The Greek Death of Imruʾ al-Qays

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It is commonly remarked, as a curiosity, that Imruʾ al-Qays's traditional death resembles that of Heracles, but it has never been meaningfully discussed. This article undertakes to do so, arguing for the Greek provenance of his death tradition and discussing the implications of the Islamic construction of a Greek death for "the greatest Arab poet." One implication involves his biography more generally, which is argued to have originally formed a different kind of narrative serving particular Islamic interests, later adapted to a biographic mold. The second stems from the recognition that the legendary Greek death of Imruʾ al-Qays is neither incidental nor isolated, which suggests that the horizons of Greco-Arabic studies are unduly narrow: alongside the transmission of written scientific texts, there were also oral popular traditions of Greek origin that left a deep imprint on Islamic culture.

Banished from Arabia, Imruʾ al-Qays made his way to the court of Caesar in Byzantium in the hope of raising an army that would allow him to fully avenge his father's regicide. Caesar granted his wish but later sent him a messenger carrying a poisoned robe, having learned, according to some sources, that the Arab poet-prince seduced his daughter and composed poetry about their affair. The poisoned robe consumed his skin and Imruʾ al-Qays died an agonizing death far from home. The historian Abū l-Fidāʾ (d. 732/1331) appears to be the first, some eight centuries after the poet's traditional death, to doubt the account: "This, to my mind," he wrote, "is a fable (*khurāfa*)."[1]

The tale should not be taken any less seriously for that.[2] If a pre-Islamic poet's traditional biography is not historical, neither is it arbitrary. Rather, it is intimately related to the poet's oeuvre, and serves as a form of commentary (*sharḥ*) on it. The authority of the biographical tradition, as in the case of hadith, depends not on its authenticity but on its currency.[3] It is

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1. Abū l-Fidāʾ, *al-Mukhtaṣar fī akhbār al-bashar*, ed. M. ʿAzab and Y. Ḥusayn, 4 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1998–1999), 1: 99.

2. Not least because the Prophet declared the man called Khurāfa and the fables associated with him to be truthful. E.g., Abū Naṣr al-Jawharī, *Kitāb al-Ṣiḥāḥ tāj al-lugha wa-ṣiḥāḥ al-ʿarabiyya*, ed. I. B. Yaʿqūb and M. N. Ṭarīfī, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1999), 4: 48.

3. S. P. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993), passim, esp. 54, 93, 123–24, 241, and for Imruʾ al-Qays, ch. 7. Some of Stetkevych's particular interpretations are up for discussion, but they have little bearing on the broader claim that a pre-Islamic poet's oeuvre and biography cannot be seen as two separate entities. In this, pre-Islamic poetry is not unique. Cf., for instance, the case of Homer in B. Graziosi, *Inventing Homer: The Early Reception of Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), and other early Greek poets in G. Nagy, *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1990). I use the term "biography" to simply mean a story centered on the life of one individual, narrating its course from birth to death (cf. A. Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography*, expanded ed. [Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993], 11), and will expound on the applicability of this concept in the early Islamic context below.

thus all the more striking to find in "a largely Islamic literary form"[4] a Greek death tradition attributed to "the greatest Arab poet" (*ashʿar al-shuʿarāʾ*).[5]

Long before Imruʾ al-Qays, a secretly poisoned robe had brought about the death of Heracles, the hero of Greek mythology. This has been noted by scholars, but only in passing as a curiosity.[6] It has never been meaningfully discussed.[7] It is the purpose of this paper to do so. I first present the sources for Imruʾ al-Qays's biography and discuss their form. I then focus on the traditions of his death, making the case that they are of Greek origin, and conclude by discussing the significance of Imruʾ al-Qays dying a Greek death.

I. IMRUʾ AL-QAYS'S BIOGRAPHY: SOURCES AND FORM

There are a number of sources for reconstructing the early Islamic biographical traditions of Imruʾ al-Qays, believed to have died around 540 CE.[8] There are texts whose explicit aim is to recount his life; there are works of other authors, in poetry and prose, that make mention of biographical details incidentally; and there is the poet's diwan, which is a more complicated source.

The most important written accounts of the poet's life are found in *al-Shiʿr wa-l-shuʿarāʾ* of Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), which features the two earliest biographies of Imruʾ al-Qays, and in *Kitāb al-Aghānī* of Abū Faraj al-Iṣbahānī (d. 356/967), which contains the most detailed and comprehensive biography.[9] The narrative in two of the three begins with Imruʾ al-Qays's grandfather, al-Ḥārith, who inherited the kingdom of Kinda from his father and grandfather before him.[10] He was installed by the Sasanian emperor Qubādh (Kavadh I) as king "over the Arabs" in place of the Lakhmid client-king Mundhir b. Māʾ al-Samāʾ, ousted because he refused to cooperate in promoting Mazdakism. When Qubādh's son Anūshirwān (Khosrow I) came to power, he had Mazdak executed and Mundhir reinstated. Al-Ḥārith, whose sons had been appointed to rule a number of Arab tribes in order to prevent internal strife, fled and was killed. One of al-Ḥārith's sons and the father of Imruʾ al-Qays, Ḥujr,

4. Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 124.

5. E.g., Muḥammad b. Sallām al-Jumaḥī, *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shuʿarāʾ*, ed. M. M. Shākir, 2 vols. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Madanī, 1974), 1: 52–54; Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-Shiʿr wa-l-shuʿarāʾ*, ed. A. M. Shākir, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1966), 1: 37. By calling the death tradition "Greek," I do not mean that it was necessarily taken over from Greeks or even from a Greek-language version of the tradition, but rather that the origin of the tradition was Greek and that it had attained such status as it had in late antiquity by virtue of that origin.

6. E.g., R. A. Nicholson (*A Literary History of the Arabs* [Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1941], 104) confuses Nessus with Heracles; A. J. Arberry (*The Seven Odes: The First Chapter in Arabic Literature* [London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1957], 38) describes the Arab tradition as "strangely reminiscent" of the Greek. See J. E. Montgomery, "The Empty Ḥijāz," in *Arabic Theology, Arabic Philosophy: From the Many to the One. Essays in Celebration of Richard M. Frank,* ed. idem (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 37–97, at 66.

7. The one exception to this is S. al-Ghānimī, *al-Kanz wa-l-taʾwīl: Qirāʾāt fī l-ḥikāya al-ʿarabiyya* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 1994), but his discussion is of an entirely different nature. He is not interested in the history of the tradition, and though he sees Imruʾ al-Qays as an Arab Oedipus, he categorically denies any connection between the Arab and Greek traditions.

8. See I. Shahīd, "The Last Days of Imruʾ al-Qays: Anatolia," in *Tradition and Modernity in Arabic Literature*, ed. I. J. Boullata and T. DeYoung (Fayetteville: Arkansas Univ. Press, 1997), 207–22, for a modern attempt to reconstruct the events leading up to his death, including the intriguing suggestion of a correlation between Imruʾ al-Qays's ulcers and the bubonic plague of Justinian. See Montgomery, "Empty Ḥijāz," 61–62 nn. 75 and 79 for criticism of Shahīd.

9. Other early written accounts will be treated below. Later written accounts, relying on al-Iṣbahānī, preserve no earlier unattested traditions.

10. The narrative of the second Ibn Qutayba tradition and that of al-Iṣbahānī begin with al-Ḥārith; the first Ibn Qutayba tradition begins with Ḥujr, Imruʾ al-Qays's father.

was murdered by the rebelling tribe of Asad. Upon receiving the news, Imruʾ al-Qays, who had previously been exiled by his father for composing poetry, swore to exact extravagant revenge. His eventful quest for revenge led him to Byzantium and to Caesar's court.

The accounts found in *al-Shiʿr wa-l-shuʿarāʾ* and *al-Aghānī* were composed on the basis of oral traditions as well as written sources.[11] Ibn Qutayba occasionally mentions Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 204/809) as a source, for instance, but makes no effort to consistently identify his informants. Much more systematic is al-Iṣbahānī, on the basis of whose account a number of traditions can be reconstructed. Two can be tentatively traced to the first/seventh century: one to Haytham b. ʿAdī al-Ṭāʾī (d. 207/822) of Kufa, who transmits a tradition narrated at least in part by Ḥammād al-Rāwiya (d. 155/772) through Saʿya b. ʿArīḍ, a relative of Samawʾal b. ʿĀdiyāʾ, the well-known contemporary of Imruʾ al-Qays,[12] and the other to another relative of Samawʾal, Dārim b. ʿIqāl b. Ḥabīb (Ḥabīb was Samawʾal's great grandson).[13] Dārim received it from his elders and it came to al-Iṣbahānī's knowledge through Ibn Abī Saʿd (Mudrik b. Saʿd al-Fazārī of Damascus, d. 227/842), whose ancestors were implicated in it as well. Al-Iṣbahānī was skeptical of at least parts of it, accusing Dārim or his transmitters of fabricating the poetry attributed by them to Imruʾ al-Qays.[14] A third tradition, narrated by Ibn al-Sikkīt (d. 244/858), to which al-Iṣbahānī apparently had independent access as well, can perhaps be traced back even earlier than the first/seventh century—to Khālid al-Kilābī, possibly the father of Samʿān, a Companion of the Prophet. Finally, the most complete version of Imruʾ al-Qays's biography goes back to Ibn al-Kalbī in the second/eighth century, reaching al-Iṣbahānī via multiple channels.[15] Hishām b. Muḥammad b. al-Sāʾib al-Kalbī, who lived in Kufa and Baghdad, drew on his father, the controversial Kufan scholar (d. 146/763), among whose sources was the son of an Asadī diviner (*kāhin*).[16] Other sources are mentioned by al-Iṣbahānī, such as ʿUmar b. Shabba (d. 262/878), as well as notes of al-Iṣbahānī's grandfather relating a tradition going back through Abū ʿUbayda (d. 209/824) to Sībawayhi (d. ca. 180/796) and al-Khalīl (d. between 160 and 175/776 and 791)—but their role is lim-

