

How dare you claim!
 Oh you huge-throated rogue,
 That we lions of war,
 Are ignorant of wars!⁴²

Both uncharacteristic of his chivalrous character and unrepresentative of his "romantic" poetry, Abu Firas' facetious assault on Nicephorus sums up neatly the mood of nervousness that must have characterized the Hamdanids' response to the military threats of Nicephorus and his 'raging army'. This can be easily discerned from the absurd invective and abusive *ad hominem* argument in the following lines that have certainly compromised the otherwise highly poetic *Al- Rumiyyat*:

How dare you threaten us with wars?
 As though our hearts and yours,
 Have never been tied at their cores!
 Indeed, both of us in wars did meet,
 Every time, we were lions,
 Whereas you proved a dog!⁴³

Abu Firas' "unprincely: and "unpoetic" resort to *fuḥsh* (impropriety) and *badhā'a* (vulgar language) especially through his shocking *tashbīh* (comparison) of Nicephorus to a dog, an animal that denotes *najāsa* (uncleanness) and *ḥaqāra* (baseness) in Arabic-Islamic culture. In this, the

41. BURTON, *Traffic and Turning*, 73.

42. *Diwan al-Amir Abi Firas al-Himdani*, ed. Muhammad AL-TUNJI. Damascus 1987, 34.

43. AL-TUNJI, *Diwan al-Amir*, 34.

dog is second only to the pig. In calling Nicephorus “a dog” the prince Abu Firas had a predecessor who is none other than Harun al-Rashid⁴⁴.

Abu Firas’ lack of decorum is perhaps understandable if one remembers his almost xenophobic Arabism and extreme self-pride evocative of the pre-Islamic *jāhili* culture. His assault seems to be a direct reaction to Nicephorus’s provocative denigration of the Arabs in his presence. As many medieval Arabic sources mention, Abu Firas wrote his *hijā’* of Nicephorus most probably as a later response to the latter’s derisive remark while visiting Abu Firas in his captivity during which he said to the captive that contrary to the Byzantines, “the Arabs are born for pens and not for swords”⁴⁵. This is reflected in the closing lines of the poem:

Was it then our pens,
Or perhaps our swords!
That made you shiver in your holes!
In the midst of the desert,
You hid your face
Like a jerboa burrowing in the earth⁴⁶.

Paradoxically, if seen from a modern perspective, it seems that Nicephorus was indirectly praising the Arabs. But in the medieval age of the sword and in the context of Muslim/Byzantine enmity, Nicephorus’s remark, if as reported, was certainly an invective, which proved enormously successful.

Without the powerful figures of speech dominant in the above poems, Abu Firas’ focus in this lampoon of Nicephorus falls directly on a number of *mathālib* (demerits) and *‘uyūb* (shortcomings) of the Byzantines such as *qubḥ* (ugliness), *kibr* (pride), *ta’āli* (arrogance), *kadhib* (lies), and *jubn*

44. This refers to the reply of Harun al-Rashid to the letter sent by Nicephorus I (d. 803) in which the Byzantine emperor condemned the truce signed by his predecessor, Irene, with the Abbasid caliph and he declared not only his refusal to pay a tribute to the caliph but also his readiness to settle the matter with the sword. The insulting reply of al Rashid starts as follows “from Harun al-Rashid, Commander of the Faithful to Nicephorus *kalb al-Rūm*, the dog of the Romans”. For more on this letter, see EL-CHEIKH, *Byzantium viewed by the Arabs*, 94-97, and H. KENNEDY, “Byzantine-Arab Diplomacy in the Near East from the Islamic Conquests to the Mid-Eleventh Century”, in: *Byzantine Diplomacy*, ed. J. SHEPARD and S. FRANKLIN, Aldershot 1992, 133-43.

