

A Broken Tombstone With an Arabic Inscription

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IN 1964, the late Dr. Arieh Y. Klausner found a broken tombstone (Fig. 1) in a field close to Or ha-Ner in the northern Negev. It measured 30 cm. wide at the base, 39.5 cm. wide at the top, 43 cm. high on the left side and 34 cm. high on the right, and its thickness was 6.5 cm. It may be assumed that the stone was engraved in the fourth or fifth century A.H., but I do not feel competent to date it more precisely. The name of the deceased person does not appear in the five lines of the inscription; it may have appeared in one of the lines missing from the upper part of the stone. The following is my suggestion as to how the extant part of the inscription should be read:

1. [---] [رد اعجل القضا عليه]
2. والفوت فمحا محاسن و [جهه]
3. الموت فكان مولد [ه]
4. وماتمه صوت دعا
5. فاجابه صوت

'[—] ——— and fate and passing away came swiftly to him, and death effaced the charms [of his face.]



Fig. 1. The broken tombstone.

[Both] his birth and the mourning [for his death were heard as] a clamour.

He cried out, and was answered by a clamour.'

Early collections of Arabic poetry contain verses of similar content, expressing a gloomy view about the inescapable destiny of death. Some verses ascribed to Abū l- 'Atāhiya (d. 210 H.) with the *qāfiya* 'tu' convey the

* This article is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Arieh Klausner.

same idea and use the same rhyme — *fawt, mawt*.¹

اسمع فقد أذّنك الصوت: إن لم تبادر فهو الفوت
خذ كلّ ما شئت وعش آمنًا: آخر هذا كلّ الموت

‘Hearken, for the clamour has heralded [as follows]: “If you do not hurry, there will be a slipping away.

Take possession of everything you wish and live in safety. The end of all this is death.”’

Two verses of similar character are recorded in *Lisān al-‘Arab*:²

...والقصر الغاية: قاله ابو زيد وغيره وانشد:

عش ما بدا لك قصرك الموت: لا معقل منه ولا فوت
بيننا غنى بيتٍ وبهجته: زال الغنى وتقوض البيت

The two verses are recorded in the *‘Uyūn al-ākhbār* of Ibn Qutayba (d. 276 H.), with the variants ... لا مزحل عنه ... in the first verse, and are ascribed to al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (d. 176 H.).³ The other two verses quoted above from the *Dīwān* of Abū l-‘Atāhiya are ascribed by Ibn Qutayba to one of the *muḥdathūn* poets.⁴ Al-Jāhiz (d. 255 H.) quotes the four verses, ascribing the first two to al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad, and the other two to Abū l-‘Atāhiya.⁵

A different version of the verses ascribed to al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad is recorded by Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638 H.). The verses are said to have been recited by ‘Abdallah b. Ṭāhir (d. 230 H.) on his death bed:⁶

1 Abū l-‘Atāhiya: *Dīwān* (sharḥ), Beirut, Dār Ṣa‘b, n.d., p. 54; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī *Jawharat al-zamān fī tadkhīrat al-sulṭān*, MS. Chicago, Oriental Institute A 12049, I, p.86a:

إسمع قد أشغلك الصوت: بادر والّا فهو الفوت
أقصر عن اللهو ولذاته: فبعد هذا كلّ الموت

I would like to thank Prof. J. Sadan for this reference.

2 *Lisān al-‘Arab*: s.v. q.s.r., V, p. 97a. See also Mufaḍḍaliyyāt, ed. Lyall, p. 301, II, pp. 15–16 (Concordance of Early Arabic Poetry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem).

3 *Uyūn al-akhbār*, Cairo, 1346/1928, II, p. 304.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 306. With some variants in the second verse: بل كلّ ما شئت وعش ناعماً

Both pieces of poetry are recorded in Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (d. 463 H.): *Bahjat al-majālīs wa-unsu l-mujālīs*, ed. Muḥammad Mursī al-Khūlī and ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Qiṭṭ, Cairo, 1967, II, p. 342.