11. Cf. C. J. Lyall, *The Dīwāns of ʿAbīd ibn al-Abraṣ, of Asad, and ʿĀmir ibn aṭ-Ṭufail, of ʿĀmir ibn Ṣaʿṣaʿah* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980 [orig. publ. 1913]), 1–4; G. Olinder, *The Kings of Kinda of the Family of Ākil al-Murār* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1927), ch. 2, though they are only incidentally concerned with the biography of Imruʾ al-Qays. See also M. Fleischhammer, *Die Quellen des* Kitāb al-Aġānī (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), using the schematic breakdown on pp. 174–75 as a starting point.

12. On Haytham and the traditions attributed to him, see S. Leder, *Das Korpus al-Haiṯam ibn ʿAdī (st. 207/822): Herkunft, Überlieferung, Gestalt früher Texte der aḫbār Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1991). For Saʿya, see F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, 9 vols. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967–1984), 2: 250–51. Intermediate between Ḥammād and Saʿya is Saʿīd b. ʿAmr b. Saʿīd, who appears to be a figure of the late first century and early second century AH. His father, ʿAmr b. Saʿīd, was murdered in 70/690, while his son Isḥāq died in 176/792. It would seem most reasonable to understand al-Iṣbahānī's reference to the tradition (*Kitāb al-Aghānī*, ed. ʿA. A. Muhannā, 27 vols. in 15 [Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2008], 9: 79) as signifying that he had access to it as a written source. Cf. Fleischhammer, *Quellen*, 117. On al-Iṣbahānī's sources generally, see H. Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs: Compilation and the Author's Craft in Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī's* Kitāb al-aghānī (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 10–11; F. Sezgin, "Maṣādir kitāb al-aghānī li-Abī l-faraj al-Iṣfahānī," in *Muḥāḍarāt fī taʾrīkh al-ʿulūm al-ʿarabiyya wa-l-islāmiyya*, ed. idem (Frankfurt: Institut für Geschichte der arabisch-islamischen Wissenschaften, 1984); and the exhaustive Fleischhammer, *Quellen*.

13. E.g., Ibn ʿAsākir, *Taʾrīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. ʿA. Shīrī, 80 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995), 3: 456. Samawʾal's encounter with Imruʾ al-Qays is well attested in other sources, e.g. Ibn Qutayba, *al-Shiʿr wa-l-shuʿarāʾ*, 46.

14. Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 9: 97.

15. Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 9: 78–79. Elsewhere (12: 34, 21: 20) al-Iṣbahānī is highly critical and suspicious of Ibn al-Kalbī; see Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 106, 112–13) but here, interestingly, he appears to treat his traditions as no less credible than the others. See also Lyall, *Dīwāns*, 4.

16. Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī,* 9: 88.

ited. Noteworthy for his absence in *al-Aghānī* is al-Farazdaq (d. 110/728), reputed to have been Imruʾ al-Qays's "best transmitter" (*arwā rāwiya*).[17]

Many of these traditions appear in Ibn Qutayba and al-Iṣbahānī in prosimetric form, i.e., as prose narratives punctuated by verse citations that variously demonstrate, illustrate, substantiate, or develop the preceding prose passages. In this they are related to the genre of the diwan, in which poems are not infrequently accompanied by prefaces that purport to situate the context of their composition within the poet's biography.[18] In addition to such prefaces, Imruʾ al-Qays's diwan also furnishes us with his poetry, which is frequently in the first person, lending itself to biographical reading.[19] Questions of the veracity and authenticity of the poems and their respective traditions are for the purposes of this article immaterial—what matters is only their role in shaping his biographical tradition. The earliest recension is that of al-Aṣmaʿī (d. 213/828),[20] who spent most of his life in Basra and relied primarily on Ḥammād al-Rāwiya, who worked in Damascus and Kufa, and Abū ʿAmr b. al-ʿAlāʾ (d. ca. 154/770) of Basra, in addition to fieldwork he carried out independently among the Bedouin.[21] Another early recension is that of al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī (d. ca. 164/781).[22] There

17. Ibn Qutayba, *al-Shiʿr wa-l-shuʿarāʾ*, 48; Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, ed. A. Amīn et al., 8 vols. (Cairo: Lajnat al-Taʾlīf wa-l-Tarjama, 1940), 8: 109. Cf. Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 399 n. 85. One tradition transmitted by al-Farazdaq is related to some of the traditions compiled by Ibn Qutayba, who has preserved it although it is not integrated into the chronological outline he presents. It reached Ibn Qutayba via the Basran Muḥammad b. Sallām al-Jumaḥī (d. 231/845), though apparently not by way of his *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shuʿarāʾ*; he in turn received it from a transmitter (*rāwiya*) of al-Farazdaq, perhaps Abū Shafqal (Ibn Qutayba, *al-Shiʿr wa-l-shuʿarāʾ*, 48). More interesting, however, is its preservation by the shadowy figure of Abū Zayd al-Qurashī in his *Jamharat ashʿār al-ʿarab*, which appears to have been composed near the end of the third/ninth century or perhaps the middle of the fourth/tenth; compare "Abū Zayd al-Ḳurashī" (Ch. Pellat), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (hereafter, *EI2*) (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2004), vol. 12; "Abū Zayd al-Qurashī" (R. Weiphert), *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 3rd ed. It features an artfully wrought narrative of the poet's exile by his father, which is similar in gist to other equivalent traditions but in its detail is completely foreign. It is transmitted from al-Farazdaq ("and others") through Ibn Daʾb (d. 171/787) of Medina, whose provenance seems pertinent since the other traditions appear to have migrated at an early stage to Mesopotamia; through Ibn Daʾb, al-Qurashī perhaps preserved an alternate, thoroughly Arabian tradition (al-Qurashī, *Jamharat ashʿār al-ʿarab* [Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1963], 89–91). Al-Farazdaq himself, who was originally from Yamāma in eastern Arabia but spent most of his career in Basra before fleeing to Medina, is said to have heard the tradition from his grandfather, whose niece was the famous Fāṭima of Imruʾ al-Qays's *Muʿallaqa*. Incredible as this may sound, it is rather adroitly tied to unrelated strands of his biography.

18. On this, see R. Blachère, *Histoire de la littérature arabe des origines à la fin du XVe siècle de J.-C.*, 2 vols. (Paris: A. Maisonneuve, 1952), 1: 114–15.

19. On the recensions of his diwan, see also A. Arazi, *La réalité et la fiction dans la poésie arabe ancienne* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1989), 32–45. Diwans of other poets also occasionally refer to details of Imruʾ al-Qays's biography, in their poetry but more frequently in the prefaces to their poems; see, e.g., ʿAbīd b. al-Abraṣ, on whom Lyall, *Dīwāns*, 4–8.

20. Al-Aṣmaʿī's recension is best preserved in the edition of al-Shantamarī (d. 476/1083), for which Ibn Khayr al-Ishbīlī (d. 575/1179) provides a redoubtable chain of authority (*isnād*) going back to al-Qālī (d. 356/967), Ibn Durayd (d. 321/933), Abū Ḥātim al-Sijistānī (d. 255/869), and, finally, al-Aṣmaʿī himself. For the *isnād*, see Ibn Khayr al-Ishbīlī, *Fahrasat mā rawāhu ʿan shuyūkhihi*, ed. F. Codera and R. Tarrago (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Tijārī, 1963), 389; for an assessment of it as highly reliable, see M. Ibrāhīm, *Dīwān Imriʾ al-Qays*, 5th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 2009), 9–10 (on pp. 8–18 is also a full description of the manuscripts and their relationships to the different recensions).

21. For profiles of these figures and their activities see Arberry, *Seven Odes*, 41–48. Ḥammād was notoriously unreliable but, as said, that is not important for our purposes. For his unreliability, see ibid., 16–21; for questions about Abū ʿAmr b. al-ʿAlāʾ's reliability, 42–43.