45. AL-TUNJI, *Diwan al-Amir*, 34.

46. AL-TUNJI, *Diwan al-Amir*, 34.

(cowardice). These negative characteristics conjure up the figure of the *shaytān* (the devil). Through his vicious *hijā'* of Nicephorus, Abu Firas sums it all up as he denigrates the *mahjū* (object of invective) and strips him of any Arab quality.

The antithetical symmetry between Arab/Muslim on the one hand and Byzantine/Christian on the other is the *ethos* and *telos* of the poem, if not the entire *Rumiyyat*. In other words, Abu Firas wants to convey the message that the Byzantines stand for everything that Muslims do not stand for. In this, the poet has implemented literally what medieval Arabic critics theorized when it comes to the power of *hijā'* in not only degrading the Other but utterly negating him/her.

Abu Firas' *hijā'* of Nicephorus will serve as an introduction to the more compact polemical invectives directed against Nicephorus and the Byzantines that dominate the poetic responses of al-Qaffal (d. 946) and Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) to a poetic diatribe against Islam and its prophet attributed to Nicephorus.

Because of the length and complexity of the texts in question, a full exploration of the poems' rhetoric of otherness is beyond the scope of this article. Accordingly, the focus will be on the poets' use of the Islamic division of *ṭahāra* (purity) of the Self versus the *najāsa* (impurity/pollution/contamination) of the Other, their anti-Christian polemics, their assertion of the political and military domination of Muslims over Byzantines, and their foregrounding of the religious motif of the Other as the scourge of God.

2. The Impure Scourge of God: the Byzantines in the Poetic Responses of *al-Qaffal* and Ibn Hazm to Nicephorus's *Al-Qasida al-Mal'ūna*

In addition to the obsessive interest in *al-Naqfur*, Arabic for Nicephorus, that dominates a number of medieval Muslim texts on Byzantine/Muslim relations, it is the bizarre name of *Al-Qasida al-Mal'ūna* that haunts several others. This is true, for instance, of Ibn Kathir's entry on Nicephorus. Ibn Kathir devotes many pages to the poem which he calls *mal'ūna* (cursed), a word that not only captures vividly the rage felt by Muslims in knowing about this poem but also shows perfectly the efficacy of Nicephorus's propaganda

in his psychological war against his enemies. “This cursed *Naqfur*”, Ibn Kathir angrily informs his readers, “sent a poem to the caliph al-Muti‘ in which he defames Islam, derides the Prophet, and vows to conquer all the lands of Islam and turn them into Christian dominions”⁴⁷. Unfamiliar with the response of al-Qaffal, Ibn Kathir proceeds to comment that no Muslim had ever before written a response to the poem until the Andalusian Ibn Hazm had penned a poem he hailed as *al-farīda al-islamiyya al-manşūra al-maymūna* (the unmatched and triumphant Islamic masterpiece)⁴⁸.

All in all, *Al-Qasida al-Arminiyya* is well structured. Indeed, it can easily be divided into five sections. In the first section, the poet-proxy catalogues the deeds and victories of Nicephorus and his ancestors in Muslim lands. Of particular significance is the focus on the humiliation of Muslims especially through dramatizing the capture of Muslim women, a claim that is insulting and dishonoring for Muslims. In the second section, the poet strongly vows that Christian knights will continue their assaults on Muslim lands until they have subdued Egypt, Arabia, Iraq, Persia and Yemen. No doubt, however, the most serious threat is the conquest of Mecca and the extermination of Muslims from the face of the earth. In the third section, the poet is surprising since he attributes the defeat of Muslims to their imperfect practice of Islam’s tenets.