5 Al-Jāhiz: *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, ed. ‘Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, Beirut, n.d., III, p. 183.

6 Ibn ‘Arabī: *Muḥāḍarat al-Abrār*, Beirut, 1388/1968, I, p. 404. On ‘Abdallah b. Ṭāhir, see al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī: *Taṭīkh baghdād* Cairo-Baghdad, 1349/1931, IX, p. 488 inf.

بادر فقد أسمعك الصوت: إن لم تبادر فهو الفوت
من لم تزل نعمته قبله: أزال عنه النعمة الموت

Abū 'Ubaydallah al-Marzubānī (d. 384 H.) records in his *al-Muqtabas* the two verses ascribed to al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad by al-Jāhīz and Ibn Qutayba (*ish mā badā laka* or *kun kayfa shi'ra*); he adds, however, a third verse: *يا ليت شعري ما يراد بنا: ولعلما تعني إذا ليت*⁷

It is surprising to find these verses attributed to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib; they are said to have been recited before his death after conveying his will to his two sons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn.⁸

عش ما بدالك قصرك الموت: لا مرحل عنه ولا فوت
ساغني بيت وبهجته: زال الغنى وتقوض البيت
يا ليت شعري ما يراد بنا: ولعل ما تجدي لنا ليت

It is, however, even more unexpected to come across these verses in the biography of Muḥammad b. Ḥassān al-Samtī, a transmitter of the prophetic tradition, who died in 228 H.⁹ According to the report recorded by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī in his *Ta'rikh baghdād*, al-Samtī had a son, Aḥmad, of whom he was very fond.¹⁰ The son died and the father, Muḥammad al-Samtī, wrote the following dirge:

طامن حشاك فكلنا ميّت: وإذا ظفرت فقصرك الفوت
هيء لأحمد في الثري بيت: وخلا له من أمه بيت
فكان مولده و وفاته: صوت دعا فاجابه صوت
حكم الإله على بريته: أن الحياة قصاصها الموت

7 As quoted by al-Yaghmurī in his *Nūr al-qabas al-mukhtaṣar min al-muqtabas*, ed. R. Sellheim, Weisbaden, 1964, p. 64.

8 Nūr al-Dīn al-Haythamī: *Majma' al-zawā'id wa-manba' al-fawā'id*, Beirut, 1967, IX, p. 139.

9 See al-Sam'ānī: *Ansāb*, Hyderabad, 1396/1976, VII, p. 213, No. 2149; Ṣafīyyu l-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Abdallah al-Khazrajī: *Khulāṣat taḥdhīb taḥdhīb al-kamāl*, ed. Maḥmūd 'Abd al-Wahhāb Fāyīḍ, Cairo, 1391/1971, III, p. 392, No. 6138; Ibn Ḥajar: *Taḥdhīb al-taḥdhīb*, IX, p. 111, No. 151; Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī: *al-Jarḥ wa-l-ta'dīl*, Hyderabad, 1361, III, p. 238, No. 1306; al-Dhahabī: *Mīzān al-i'tidāl*, ed. 'Alī Muḥammad al-Bijāwī, Cairo, 1382/1963, III, p. 512, No. 7368.

10 Cairo-Baghdad, 1349/1931, II, pp. 274–275, No. 747.

The pieces of poetry quoted have in common a certain flow of ideas, expressions and features and are characterized by the fact that they consist of edifying verses, in which the vanity of life in this world and the need to prepare for the afterlife are stressed.

The text of the inscription on this tombstone is, however, most closely connected to the verses of Muḥammad b. Ḥassān al-Samī's *qit'a*:

فكان مولده ووفاته صوت: دعا فاجابه صوت

These verses correspond to Lines 3–5 of the tombstone:

فكان مولده وماتمه صوت: دعا فاجابه صوت

As this paper shows, the tombstone fits well into the tradition of Early Arabic poetry.