22. His recension is best preserved through the transmission of Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Sinān al-Ṭūsī, the direct student of the Kufan Ibn al-Aʿrābī (d. 231/845), who was al-Mufaḍḍal's stepson. We do not know, however, who prepared the edition in which this recension is found. For a detailed account of the edition, see Ibrāhīm, *Dīwān Imriʾ al-Qays*, 11–13.

are a number of important traditions appended to poems not found in either of the above in the recension of al-Sukkarī (d. 275/888), whose edition, according to Ibn al-Nadīm, was based on the traditions of al-Aṣmaʿī, Abū ʿAmr al-Shaybānī (d. 210/825), Khālid b. Kulthūm, and Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb (d. 245/860),[23] preserved in a manuscript tradition going back to 383/993.[24]

The outline of Imruʾ al-Qays's biography is generally clear, but some details are murky: who, for instance, was Hind, alternately identified as Imruʾ al-Qays's wife, daughter, and sister? What exactly was the role in Ḥujr's death of ʿIlbāʾ, who is variously described as executing the killing, instigating it, and serving as an accomplice to it? It is indicative of the instability and fluidity of the tradition that, as late as the third/ninth century, in one biography Imruʾ al-Qays's paternal grandfather is named al-Ḥārith, and in another ʿAmr. These discrepancies, however, should most productively be seen not as the failure of oral transmission—signifying that already in early Islam the pre-Islamic past was lost—but rather that it was very much alive, and that the stakes were high: if poetry was the "archive of the Arabs" (*dīwān al-ʿarab*) and Imruʾ al-Qays was "the greatest of poets," clearly his own diwan was of great importance. By extension, so was his biography, his *akhbār*, which while serving as a commentary on his poetry also narrated the story of the last member of the predominant Arabian dynasty in the century before Islam. We should thus see the divergent traditions as traces of the pre-Islamic and early Islamic enterprise of molding his biography. Instructive in this regard are the traditions that were not integrated into standard versions of his biography but were otherwise preserved, such as the story of the failed negotiations with representatives of Asad.[25]

The Form of Imruʾ al-Qays's Biographical Sources

We must then see these traditions as compositions. As such, there are two perspectives from which to examine them: as wholes, in the form of the broad narrative traced by Ibn Qutayba and al-Iṣbahānī, and as parts, i.e., the individual traditions that were synthesized to form the whole. The two cannot be considered in isolation, for the composite tradition is made up of the many while the many must be read in contrast with one another, in competition to be included in the whole. The form of the composite tradition will be considered first, then that of the individual traditions, and lastly the traditions of Imruʾ al-Qays's death.

From a narratological point of view, the structure of the composite tradition is best seen as tripartite. It starts with Imruʾ al-Qays's ancestors. The death of his father serves to introduce Imruʾ al-Qays and determines, with the legacy of his grandfather, the trajectory of his life. The middle part of his biography, by virtue of which he comes to be called the Wandering King (*al-malik al-ḍillīl*), narrates the course of his journeys throughout Arabia. At last his past drives him out of Arabia, his wandering brought to its narrative peak, and in Byzantium he earns the title The Man of Ulcers (*dhū l-qurūḥ*) and dies.

23. Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. G. Flügel, 2 vols. in 1 (Leipzig: F.C.W. Vogel, 1871), 1: 157. Ibn al-Nadīm writes only "Abū ʿAmr," but the beginning of the entry above reads: "Abū ʿAmr al-Shaybānī." This also makes chronological sense.

24. Ibrāhīm, *Dīwān Imriʾ al-Qays*, 13–14. See there as well for other later medieval editions, which are not of great importance for our purposes.

25. Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī,* 9: 122–24. Cf. al-Iṣbahānī's treatment of separate traditions in the entry on Qays b. Dharīḥ, in H. Kilpatrick, "*Aḫbār manẓūma*: The Romance of Qays and Lubnā in the Aġānī," in *Festschrift Ewald Wagner zum 65. Geburtstag*, vol. 2: *Studien zur arabischen Dichtung*, ed. W. Heinrichs and G. Schoeler, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1994), 350–61, at 356–57 (the traditions that were not integrated into Imruʾ al-Qays's biography are referred to on p. 358 n. 14).

While this structure makes narrative sense, it does not make much sense as biography. Certainly, the early Islamic concept of biography could well have been different than that found, for example, in the modern Western literary tradition, but in Ibn Qutayba and al-Iṣbahānī the composite traditions are clearly presented as chronological accounts of Imruʾ al-Qays's life.[26] As such, it is surprising that they begin not with his birth or even with a cursory mention of his ancestors, but rather with a strikingly long account of their exploits.[27] The narrative importance of the beginnings, even if we see their historical determinism as the functional equivalent of the psychological determinism of the protagonist's childhood in the modern Western biography, does not account for their disproportionate detail. What purpose, for example, did it serve to narrate the scene in which Mundhir begs Mazdak not to have sex with the former's mother? That it is an excellent story is not a sufficient explanation.[28] We cannot know the structure of the individual traditions about his ancestors, even whether they were in fact traditions concerned with Imruʾ al-Qays or a group of disparate traditions later aggregated, but it appears that already Saʿya, as well as numerous others, took an interest in the exploits of al-Ḥārith and Ḥujr. We also do not know at which point Imruʾ al-Qays's biography assumed this form, but at a certain time these traditions clearly came to form an integral, coherent narrative, surely before Ibn Qutayba in the third/ninth century. This suggests that these traditions did not originally form a biography, a story whose chief purpose was to paint a picture of the life of an individual, but a different kind of narrative.

A similar question emerges when we consider that while there is a great deal of poetry, indeed his poetry, in this life of a poet, there is little about his poetry or about his life as a poet. This is not typical of entries devoted to poets in *al-Aghānī*.[29] There are accounts of the reception of Imruʾ al-Qays's poetry in Ibn Qutayba's entry, but they are unconcerned with his biography. It is thus interesting that Imruʾ al-Qays's poetry is thematized rather than cited in two parts of his story: his childhood and his death. Both will be considered in greater detail below, but it should first be noted that his childhood, at least, does not fit the narrative elegantly. It seems quite clear that it does not belong to the basic structure of the narrative, which hinges on the transition from Ḥujr to his son and the assumption of the blood vengeance burden; the accounts of their earlier relationship, as much as they may add to the narrative,[30] require an awkward chronological regression. To what extent then is this the biography of a poet? What exactly is the role of poetry in these traditions?

When the individual traditions that together form the composite tradition are studied, more such questions arise. Haytham's tradition, for example, as it is presented in al-Iṣbahānī,

26. They thus correspond to the general notion of biography set out in n. 3 above. The particular problems involved in delineating the generic boundaries of Arabic biography are therefore not important for our purposes. See M. Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Maʾmūn* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), ch. 1, for the development of Arabic biography, specifically pp. 9–11 for poets' biographies; J. Bray, "Literary Approaches to Medieval and Early Modern Arabic Biography," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 20,3 (2010): 237–53, for a recent survey of work on medieval Arabic biography and a call to recognize its generic uniqueness.

27. Cf. Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 183.

28. Compare, for instance, the polished dinner party anecdote, al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 9: 101–3, which did not make it into the integrated biography. More on the methodological basis of this argument below.

29. Cf. Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 185–95. It is not that there is no room for poetry in accounts (*akhbār*), even those of poets, as an event, as a *khabar*: the poetry of ʿAbīd al-Abraṣ, for instance, is highly effective in swaying Ḥujr's judgment, indeed in bringing about his demise. It is in fact quite striking that poetic criticism is entirely absent from al-Iṣbahānī's entry on "the greatest poet" of the Arabs. On poetic criticism in *al-Aghānī*, see ibid., 81–85.

30. See Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 246, on oedipal antagonism.

began with al-Ḥārith and Ḥujr and related Imruʾ al-Qays's whereabouts at the time of his father's murder; it included some of his adventures in pursuit of blood vengeance and concluded with him rejecting the oracle of Dhū l-Khalaṣa, vanquishing Asad and fleeing to Ṭayyiʾ. Ending with the obliteration of Asad, it appears to have been a narrative of triumph. This would be fascinating, except that when we consider that the tradition does not form a continuous narrative, neglecting, for instance, Imruʾ al-Qays's assuming responsibility for the blood vengeance, we realize that what we have in fact is not a story, but rather stories, or anecdotes. While there are limits to al-Iṣbahānī's methodological care and one can imagine that there are points where his attempt to tell the story gets in the way of his diligence in identifying his sources, this can only account for some of the curious gaps in the traditions. There are puzzling superfluities as well: what do all these stories about Hind, whoever she (or they) may be, contribute? Why the story about the wild cow that Imruʾ al-Qays and his Fazārī guide meet on the way to Samawʾal? And why, when Ibn Qutayba's narratives are structured by such elegant ring composition, do the narrators persist in ending Imruʾ al-Qays's tale with the odd detail concerning the grave of the princess that he notices and by whose untold story he is struck?