While the reader was expecting that the poet would link the Christian victories to the truth of their faith and their courage, he relates it intrinsically to the moral depravity of Muslims. It is as if God chastised them after their ruler and judges had transgressed the Islamic laws of governorship and justice. Section four is another pledge to propagate Christianity with the power of the sword. Finally, the last section is in praise of Christianity and Jesus and a diatribe against Islam and its prophet. The opening and closing lines of this long poem summarize it well:

47. IBN KATHIR, *Al-Bidaya wa-l-Nihaya*. Beirut 1982, 260.

48. Interestingly enough, in the essay posthumously published, G. E. VON GRUNEBaum, “Eine poetische Polemik zwischen Byzanz und Bagdad im X. Jahrhundert”, in: *Islam and Medieval Hellenism: Social and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. D. S. WILSON, London 1976, 43-64, seems not to have been familiar with Ibn Hazm’s poem. Indeed, while introducing the Byzantine polemical poem and the Muslim response(s), he did not allude even in passing to Ibn Hazm.

From Nicephorus, the pure Christian king to the remnant of the Hashimites.

His Excellency al-Muti', who is doomed to endless plights.
 Haven't your ears heard what I've been doing in recent fights!
 Or too feeble you are to act the unyielding knight!
 If, however, you know, yet deliberately uncaring,
 I'm sleepless planning what I'm planning⁴⁹.

And:

East and west of God's earth shall be mine.
 Christianity will triumph with my sword.
 Jesus is exulted and his crown sits high in the heavens.
 Victorious is the one who sides with the Lord.
 While your prophet is dead in the earth.
 And his disciples' reputations are torn and soiled⁵⁰.

The anti-Islamic rhetoric and the crusading spirit of this poem made it notorious in Baghdad. It is said that the first response to the poem in the Mashriq came from the *faqīh* Abu Bakr al-Qaffal, who must have been taken by religious zeal upon hearing the anti-Islamic propaganda and the assault on his prophet. The opening lines of al-Qaffal's *qaṣīda* are powerful especially when it comes to capturing the highly "othering" religious rhetoric of *al- anā al- ṭāhira* (the pure Self) versus *al-akhar al-najis* (the impure Other):

News came to me of a man who, in times of quarrels,
 Is ill-bred in the arts of the word.
 Pompously claiming titles he has not.
 And great deeds he has never done.
 Calling himself pure when, in truth,
 He is an infidel, most impure.
 His garments are polluted with impurity.
 Pretending to be a good Christian. In fact, he is not!⁵¹

49. Salahuddin AL-MUNAJJID, *Qasidat 'Imbratur al-Rum Niqfuz Fuqas fi- Hija' al-Islam wa-l Rad 'Alayh*, Beirut 1982, 11.

50. AL-MUNAJJID, *Qasidat 'Imbratur al-Rum*, 22.

51. AL-MUNAJJID, *Qasidat 'Imbratur al-Rum*, 28.

As a non-Muslim Other, Nicephorus who, in turn, attributes to himself his own religious purity (from the Pure Christian), is depicted by al-Qaffal as grouping three types of *najāsa* (impurity/pollution/uncleanness).

The first one is, islamically speaking, the most revolting for it is synonymous with *kufr* (infidelity/unbelief) and *shirk* (polytheism). It is perceived as *najāsa ma'nawiyya* (abstract impurity), and it denotes the uncompromisingly Other of the pure monotheistic and submissive Self. Second, *al-najāsa al-ḥissiyya* (physical/tangible) which is perfectly alluded to in al-Qaffal's reference to Nicephorus's unclean/polluted garments and it is one of the most recurring *topoi* of differences in medieval Muslim writing about the Other. Most often it deals with the issues of *al-ṭahāra al-kubrā* (major purity) after *jima'* (sexual intercourse) and *ḥayḍ* (menstruation) for women⁵². The third one, it seems, is the invention of al-Qaffal and it refers to *al-najāsa al-akhlāqiyya* (moral/ethical uncleanness), through which al-Qaffal alludes to the cruelty of the Byzantines during their wars. This was to become very much the central theme in Muslims' perception of *a-Ifranj* during the Crusades.

