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. والموت فمحا محاسن و جهة
3. الموت فكان ولد[ه]
4. وسأله صوت دعا
5. فاجأه صوت

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

[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 Abu l-‘Atahiya (d. 210 H.) with the qāfiya ‘tu’ convey the

Fig. 1. The broken tombstone.

* This article is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Arieh Klausner.
same idea and use the same rhyme — *fawt, mawt.*

اسمع فقد أذنك الصوت: إن لم تبادر فهو الفوت

خذ كل ما شئت وعاش أمنًا: أخر هذا كله 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.*

... والقصر الغاية: قاله أبو زيد وغيره وانشده:

عش ما بدا لك قصرك الموت: لاعقل منه ولا فوت

بينا غنى بيت وهجته: زال الغنى وتقوض البيت

The two verses are recorded in the *‘Uyūn al-akhbār* of Ibn Qutayba (d. 276 H.), with the variants ... in the first verse, and are ascribed to al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (d. 176 H.). The other two verses quoted above from the *Diwān* of Abū l-Atāḥiya are ascribed by Ibn Qutayba to one of the *muḥdathūn* poets. 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-Atāḥiya.

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

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

1 Abū l-ʿAtāḥiya: Diwān (sharḥ), Beirut, Dār Ṣaʿb, n.d., p. 54; Sībīʿ Ibn al-Jawzī: Jawharat al-zaman fi ṭadhkirat al-sultān, MS. Chicago, Oriental Institute A 12049, I, p.86a:

إسمع قد أذنك الصوت: برار ولا فوت هو الفوت

أضر عين الهم ودانته: فبعد هذا كله الموت

2 *Lisān al-ʿArab:* s.v. q.s.r., V, p. 97a. See also Mufaddaliyyāt, 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 كل ما شئت وعاش ناعمًا


Abū 'Ubaydallah al-Marzubānī (d. 384 H.) records in his al-Muqtabas the two verses ascribed to al-Khalīl b. Ahmad by al-Jāhiz and Ibn Qutayba (qish mā badā laka or kun kayfa shī'ta); he adds, however, a third verse: 7

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

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

7 As quoted by al-Yaghrūnī in his Nūr al-qabas al-mukhtaṣar min al-muqtabas, ed. R. Sellheim, Weisbaden, 1964, p. 64.
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-Samṭī’s qit’ā:

\[
\text{فكان مولده ووفاته صوت: دعا فاجابه صوت}
\]

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

\[
\text{فكان مولده وماته صوت: دعا فاجابه صوت}
\]

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