The reason for Haytham's lacunose narrative, I suggest, is that he is transmitting from Saʿya, who was a poet, and from Ḥammād, who is interested in transmitting verse, not biography, which is merely the accompaniment of verse. Similarly, the wild cow is inserted into the narrative, as is the anonymous princess, because they accompany verse. The fact that both contributed very little to the narrative, were even detrimental to it—and this is striking in light of the great artistry and careful structure found in some of the anecdotes—was evidently irrelevant in the cultural context in which these traditions were valued.[31] The primacy of verse was so strong that even al-Iṣbahānī, who went to great lengths to synthesize the traditions and present a streamlined narrative, felt compelled to include such superfluous details.[32] Notably, this is true even for the al-Kalbī tradition, transmitted by figures whose interests were certainly not exclusively poetic. Father and son may have been more interested in history than poetry, but verse still appears indispensable to their enterprise; if it is not the raison d'être of their tradition, it seems that where the narrative can be supported with verse, it is, and also that verse was typically interpreted as biography.

Verse thus provides a key to the construction of these biographies. Scholarship envisions two ways in which accounts of poets' lives were constructed: either as arising from the poetry attributed to the poet, whose life is reconstructed on its basis as in the exegetical tradition (*tafsīr*), specifically circumstances of quranic revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), or as the merging of a body of poetry with separate, pre-existing biographical traditions.[33] The two do

31. The relationship between prose and poetry in third/ninth-century reports concerned with contemporary poets was, in contrast, very different. See those composed by proponents of *muḥdath* poetry surveyed in B. Gruendler, "Verse and Taxes: The Function of Poetry in Selected Literary *Akhbār* of the Third/Ninth Century," in *On Fiction and* Adab *in Medieval Arabic Literature*, ed. P. F. Kennedy (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 85–124. For an indication of the exceptional care al-Iṣbahānī took in composing the entry on Imruʾ al-Qays, see Kilpatrick, "*Aḫbār manẓūma*."

32. For his reliance on verse as a historical source, see Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs*, 115–16. This is all the more remarkable in light of his critical approach to transmitted poetry, as with the poem from Dārim (9: 97), and see more generally Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs*, ch. 4.

33. The former is emphasized by Montgomery, "Empty Ḥijāz," 67, the latter by Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, e.g., 157. The same was true, incidentally, in ancient Greece (A. Rotstein, "The Ancient Literary History of *Iambos*," in *Iambus and Elegy: New Approaches*, ed. L. Swift and C. Carey [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016], 101–21, at 102: "biographical interpretation of poetry was the rule . . . [and] also a tool for the explanation of texts"). M. Kivilo, *Early Greek Poets' Lives: The Shaping of the Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2010) argues that in

not exclude each other, yet the second option raises the possibility that these traditions are not ultimately derived from poetry. Indeed, not all elements of Imruʾ al-Qays's biography are underpinned by poetic citations.

Where then do such traditions come from? An assumption that underlies even recent scholarship, which reads Imruʾ al-Qays's poetry not very differently from the biographical form of interpretation employed in early Islam, is that their origin is historical.[34] But we should be skeptical of the historical basis of prose traditions accompanied by poetry: we have already seen that the biographical traditions privileged poetry over history, and at least some members of early Islamic communities already in the second/eighth century were well aware that much of this poetry was not authentic.[35] As for those traditions that are not of a poetic origin, it seems we should be wary of reading them as historical too, for reasons that should already be apparent: the chains of authority are weak, the interests of the parties involved in their transmission are not hard to detect, and the distinct patterns traced by the traditions betray processes of structuring.[36] Still, such traditions do not come out of nowhere. With the question of their origin in mind, we now proceed to examine the traditions of Imruʾ al-Qays's death in greater detail.

II. IMRUʾ AL-QAYS'S DEATH

There is no alternate tradition regarding Imruʾ al-Qays's journey to Byzantium, evidence for which can be found in other pre-Islamic poetry as well.[37] There is clear reference to it in the context of revenge against Asad in his *rāʾiyya* (no. 4) which appears in both second/eighth-century recensions:

بكى صاحبي لما رأى الدرب دونه وأيقن أنا لاحقان بقيصرا

فقلت له لا تبك عينك انما نحاول ملكا او نموت فنعذرا

My friend wept when he saw Darb[38] before him
and knew we were on our way to Caesar.
I said to him: Let not your eye weep,
we will try to attain kingship or we will die and receive reprieve (4.34–35).

In another poem (no. 46), attributed to al-Mufaḍḍal's recension, Imruʾ al-Qays's death is imminent and is explicitly connected with Byzantium:

ancient Greece local traditions were an important source for constructing poets' biographies alongside their poems. For the parallel relation of prose narrative underpinned by verse citation in biographies of Greek poets, see some references in B. Gentili and G. Cerri, *History and Biography in Ancient Thought* (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1988), 72–73, and in oral Turkic epic tradition, see A. Chodzko, *Specimens of the Popular Poetry of Persia, as Found in the Adventures and Improvisations of Kurroglou, the Bandit-Mistrel of Northern Persia; and in the Songs of the People Inhabiting the Shores of the Caspian Sea* (London, 1842), 12–13, as quoted in K. Reichl, "The Mixture of Verse and Prose in Turkic Oral Epic Poetry," in *Prosimetrum: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse*, ed. J. Harris and idem (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 321–48, at 321–22.

34. E.g., al-T. A. Makki, "Imruʾ al-Qays," in *Arabic Literary Culture, 500–925*, ed. M. Cooperson and Sh. Toorawa (Detroit: Gale, 2005), 212–24; Shahīd, "Last Days."

35. E.g., Arberry, *Seven Odes*, 20–21.

36. On structuring, see J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 167–73.

37. E.g., poem no. 4 in ʿAbīd's diwan, see Lyall, *Dīwāns*, 24–25.

38. Derbe, near the Cilician Gates. Translations are mine. Poem numbers are according to the edition of Ibrāhīm, *Dīwān Imriʾ al-Qays*.

ولكن هلكت بأرض قوم بعيد من دياركم بعيدا
أعالج ملك قيصر كل يوم وأجدر بالمنية أن تعودا
بأرض الروم لا نسيب قريب . . .

I die in the land of a far away people,
far from your land.
I tend the domain of Caesar daily,
and it is fully appropriate that the fate of death befall me
In the land of the Rūm with no near relative
. . . (46.4–6)[39]

At the end of the *sīniyya* (no. 13), which appears in both recensions, we encounter the figure of al-Ṭammāḥ, variously involved in the poet's murder in the different traditions. This passage associates the poet's death with illness and, interestingly, clothes:

وما خفت تبريح الحياة كما أرى تضيق ذراعي أن أقوم فألبسا
. . . وبدلت قرحا داميا بعد صحة . . .
لقد طمح الطماح من بعد أرضه ليلبسني من دائه ما تلبسا

I did not fear life's parting as I recognized
my inability to rise and dress.
. . . I was turned into a blood-infested ulcer after health
. . .
Al-Ṭammāh desired from his distant land
to dress me in the sickness that he wore. (13.10–13)

In al-Sukkarī's third/ninth-century edition, poem no. 80 speaks of ulcers, associating them with clothing ("the ulcers put me in a coat," 80.3), and no. 94 also features clothing in what appears to be the context of death, as well as providing the location of Anqira.[40]

Of these, the lines from poem no. 13 cited above feature prominently in the death traditions reported by Ibn al-Kalbī and Ibn Qutayba, in relation to Imruʾ al-Qays's ulcerous death and the involvement of al-Ṭammāḥ. One can certainly see how these lines would give rise to the central role that is assigned to al-Ṭammāḥ in the story of Imruʾ al-Qays's death.[41] The second biography of Ibn Qutayba cites poem no. 54.8–9, which appears in a forged appendix to al-Ṭūsī but was evidently current in the third/ninth century. There the poet speaks of drinking with Caesar, a recurrent topos, but it appears to be written in retrospect, as if Imruʾ al-Qays had survived the journey to Byzantium, perhaps even escaping Caesar's messenger. In relation to the site of his death, no. 94 is conveniently cited by Ibn al-Kalbī and in both of Ibn Qutayba's biographies.

39. Poem no. 11 is concerned with the poet's death too, but there are no such concrete details (save the mention of his father and grandfather) and, perhaps tellingly, none of the prose traditions cite it. We might in addition also mention poem no. 60.26, which appears in a forged appendix to al-Ṭūsī's recension as well as in the very late edition of Abū Sahl, equating Caesar with the Persian Ibn Hurmuz; poem no. 66, only in the forged appendix, speaks of ruling through Rūm (Byzantium) and Ghassān.

40. Traditionally understood as modern Ankara; Montgomery ("Empty Ḥijāz," 61 n. 77) is skeptical. For discussion of the curious story of the famously philhellenic caliph al-Maʾmūn, who reported seeing a statue erected in honor of the poet there, see Shahīd, "Last Days," 212–13; Montgomery, "Empty Ḥijāz," 60–61.

41. On the basis of the paronomasia employed by the poet (*ṭammaḥa al-ṭammāḥu*, 13.13), one might suspect that what was construed as a proper noun was originally not a name. See also Montgomery, "Empty Ḥijāz," 66 n. 92.