Suffice to say that the distinction of the pure Self versus the impure Other is not unique to the religious-cultural consciousness of Islam⁵³. Indeed, it is universal and common across different cultures and religions. Nevertheless, as a growing number of scholars have argued, this polarity has maintained a dominant place in the religious and cultural discourses of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* (1994), for instance, Sacha Stern has aptly demonstrated the paramount importance of the polarity of the pure Jew versus the impure non-Jew in the construction of Jewishness and concomitant dialectics of Self and Other.

In western literature in general and English literature in particular, the polarity of purity and impurity is strongly echoed in numerous medieval and early modern works. In Elizabeth Carey's *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry* (1613) for example, this polarity is central in the

52. For a non-Muslim viewpoint of Muslim *ṭahāra*, see Z. Maghen, "Strangers and Brothers: The Ritual Status of Unbelievers in Islamic Jurisprudence", *Medieval Encounters* 12 (2006)173-223.

53. See also CHR. HAYES, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud*, Oxford 2002.

religious and racial discourse of the first English play ever to be published by an English woman. In order to delineate the doomed marriage of a pure Christian woman represented by the protagonist of the play to an impure non-Christian, the antagonist Herod, the playwright designs a tragic encounter of the Arab Silleus and the half-Jewish Salome. After discovering the love-affair of his wife Salome and her intention to leave him for Silleus, the Jewish Constabarus' words illustrate this opposition explicitly:

Oh Salome, how much you wrong your name,
 Your race, your country, and your husband most!
 A stranger's private conference is shame,
 I blush for you, that have your blushing lost.
 Oft have I found, and found you to my grief
 Consulted with this base Arabian here
 Heavens knows that you have been my grief
 Then do not now my greater plague appear⁵⁴.

In short, as a Jewish husband, Constabarus is concerned with his name and honour. Nonetheless, as he reveals it, his "greater plague" lies in the fact that his wife has given him up, he who is a pure Jew, for the sake of an impure gentile, a stranger, a "base Arabian", as he bluntly puts it.

Like Constabarus, al-Qaffal in his poetic process of self-assertion and self-identification highlights the impurity/pollution of the Other, an impurity that does not only denote the religious-cultural inferiority of the Byzantine but also invokes their baseness and lack of human compassion. In this, they are the same both in times of war and peace. The primary contrast that the poet creates is between the insatiable cruelty of the Byzantines and the humane heroism of Muslims as in the following lines:

Our power and pride lie in our faith
 By God, soon our birds will fly over in your lands.
 The number of our captured women you did overplay.
 Forgetting that thousands of yours are in our hands.
 We are the most merciful when we triumph in the fray.
 But you are the cruelest when you win the day⁵⁵.

Ibn Hazm's polemical invective is strikingly similar to that of al-Qaffal. Although there is nothing to indicate that Ibn Hazm might have been

54. E. CAREY, *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry*, Peterborough 2000.

55. AL-MUNAJJID, *Qasidat 'Imbratur al-Rum*, 30.

familiar with al Qaffal's response, it is clear that the religious background and fervor of both poets was the foremost motivation behind their poems. This is illustrated largely by their assault on the theological foundations of Christianity. Ibn Hazm writes:

How dare you brag of a Trinitarian faith?
 So removed from reason, so out of place.
 Worshipping a being who has a worshipping face!
 Woe to you! Where is your sanity and brain?
 Your gospels are tampered with in every place.
 And in them, words of truth are often slain.
 You bow still to a wooden cross.
 Woe to you! Where is your sanity and brain?⁵⁶

In Ibn Hazm's view, because of their adherence to Christianity, the Byzantines are irrational and intellectually feeble. Reason, he argues, does not seem to have any place for the Byzantines when, as he maintains, the basic tenet of their "faulty" religion (i.e. the Trinity) is essentially removed from reason. This message is consolidated by questioning rhetorically their worship of Jesus who, in Muslim understanding, although a venerated Prophet and source of many miracles, worships in turn his Creator.