Alongside these relatively straightforward citations there are others that are convenient, perhaps suggestive, but cannot fully account for the prose traditions associated with them. In regard to an encounter between Imruʾ al-Qays and the uncircumcised Caesar in the public bath (*ḥammām*), the first biography of Ibn Qutayba cites poem no. 67, which appears in the forged appendix but also in al-Sukkarī, containing no mention of a bath or of Caesar. It can be understandably related to that encounter, but as with poem no. 97, cited by Ibn al-Kalbī and Ibn Qutayba in relation to the grave of the anonymous princess,[42] it is difficult to see how these opaque poems could independently give rise to such well-developed stories. It might be more plausible to see them as opportunely merging with pre-existing traditions.[43]

These are the only poems cited in the traditions of Imruʾ al-Qays's death. Some traditions, such as Dārim's, lack poetic citations altogether. But none of the poems, including those cited above, can account for all the details found in the traditions: the tryst with Caesar's daughter, for instance, or Caesar's change of attitude, especially as he is nowhere presented in the poetry as hostile. One can see how Imruʾ al-Qays's poetry, filled with accounts of scandalous love affairs, might have inspired the first, while Caesar's reversal neatly mirrors the tradition of Imruʾ al-Qays's childhood in which his father regretted the order to have him killed. The construction of these elements of the narrative does not require a dramatic imaginative leap, but they do constitute a leap, and do require some imagination. Combining the fluidity of the tradition, which suggests that we do not have one definitive unaltered story passed down from generation to generation, with the distinction between narrative elements that are stable and others that are mutable, these "leaps" should be seen as processes of emplotment, which consist in tying the stable narrative elements together by various devices, according to certain patterns, in order to form a continuous narrative.[44]

The most striking detail of Imruʾ al-Qays's death is the poisoned robe. The poetry of his death features items of clothing, as has been seen, and poison would be a plausible way of associating them with a dermatological disorder,[45] but here too a leap is required. And yet, while other details may vary, the poisoned robe invariably serves as the narrative linchpin of the poet's traditional death. Significantly, it displays linguistic stability as well: it is consistently introduced as *ḥulla masmūma*, even in the later tradition, which is evidence of its deep roots.[46]

Where did it come from? Not from Imruʾ al-Qays's transmitted poetry, otherwise it would have been cited. It mostly likely derives from the transmitters' imagination, or rather from their social imaginary. Such traditions are never simply the creation of one person, even if they could ultimately be traced back to an individual; their transmission requires the coopera-

42. It is interesting to consider this odd detail and the question of its resonance in the context of the story of Muḥammad and the golden bough, which begins with Muḥammad asking about a grave he encounters, then relating the story of the entombed Abū Righāl. See J. Stetkevych, *Muḥammad and the Golden Bough: Reconstructing Arabian Myth* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1996), 13–14 and passim.

43. One such tradition, unrelated to Imruʾ al-Qays the poet, would likely be the trip made by a previous Imruʾ al-Qays to Emperor Leo in Constantinople during the fifth century CE, where he too received gifts; see I. Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989), 59–91. This is noted by Montgomery, "Empty Ḥijāz," 65 n. 91.

44. The concept of emplotment was most meaningfully developed by Hayden White; see, e.g., H. White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. idem (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), 81–100. Some of its implications there are relevant here, others are not.

45. András Hámori points out to me the biblical story of Gehazi, Elisha's servant, who is afflicted by his master's curse of leprosy for stealing clothes (and money). See 2 Kings:5.

46. Al-Jāḥiẓ's shirt (*qamīṣ*) constitutes an isolated early outlier; al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Maḥāsin wa-l-aḍdād* (Beirut: Maṭbaʿat al-ʿIrfān, 1950), 225.

tion of their initial audience, and in the case of Imruʾ al-Qays the cooperation of numerous audiences and transmitters—all the more so since at least certain stages of the transmission would have been oral, successful oral transmission inevitably entails surviving selection, and even an account of a true event would have to fulfil the necessary condition that it possess some kind of resonance within the society in which it circulates and is transmitted. In short, at the level of composition successfully transmitted traditions are not created ex nihilo and at the level of transmission they do not circulate *sponte sua*, arbitrarily—rather, they are informed by deep structures of meaning.[47]

This principle makes it more likely that the flood myths attested in multiple ancient cultures are related than that they are independent of one another. One can claim that they arise naturally, that they are universal, but that avenue is not one to which there is recourse in our case: the poisoned robe motif is quite particular, it is not obviously related to a phenomenon of nature, and there is no evidence for it being widespread.[48] Since it is not clear how such a stable tradition could have come about incidentally, and as we might be skeptical of the existence of a different source endowed with sufficient resonance to inspire Imruʾ al-Qays's *ḥulla masmūma*, which at the same time was not vital enough to leave any trace itself, in the search for the source of his death tradition we are left with the poisoned robe of Greek mythology. The question is, how compelling is the parallel and how plausible is its borrowing?

Heracles Arabus

There was contact between Greeks and Arabs over a millennium before the hypothetical time of Imruʾ al-Qays, traced to the network of aromatics trade between Greeks, Arabs, Egyptians, and Cypriots.[49] Evidence from material culture suggests that only the tip of an iceberg is in view: already in the fourth to third centuries BCE coins in southern Arabia were modeled on the Athenian tetradrachm, and in eastern Arabia on coins of Alexander, while the Nabateans minted coins on Seleucid models.[50] Hellenistic culture was firmly anchored in the region, exerting its influence from the coast of the Mediterranean to the northern part of the Arabian peninsula, all of which was under Roman rule, but also penetrating central and southern Arabia.[51] Greek epigraphy is found throughout the region, more densely in certain parts and less so in others, and it is also said to have had an impact on the language of

47. On the necessarily communal character of such oral traditions, see the brilliant P. Bogatyrëv and R. Jakobson, "Folklore as a Special Form of Creativity," in *The Prague School: Selected Writings, 1929–1946*, ed. P. Steiner (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1982), 32–46. On oral tradition generally, see again Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, and on oral and aural transmission in early Islamic society, G. Schoeler, *The Genesis of Literature in Islam: From the Aural to the Read,* trans. Sh. Toorawa, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2009).

48. Three other cases are mentioned, all late and Indo-European, in S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, 6 vols. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1955–1958; electronic ed. 2000), D1402.5.

49. J. Retsö, "The Arab Connection: Political Implications of Frankincense in Early Greece," in *Profumi d'Arabia: Atti del convegno*, ed. A. Avanzini (Rome: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 1997), 473–80; M. C. A. Macdonald, "Arabians, Arabias, and the Greeks: Contact and Perceptions," in *Literacy and Identity in Pre-Islamic Arabia*, ed. idem (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 1–33.

50. When one considers, for instance, the Hellenistic coins minted by the Hasmonean state and the extent of the influence Hellenism had on Jewish society, the Arab coins are remarkable, and suggestive. On these Arab coins, see S. C. Munro-Hay, *Coinage of Arabia Felix: The Pre-Islamic Coinage of the Yemen* (Milano: Edizioni ennerre S.r.l, 2003); R. G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2001), 194. For Greek influence on later Nabatean coins, see G. W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1990), 8.

51. E.g., Qaryat al-Faw, situated in the kingdom of Kinda, for which, see Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, 74–75. For Hellenistic influence on southern Arabian art, see Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 167–68.

Arabic epigraphy.[52] Indeed, the Arabic language itself bears witness to contact with Greek, not simply in words that easily migrated through commercial contact but also some that either possessed deep theological import (*iblīs*, devil) or came to acquire it in time (*ṣirāṭ*, way).[53] If the latter came into Arabic through intermediaries—Christians, Greek-speaking as well as speakers of Syriac; Jews; Persians, all of whom in different ways had come under significant Hellenistic influence—still it was with Greek culture that Arabs were in contact, if unknowingly. What united them was Hellenism, which served as a cultural lingua franca throughout the Near East.[54] Starting in the fourth century CE we know Arab contact with Hellenistic culture to have been particularly intense, as Arabs settled in Hellenistic towns in greater numbers and served in the Byzantine army.[55] Such contact persisted when Muslims conquered areas formerly under Byzantine control.[56]

An illustration of this is provided by the markedly Greek art gracing the walls of Quṣayr ʿAmra, a hunting lodge in Jordan inhabited by the Umayyad caliphs Yazīd II (d. 105/724) and his son al-Walīd II (d. 126/744). It includes a painting depicting Eros and Dionysius at Naxos. Missing from the familiar scene is Ariadne. Her absence, Garth Fowden shows, is likely the result of misinterpretation and ignorance of the original story. But it is also testament, Fowden compellingly argues, to al-Walīd's personal engagement with Greek mythology: he was making use of its iconography to express his famously passionate anguish over the loss of his own beloved, Salmā, whom he lamented in his poetry.[57] In fact, it is all the more striking, in light of his ignorance, that he found Greek mythological iconography so evocative.

Here then is a paradigm for the way in which Greek cultural symbols, though misunderstood, could be highly significant among early Islamic elites.[58] Interestingly, here too we

52. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 209–10. Consider the interaction of Greek and Arabic in some of the few extant sixth-century Arabic inscriptions, described in R. Hoyland, "Language and Identity: The Twin Histories of Arabic and Aramaic (and: Why Did Aramaic Succeed Where Greek Failed?)," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 23 (2004): 183–99, at 190.

53. A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān* (Leiden: Brill, 2007 [orig. publ. 1938]), s.v. *iblīs*, *ṣirāṭ* (derived from Lat. *strata*, but it was with the Greek στράτα that the Arabs came in contact). For a list of such words, see D. Gutas, "Greek and Arabic: Early Contacts," in *A History of Ancient Greek: From the Beginnings to Late Antiquity*, ed. A.-F. Christidis, 2 vols. (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 1: 844–50, at 848.

54. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, 9 and passim. See also L. E. Goodman, "The Greek Impact on Arabic Literature," in *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. A. F. L. Beeston et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), 460–82, at 460–64.

55. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 236–43. For contact between Byzantium and the Arab *foederati*, see I. Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984); idem, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*; idem, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 4 pts. in 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995–2009).

56. For the persistence of Hellenism in such communities, see Goodman, "Greek Impact," 468–70; Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, 77–81; A. Cameron, "The Eastern Provinces in the 7th Century A.D.: Hellenism and the Emergence of Islam," in *Ἑλληνισμός: Quelques jalons pour une histoire de l'identité grecque. Actes du Colloque de Strasbourg, 25–27 octobre 1989*, ed. S. Said (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 287–313; G. W. Bowersock, *Mosaics as History: The Near East from Late Antiquity to Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press), especially ch. 3; G. Fowden, "Greek Myth and Arabic Poetry at Quṣayr ʿAmra," in *Islamic Crosspollinations: Interactions in the Medieval Middle East*, ed. A. Akasoy et al. (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007), 29–45; M. Mavroudi, "Greek Language and Education under Early Islam," in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*, ed. B. Sadeghi et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 295–342.

57. Fowden, "Greek Myth and Arabic Poetry."

58. On Arab interaction with Greek mythology, see also G. Fowden and E. K. Fowden, *Studies on Hellenism, Christianity and the Umayyads* (Athens: Diffusion de Boccard, 2004), 98–106, and note that the caliph's retinue included the secretary Sālim Abū l-ʿAlāʾ, who was well versed in Greek culture (see also Fowden, "Greek Myth and Arabic Poetry," 37–38).

find a nexus involving a poet-ruler in agony and princesses scandalously wooed and pitifully deceased, expressed in Greek cultural language.

Heracles appears to have been second only to Dionysus in popularity in late antiquity.[59] He was featured on the obverse of the east Arabian coins mentioned above[60] due to his association with Alexander, whose legend during late antiquity circulated widely in the Near East, in particular during the seventh century CE in Syriac, from which it made its way into the Quran (18:83–102).[61] The appropriation of Heracles by Alexander and his successors was in turn motivated by the former's affinities with Near Eastern deities,[62] which facilitated his worship throughout the Near East, including Palmyra, Amman, and Mesopotamia.[63]

The poisoned robe motif was familiar also from the myth of Medea, but Heraclean mythology appears to be the more immediate source of Imruʾ al-Qays's death. Certain details vary but it was well established that, after donning a poisoned robe delivered to him from his wife Deianeira, Heracles was in such suffering that he had himself set aflame on Mount Oeta, where he perished and subsequently underwent apotheosis.[64] The deaths of Imruʾ al-Qays and Heracles correspond both in the details of the respective traditions, as well as in their structural role within them. In both, a poisoned robe is sent via messenger and its presentation as a gift is emphasized, it is sent in retaliation for the protagonist's unsanctioned contact with a woman, and the protagonist is far from home when afflicted, which he laments.[65]

59. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, ch. 4. For his prevalence in Syrian iconography, see Bowersock, *Mosaics as History*, ch. 2.

60. See Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 22 pl. 3, for a picture of the coin.

61. See K. van Bladel, "The Alexander Legend in the Qurʾān 18:83–102," in *The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context*, ed. G. S. Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2008), 175–203, esp. 188 for the dating of the Syriac sources. See also J. N. Mattock, "Islam," in *Perceptions of the Ancient Greeks*, ed. K. J. Dover (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 79–99, at 84, for the Arab "fascination" with Alexander.

62. A. M. Nicgorski, "The Magic Knot of Herakles, the Propaganda of Alexander the Great, and Tomb II at Vergina," in *Herakles and Hercules: Exploring a Graeco-Roman Divinity*, ed. L. Rawlings and H. Bowden (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2005), 97–128. The Adoulis inscription, across the sea from Arabia, provides an example from the third century BCE of the political appropriation of Heracles (W. Dittenberger, *Orientis graeci inscriptiones selectae: Supplementum sylloges inscriptionum graecarum* [Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1903], no. 54, 1.83–88).

63. E.g. C. Bonnet, *Melqart: Cultes et mythes de l'Héraclès tyrien en Méditerrannée* (Leuven: Peeters, 1988), ch. 3. Bowersock (*Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, 41) attributes his popularity in late antiquity to his far-flung travels.

64. First attested in Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*, it is most fully narrated in Sophocles's *Trachiniae*, and also featured in Bacchylides 16 and later in Roman literature, most prominently Ovid's *Metamorphoses* IX. For a concise discussion of evidence for the myth in Greco-Roman literature, see Sophocles, *Trachiniae*, ed. P. E. Easterling (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982), 15–19; T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*, vol. 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993), 457–63; F. Bömer, *P. Ovidius Naso: Metamorphosen. Kommentar*, 7 vols. (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1969–1986), 4: 310–14.

65. For the emphasis on the robe as a gift, see, e.g., *Trachiniae* 603, and for the lament, 801–2. We might also mention that the doom of both protagonists is prophesied in vain: Imruʾ al-Qays abused Dhū l-Khalaṣa, while Heracles simply did not understand Zeus (1159–61). At the end of Heracles's life, he is concerned with a woman who (previously) "lay by his side" (1225–26), while Imruʾ al-Qays was "buried beside the woman" he asked about (al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī,* 9: 101). References are to the Sophoclean version, but see also Diodorus 4.38–39, Apollodorus 2.157, Hyginus 36, and the other Greco-Roman sources cited above. We can hope but should not expect to find precise linguistic parallels between the traditions of Imruʾ al-Qays's death as they are found in the written sources and in the manifold literary Greek versions of Heracles's death. We can only speak of "translation" here in a very loose sense, and in imagining the diffuse and lengthy process of transmission we should not employ the model of a translator working at a certain moment to produce a specific text on the basis of a concrete exemplar. See above regarding the communal character of such traditions.

Structurally, both traditions narrate the death of men who cannot be subdued by force, necessitating the use of the poisoned robe to bring them down through deception.[66]

It is also highly significant that we are not positing the Greek origin of a tale set in a random locale or arguing for the Greek origin of a tale featuring a cast of random characters. The tale of Imruʾ al-Qays's death took place in Byzantium, in contact with Greeks.[67] In fact, reading Imruʾ al-Qays's biography against a Greek background illuminates other curious features of the tradition, such as his encounter with the uncircumcised Caesar in the bath.[68] Regardless of its source, it is not at all clear what it adds to Imruʾ al-Qays's story. A tradition appended to poem no. 46, of whose provenance we know very little,[69] depicts the poet's interaction with Caesar in notable detail: Caesar calls the Arab poet into the hall through a narrow doorway so as to force him to bow. Imruʾ al-Qays enters with his back turned. Caesar's question is quoted in Greek, *ṭīthālis* (τί θέλεις, "What do you want?"). He grants Imruʾ al-Qays's request for an army, recants, and sends him the poisoned robe, which the poet is said to have donned in the bath. The bath appears then to be another traditional narrative element, variously deployed in different strands. This is significant because even in the fourth/tenth century, the *ḥammām* was identified as *rūmī*; it marks Imruʾ al-Qays as Hellenizing just as the lack of circumcision marks Caesar as foreign.[70]

The story of his youth, which has already been shown to fit uncomfortably in the chronological progression of the narrative, also shows traces of foreign influence, which further illustrate the ways in which these traditions were constructed. Structural symmetry suggests that it was modeled on the poet's death: along with his death, his youth is the only part of his biography in which his poetry is thematized, and just as Caesar had him killed because he wrote poetry about his daughter, as a young man, his father ordered him killed

66. Imruʾ al-Qays is not a hero on the level of Heracles, but time and again he emerges unscathed from battle against powerful opponents, undone only by his lack of manpower. Sophocles's *Trachiniae* (1062–63) emphasizes the femininity of the deception, and it is interesting that in other biographical traditions that were not incorporated in the integrated account, Imruʾ al-Qays similarly falls victim to wily women: see al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 9: 101–3, and the prefatory tradition regarding Umm Jundab appended to poem no. 3—on which, see also J. E. Montgomery, "ʿAlqama al-Faḥl's Contest with Imruʾ al-Qays: What Happens When a Poet Is Umpired by His Wife?," *Arabica* 44 (1997): 144–49; A. M. Sumi, *Description in Classical Arabic Poetry* (Brill: Leiden, 2004), ch. 1.