The *hijā'* of the Christian Byzantines and their faith shifts to *madīḥ* whenever Ibn Hazm –and by the same token al Qaffal– refers to the Muslim faith or the Prophet of Islam. Evidently, ridicule of Christianity and the ensuing denial of the Other is ultimately an indirect celebration of Islam and a final affirmation of the Self. "Thus while the surface elements of the *hijā'* are the opposite of those in *iftikhār* [praise]", S. P. Stetkevych asserts, "the ultimate purpose is the reaffirmation of those same values"⁵⁷.

With Ibn Hazm and al-Qaffal, when it comes to the *mahjū* (object of invective), the main rhetorical and ideological focus of *hijā'* lies the description of their Otherness with a special insistence on their religious *ḍalāl* (misguidance), moral inferiority, and the ensuing military and cultural weaknesses. In contrast, the Muslim *mamdūḥ* (the praised one) is cherished for his/her religious truthfulness, moral superiority and the resulting military and cultural achievement, which should be thought of as

56. AL-MUNAJJID, *Qasidat 'Imbratur al-Rum*, 53.

57. S. P. STETKEVYCH, *Abu Tammam and the Poetics of the Abbasid Age*, Leiden 1991, 335.

divine proof of these qualities. Certainly when the reality of the battlefield indicates otherwise, as we will see later, there is always the universal idea of God's affliction and disapproval.

Expectedly enough, in Arabic literary tradition, especially in times of wars and enmities, *hijā'* has been part and parcel of conflicts. It was, for example, the most effective weapon in the tribal wars and rivalries of the Arabs before Islam. Similarly, since the time Prophet Muhammad called his poets to attack their enemies with their words, it has become central in the propaganda of jihad. Given that, it seems clear why Ibn Hazm and al-Qaffal have foregrounded the links between the explicit *hijā'* concerning the Byzantines and their religion and the implicit *madīḥ* of the Arabs and their religion. S. P. Stetkevych's reference to Ibn-Rashiq's explanation of the underlying function of *hijā'* is worth considering:

“According to medieval critic Ibn Rashīq, *hijā'* (invective) can be termed the censure, blame, or ridicule for the absence of those virtues. The dictum ‘all poetry’ can be summed up in three phrases: when you praise, you say ‘you are’; when you lampoon, you say ‘you are not, and when you elegize you say ‘you were’ ”⁵⁸.

Furthermore, it should be noted that within the thematic and rhetorical battle of the Self and the Other, the obsessive reference to the other *ḥarīm* (womenfolk) is crucial in understanding the nature of Muslim/Byzantine rivalry and the underlying *topoi* of the medieval Arabic-Islamic rhetoric of alterity.

The emphasis on capturing, enslaving, and –implicitly– sexually enjoying the Other's women is central to this alterity. It all starts with Nicephorus's, islamically speaking, insulting reference to “the noble and sumptuous ladies descendents of your Prophet” who, according to the poem attributed to Nicephorus, “were captured and gave themselves without contracts and dowries”. Unsurprisingly, al-Qaffal and Ibn Hazm responded with a defensive rhetoric of apology that reveals the success of Nicephorus's psychological war and his deep knowledge of the Muslim psyche. Echoing al-Qaffal, Ibn Hazm writes:

Of our women, you did not capture many.
Whereas of yours, we have as many as the drops of rain.

58. STETKEVYCH, *Abu Tammam*, 335.

Indeed, counting them is an endless task.
Like a man counting the pigeons' feathers⁵⁹.

And:

Your emperors' daughters, we herded with our hands,
As a hunter herds a desert's deer to his own field.
Ask Heraclius about our deeds in your Lands.
And other kings of yours who were made to yield.
For they can tell you about our troops deployed
And the countless Byzantine women we have enjoyed⁶⁰.