67. Byzantium in the seventh century CE was a "fully Greek state" (Cameron, "Eastern Provinces," 310).

68. Ibn Qutayba, *al-Shiʿr wa-l-shuʿarāʾ*, 39.

69. It lacks an *isnād* and would presumably belong to al-Ṭūsī, but as we know nothing about the manuscript we cannot know. It appears related to the tradition regarding Imruʾ al-Qays's companion ʿAmr b. Qamīʾa, found in Ibn Qutayba, *al-Shiʿr wa-l-shuʿarāʾ*, 45–46, with lines 34–37 from the *rāʾiyya*.

70. "Ḥammām" (J. Sourdel-Thomine and A. Louis), *EI2*. See also Fowden and Fowden, *Studies on Hellenism*, 108–9. Note also that Ḥujr is referred to as *al-malik al-aṣhab*, "the red king" (al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī,* 9: 84). According to Lane, *aṣhab* can refer to a lion (bringing to mind Heracles's typical iconographic representation, wearing a lion's skin) and red hair can signify "enemies," particularly Greek. Imruʾ al-Qays's horse too is repeatedly described as *shaqrāʾ*, "red" or "blond" (al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī,* 9: 85, 92). On the Greeks, and non-Arabs generally, as red-skinned, see I. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, trans. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern, 2 vols. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967), 1: 243–44; on Greeks as "yellow," see M. Fierro, "Al-Aṣfar," *Studia Islamica* 77 (1993): 169–81, at 175–76; N. M. El Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs* (Cambridge, MA: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard Univ., 2004), 24. For more on the significance of the color red designating "the other," see Stetkevych, *Muḥammad and the Golden Bough*, 22–23. Caesar's reversal was not atypical: the Greeks were proverbially known for their treachery, specifically with regard to parting gifts; this knowledge would presumably be available wherever Greek mythology was current. See R. Tosi, *Dizionario delle sentenze greche e latine* (Milan: Biblioteca universale Rizoli, 2007), nos. 242–44; A. Cameron, "New Themes and Styles in Greek Literature: Seventh–Eighth Centuries," in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East,* ed. eadem and L. I. Conrad (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1992), 88, noting that "Hellenic deceit" was a "typical formulation" in Greek literature of the time.

(or exiled him) because he wrote poetry about Fāṭima.[71] Instead of killing him, his father's chamberlain, Rabīʿa, sacrificed a wild calf. The sacrificial surrogate employed to avert his death brings to mind the biblical Binding of Isaac (cf. Q 37:100–107), while the character deployed for that purpose—a disobedient servant who spares the life of his master's child on a mountain—is reminiscent of the traditional Greek motif of the merciful shepherd saving an exposed child.[72] It is not necessary for this argument that the transmitters of such a story be consciously aware of Oedipus, only that such tales resonate with the audience as biographical details typical of culturally significant figures.

It is thus remarkable that Imruʾ al-Qays's biography hews so closely to the traditional Greek model for poets and heroes: an important lineage, poetic initiation, conflict with authority and exile, travel, and, especially, an unnatural death.[73] The significance of this correspondence should not be overestimated, but perhaps not underestimated either: in the structure of his biography Imruʾ al-Qays could have been a Greek hero, which is surely not true of all pre-Islamic poets, as will be seen below. The purpose of the preceding paragraphs, however, has only been to suggest that other parts of Imruʾ al-Qays's biography might well have been informed by Greek influence too.

I conclude this section by suggesting that Imruʾ al-Qays was not the only founding figure of Islamic culture for whom a Greek death was emplotted.[74] The biography of Sībawayhi, the father of Arabic grammar, is marked by ring composition similar to that found in the biography of Imruʾ al-Qays: having recently arrived from Persia to study hadith in Basra, he made a grammatical mistake, using the nominative rather the accusative, which prompted him, humiliated, to turn to the study of grammar; during a public contest in Baghdad not many years later, he again erred in choosing the nominative over the accusative, lost the contest, and—humiliated—returned home, where he died a young man, reportedly around 180/796.[75] The earliest report of his death, from the third/ninth century, keeps his humiliation separate from his premature death, but biographical accounts from the following century yield to the temptation it offers and connect them. Homer too, according to the tradition, died of sorrow over his failure to solve a riddle—a tale attested and, indeed, creatively deployed in contemporary Syriac literature.[76]

71. Cf. K. De Temmerman, "Ancient Biography and Formalities of Fiction," in *Writing Biography in Greece and Rome: Narrative Technique and Fictionalization*, ed. idem and K. Demoen (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2016), 19, on the affinities between biographical childhood and death narratives, and their fictionalization.

72. E.g., Oedipus, and the story of Harpagus and Astyages in Herodotus 1. Note also that the symbolic removal of Imruʾ al-Qays's eyes presaged his exile and wandering, as the blinding of Oedipus preceded his own. John Mattock ("Islam," 91) discerns echoes of the Oedipal tradition in an anecdote attributed to Plato by al-Qazwīnī (605–82). For more on Oedipus and Imruʾ al-Qays, see al-Ghānimī, *al-Kanz wa-l-taʾwīl*, and Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, passim, who finds him useful in thinking about pre-Islamic poetry generally. Neither considers the traditions historically related.

73. Cf. Kivilo, *Early Greek Poets' Lives*, 208–23. Greek poets typically travel to compete in song, heroes in order to accomplish great deeds. Imruʾ al-Qays's integrated biography casts him in the role of the hero, but other traditions (e.g., the Umm Jundab tradition appended to poem no. 3) report poetic competitions.

74. I hope to argue this in greater detail in a future article.

75. The earliest account of Sībawayhi's death is in Ibn Qutayba, *al-Maʿārif*, ed. Th. ʿUkāsha (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Dār al-Kutub, 1960), 544.

76. Versions of Homer's death, which go back at least to Heraclitus ca. 500 BCE, are conveniently collected in M. L. West, *Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003). For its Syriac iterations, see S. P. Brock, "From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning," in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, ed. N. Garsoïan et al. (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 17–34, at 28–29, with refs. We might also mention the report of Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa (d. 668/1270) in *ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbāʾ* (ed. A. Müller, 2 vols. [Cairo, 1882–1884], 1: 185), according to which Homer

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A GRECO-ARABIC DEATH

"Arabian legend," H. T. Norris declares, "is ultimately derived from stories common to the Ancient Eastern civilization."[77] He goes on to mention Rabbinic, Syriac, Persian, Coptic, even Indian material, but no Greek. The presence of Hellenism in the Near East on the eve of the Muslim conquests is generally represented in scholarship as "superficial," "artificial," at best "residual," a view that conveniently lends itself to accounting for the rapid spread of Islam.[78] At the same time, scholars in adjacent fields have demonstrated that Hellenism was still vital in the seventh century and persisted under Islamic rule.[79] Evidence for Greek influence in the construction of the *akhbār* of Imruʾ al-Qays and perhaps others should thus not be entirely surprising. This study shows, then, one consequence of the persistence of Hellenism in its interaction with Islam. In so doing, it broadens the horizons of Greco-Arabic studies: before the state-backed translation movement of the third/ninth century, which was focused on written texts of scientific nature and "practical" value, we find also evidence of the transmission and "translation" of oral traditions of Greek provenance.[80]

In other words, attention should be paid not only to what the Arabs advertised as their acknowledged debts to Greek culture but also to the unacknowledged debts, whose traces they sought to efface—"the legends of the ancients" (*asāṭīr al-awwalīn*) from which the Quran so persistently seeks to distance itself.[81] Inherent in the enterprise of establishing Islamic culture was the need to mark pre-Islamic culture as uncouth, uncultured, and uncivilized, as *jāhil*.[82] Pre-Islamic poetry bore witness to the richness of pre-Islamic culture, and its significance, its importance for Arab identity, was such that it could not simply be ignored or

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was studied and recited in the court of Hārūn al-Rashīd in Baghdad, precisely around the time of Sībawayhi's death; fanciful though it may be, it is not insignificant. See Mavroudi, "Greek Language and Education," 324–25, and for more on Homer in Arabic literature, Mattock, "Islam," 91–92; at length, J. Kraemer, "Arabische Homerverse," *ZDMG* 106–107 (1956–1957): 259–316, 511–18.

77. H. T. Norris, "Fables and Legends in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Times," in *Arabic Literature*, ed. Beeston et al., 374–86, at 375. In "Al-Sindibād and Polyphemus: Reflections on the Genesis of an Archetype" (in *Myths, Historical Archetypes, and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature: Towards a New Hermeneutic Approach*, ed. A. Neuwirth et al. [Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1999], 437–66, at 466), James Montgomery is explicit: "the supposed Greek influence on the popular culture of the Arabs should by and large be dismissed as unsubstantiated and insubstantial." He appears to be primarily referring to a later period than the one under discussion, though by implication it may also apply to earlier periods.