Echoing several other *Rumiyyat* especially those texts of Abu Tammam's *madīḥ* of al-Mu'tasim's *fath* (opening, conquest) of Amuriyya (Amorium) and al-Mutanabbi's *madīḥ* of Sayf al-Dawla, the above lines of al-Qaffal and of Ibn Hazm illustrate the central role played by "the sexual gender-based imagery," to borrow S. P. Stetkevych's expression in the description of Muslim military and political domination of the Byzantine Other⁶¹. Although there is no explicit reference to rape, as is the case with abu Tammam and others, the references to the sexual enjoyment of female Byzantine captives, can be seen as metaphors for the poets' final declaration and ultimate celebration of Muslim superiority over the Byzantine Other. As S. P. Stetkevych puts it "[T]he image of sexually defiled womanhood, however, varied in detail and powerfully achieved is the conventional means for expressing the ultimate (male) dishonor and degradation"⁶².

Last, but not least is the poets' use of the trope of the infidel Other as the "scourge of God" in their efforts to justify the Byzantine threat and to downplay the military, even temporary, superiority of the Other. If the Byzantines defeated the Muslims, it is neither because they are believers in the true faith nor because they are militarily superior, let alone invincible. Rather, they are used by God to alert Muslims to their neglect and transgression of Muslim values. Confirming Nicephorus's criticism of Muslim corruption, al-Qaffal replies:

59. AL-MUNAJJID, *Qasidat 'Imbratur al-Rum*, 46.

60. AL-MUNAJJID, *Qasidat 'Imbratur al-Rum*, 46.

61. S. P. STETKEVYCH, *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender, and Ceremony in the Classical Arabic Ode*, Bloomington 2002, 176.

62. STETKEVYCH, *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy*, 176.

You triumphed thanks to our leaders' misconduct.
 Indeed, that is exactly what you said,
 If so! That is a proof of the accuracy of our faith;
 For it is a law when we transgress,
 We are transgressed upon⁶³.

The recurrence of this theme made Ibn Hazm transfer his lampoon of the Byzantines not only to Kafur, but also and unexpectedly to the Hamdanids in spite of all their efforts in fighting the Byzantines: "With the Hamdanids and Kafur you triumphed/ Who were but ill-bred, impure and weak"⁶⁴. The Umayyad Ibn Hazm does not let the chance go by to attack his political opponents. It is clear that in his view, the Byzantine resurgence is a direct and severe punishment from God precisely because those who fight in his name are in essence usurpers, if not heretics.

Comparatively speaking, al-Qaffal's and Ibn Hazm's perception of the "Byzantine Peril" as a scourge inflicted by Allah on disobedient Muslims recalls the western medieval and early modern tradition of the "Infidel Saracen/Turk" as a Scourge of God and that of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century German anti-Turkish pamphlets known as the *Türkenbüchlein*⁶⁵. In short, as shown by John W. Bohnstedt, these German Lutheran and Catholic pamphleteers interpreted "[T]he Turkish peril as a scourge inflicted by God upon a sinful Christendom and many of them seem to have been more concerned with the sins of the Christians than with the Turkish danger *per se*"⁶⁶.

In sum, the three above mentioned poems, and to a lesser degree Abu Firas' texts, are characteristically violent in tone, if not indeed sadistic. This very violence, however, does capture well the nature of the historical and religious enmity between Islam and Byzantium during the Middle Ages.

63. AL-MUNAJJID, *Qasidat 'Imbratur al-Rum*, 30.

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65. It is interesting to note here that after the outburst of the Mongols and their invasions of Muslim and European countries in the thirteenth century, both Muslims and Europeans would consider them the ultimate "Scourge of God" ascribing to them all possible *topoi* of otherness. For example, in Muslim and western sources alike, they were depicted as unimaginably cruel, bloodthirsty, bestial, and as God's just punishment for their respective sins.

66. J. W. BOHNSTEDT, *The Infidel Scourge of God: The Turkish Menace as seen by German Pamphleteers of the Reformation Era*, Philadelphia 1968, 3.

Undoubtedly a modern reader in spite of the ongoing wars of the moment will be perplexed by the apparent enjoyment of violence in these works. Nevertheless, if one approaches the *Cursed Poem* in relation to al-Qaffal's and Ibn Hazm's responses within their historical context and literary form, one can better appreciate their content. It must be remembered also that what we consider nowadays useless violence was, as the poems suggest, based in examples of courage and heroism.

The texts studied here are reminiscent of classical epics east and west such as *Gilgamesh*, *the Iliad*, *the Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, *the Chansons de Geste*, the Arthurian romances and the popular *ḥamāsa* genre in the Arabic tradition such as *Sirat 'Antar*, as well as the poetry of Abu Tammam and al-Buhturi⁶⁷. The western epic and Arabic-Islamic *ḥamāsa* poems are founded upon the veneration of heroism, chivalry, courage and sacrifice for one's faith, country, friends, and lovers, etc.⁶⁸. Many of these qualities cannot be realized without invoking violence in some form. Certainly, the western epic, and to a lesser degree the Arabic-Islamic tradition of *ḥamāsa*, have also been often related to legendary battles and combats where the hero has had to fight gods, monsters, dragons, and the like. In my view, this is not the case with the poem attributed to Nicephorus and the responses of al-Qaffal and Ibn Hazm for the very reason that they were most often describing violence that was more or less historical. The players in this violence and the reciprocal-demonization of the Other, in spite of some instances of ruptures and negotiations, intensified with the coming of the Crusades and changed with time. Indeed, *al-Ifranja* would take the place of *al-Rūm* as the Other, interestingly, in the same manner that Turks had taken the place of Saracens in European literature with the rise of the Ottomans and the ensuing danger they represented for early modern Europe.

67. The reader is referred to the anthologies of *ḥamāsa* collected by Abu Tammam and al-Buhturi. *Ḥamāsa* in Reynold A. Nicholson's words, "denotes the virtues most highly prized by the Arabs—bravery in battle, patience in misfortune, persistence in revenge, protection of the weak and defiance of the strong" (R. A. NICHOLSON, *The Literary History of the Arabs*, Cambridge 1969, 79).

68. As mentioned above, there was no dearth of epics that mirrored the spirit of reconciliation that developed between Byzantines and Arabs especially after the Crusades. This is suggestive, for instance, of the Arabic epic-romances of 'Umar al-Nu'man and 'Antar and the Byzantine *Digenis Akritas*.

THE BYZANTINES IN MEDIEVAL ARABIC POETRY:
 ABU FIRAS' *AL-RUMIYYAT* AND THE POETIC RESPONSES OF AL-QAFFAL AND
 IBN HAZM TO NICEPHORUS PHOCAS' *AL-QASIDA AL-ARMINIYYA AL-MAL'UNA*
 (THE ARMENIAN CURSED ODE)

Up until the Crusades, it was *al-Rūm* who were universally seen by Arab writers and Arab poets in particular as the “Other” *par excellence*. Nowhere is this more conspicuous than in the sub-genre of *Al-Rumiyyat* (poems about the Byzantines), namely as found in *Al-Rumiyyat* of Abu Firas al-Hamdani (d. 968), and in the poetic responses of al-Qaffal (d. 946) and Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) to what was described by several medieval Muslim chronicles as *Al-Qasida al-Arminiyya al-Mal'una* (*The Armenian Cursed Ode*). By exploring the forgotten views of the Byzantines in medieval Arabic poetry, this article purports to demonstrate that contrary to the impression left after reading Edward Said's groundbreaking *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978) and other postcolonial studies, Orientals have not existed solely to be ‘orientalized’. Perhaps even before this came to be so, they too had “Occidentalized” their Euro-Christian Other(s) in a way that mirrored in reverse the subject/object relationship described as Orientalism.