78. See quotations from Hitti and Donner cited in Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, ch. 6. S. P. Stetkevych, *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 2002), 1, speaks of "the residues of the Hellenistic age." Earlier scholars appear to have been more willing to consider Hellenistic influence on early Islam, e.g., F. Rosenthal, *Das Fortleben der Antike im Islam* (Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1965), 13–14. For the politics of scholarship on Hellenism and early Islam, cf. Mavroudi, "Greek Language and Education," 299–301.

79. See n. 56 above for references, most recently and in greatest detail Mavroudi, "Greek Language and Education." See also D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998), ch. 1, esp. 11–16, contending that Hellenism was in fact revitalized by the Muslim conquests, which unified parts of the Hellenistic diaspora, and Fowden and Fowden, *Studies on Hellenism*, ch. 5, illustrating cultural continuity rather than rupture under the Umayyads. G. Tamer, *Zeit und Gott: Hellenistische Zeitvorstellungen in der altarabischen Dichtung und im Koran* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), makes a case for Arab Hellenism predating Islam; B. Jokisch, *Islamic Imperial Law* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), esp. ch. 6, argues for exceptionally extensive Hellenistic influence on early Islamic culture.

80. For the possibility of non-scientific Greek texts circulating among Arabs, see T. Hägg, "The Oriental Reception of Greek Novels: A Survey with Some Preliminary Considerations," *Symbolae Osloenses* 61 (1986): 99–131, esp. 111.

81. See Q 6:25, 8:31, 16:24, 23:83, 25:5, 27:68, 46:17, 68:15, 83:13.

82. Goodman, "Greek Impact," 460; Montgomery, "Empty Ḥijāz," esp. 42; Stetkevych, *Muḥammad and the Golden Bough*, introduction.

denied.[83] Hence the early Islamic ambivalence toward poetry and the need to domesticate—Islamicize—it.[84] Hence also the ambivalence to Arab poetry's founding father, whose style was exalted while his morals were denigrated.

In an environment of intense cultural competition, we should see early Islamic biographies as constructed with an eye to both competing with other cultures by establishing the authority of their own cultural founding figures[85] and solidifying the foundations of their own nascent culture and reinforcing its ethos. A Greek myth would be a natural choice for the former, not because it was necessarily recognized by all as specifically Greek, but because of Hellenism's role in the region as a cultural lingua franca.[86] A tale illustrating the dangers of poetry and the self-destruction suffered by pagans served the latter purpose well, while a specifically Greek tale would be especially suitable, as Hellenism in late antiquity was commonly equated with paganism.[87]

In conclusion, I return to the questions posed in part one—why does his biography not look like a biography and why is so much space accorded to his ancestors?—and examine Imruʾ al-Qays's traditional biography as a narrative responding to pressure from within and without. As already suggested, the rich traditions concerning al-Ḥārith and Ḥujr imply an interest in them not simply as Imruʾ al-Qays's ancestors. Approaching the traditions unconditioned by the form of their presentation as biography, they plausibly present themselves as forming a tripartite narrative consisting of the stories of three members of the royal dynasty of Kinda. The three stories reflect each other: both Imruʾ al-Qays and Ḥujr are killed by a family member of someone they themselves killed[88] and all three are undone by vows they took, which were expressed in the same formulaic, poetically organized language, *ālā allā* ("swore that he would not"): the grandfather because of his obsession with the gazelle (*ālā aliyyatan allā yaʾkula awwalan illā*), the father due to his vow that the Asadīs would never

83. E.g., Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 242–47.

84. E.g., Labīd b. Rabīʿa and Kaʿb b. Zuhayr, on whom more below. On the inherently uneasy relationship of Islam and poetry, see Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 1: 56; R. Blachère, "La poésie dans la conscience de la première génération musulmane," in idem, *Analecta* (Damascus: Institut français de Damas, 1975), 231–41; S. Bonebakker, "Religious Prejudice against Poetry in Early Islam," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 7 (1976): 77–99; M. Kister, "The *Sīrah* Literature," in *Arabic Literature*, ed. Beeston et al., 352–67, at 358–61; W. Heinrichs, "The Meaning of *Mutanabbī*," in *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, ed. J. L. Kugel (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), 120–39, at 120–22; M. Zwettler, "A Mantic Manifesto: The Sūra of "The Poets" and the Qurʾānic Foundations of Prophetic Authority," in *Poetry and Prophecy*, ed. Kugel, 75–119; G. H. A. Juynboll, "On the Origins of the Poetry in Muslim Tradition Literature," in *Festschrift Ewald Wagner*, ed. Heinrichs and Schoeler, 182–207; J. E. Montgomery, *The Vagaries of the Qaṣīdah: The Tradition and Practice of Early Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 1997), ch. 6. For the cooptation of pre-Islamic poetry, see, in addition to Montgomery's *Vagaries of the Qaṣīdah*, also Stetkevych, *Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy*, ch. 2.

85. On the intensity of contemporary cultural competition, see Cameron, "Eastern Provinces." The biography of Muḥammad himself, notes Kister ("*Sīrah* Literature," 355), was constructed under the pressure of establishing his authority in the eyes of other cultures.

86. This would not be the first time Greek culture was appropriated for its international prestige by a nascent culture seeking to assert its superiority over its neighbors; see D. C. Feeney, *Beyond Greek: The Beginnings of Latin Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2016) for, similarly, the beginning of Latin literature.

87. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, 9–13; "Hellene" could also mean barbarian, foreign, Christian, cf. Cameron, "Eastern Provinces," 287, 311. Note that the philhellenic al-Walīd was remembered in the tradition as a heretic (Fowden, "Greek Myth and Arabic Poetry," 39). There is nevertheless a difference between finding Greek material useful and advertising it as Greek.

88. In the case of Imruʾ al-Qays's death, the reference is specifically to al-Ṭammāḥ. Ḥujr's death may also involve clothes (see al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī,* 9: 84). Note the diviner's pregnant use of the verb *yuslabu* ("will be plundered"), which seems to be particularly associated with clothes.

return home (*ālā bi-llāhi allā*),[89] the son on account of his mission for boundless revenge, the excessiveness of which is iconically reflected in the language of his unending vow (four clauses beginning with *wa-lā*, echoing the first *allā*).[90]

Rather than three similar stories, they form one large, coherent narrative, which is not only about the demise of Imruʾ al-Qays or even of the dynasty of Kinda. The demise of the Kinda dynasty is also the demise of the pre-Islamic period, for Kinda in the fifth and sixth centuries CE unified Arabia for the first time, bringing with it a sedentary lifestyle, Christianity, and literacy.[91] When these traditions were formed, the role of unifying Arabia had been assumed by Islam. It is thus significant that when Imruʾ al-Qays leaves Arabia for Byzantium, war breaks out in Ṭayyiʾ in his wake.[92] Significant too is the emphasis placed on the fact that after Imruʾ al-Qays smashed Dhū l-Khalaṣa none went to the oracle until its final destruction under Islam.[93] Imruʾ al-Qays appropriately brought about the end of the pre-Islamic period with his own hands.

The story of the dynasty of Kinda begins with al-Ḥārith, the "best-known member of its house,"[94] and specifically with the religious heresy, particularly the sexual profligacy, that he imports from Persia and spreads among the Arabs. The narrative thus begins with sin and ends with what is clearly marked as causally related punishment: al-Ḥārith's heresy brought Mundhir's wrath upon him, and eventually upon his grandson too, driving Imruʾ al-Qays out of Arabia and to his Greek death. This is indeed no biography. Rather these traditions appear to have originally formed a narrative comparable to the Lydian saga in book one of Herodotus's *Histories*, where Croesus pays for the sin of his ancestor Gyges five generations earlier; later these traditions were fit into a biographic mold, such as we find in Ibn Qutayba and al-Iṣbahānī. This narrative at once furnished early Islamic society with a figure whose legendary biography could measure up to the founder of any rival tradition and legitimize Arabic poetry in the eyes of outsiders while, at the same time, accounting for the rise of Islam through the self-immolation of paganism. If revelation came in language that was emphatically not-poetry, if traditional poetry could not serve as an instrument for spreading the message of Islam, then the biography of its founding father would account for why this was so.

The poets of the following generation, the generation of the Prophet, set Imruʾ al-Qays's death by "the shirt of Nessus" in sharp relief. Labīd b. Rabīʿa, who according to tradition lived to an exceptionally old age, abandoned poetry along with paganism; in the lone verse of poetry that he composed under Islam, he thanked Allāh for sparing him an early death and "clothing him with the shirt (or coat) of mail of Islam."[95] What was metaphorical in his case was literal in that of Kaʿb b. Zuhayr, whose shoulders the Prophet wrapped in his own mantle (*burda*) in response to his poetry.[96] As is pointed out by Suzanne Stetkevych, Imruʾ al-Qays undressed before leaving Arabia, handing over his ancestral coats of arms to Samawʾal—his

89. Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī*, 9: 81, 83, 88, respectively.

90. Cf. Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 246. Al-Shanfarā and Muhalhil also succumbed to the temptation of excessive vengeance, from which even Muḥammad had to be restrained (p. 205).

91. "Kinda" (Shahîd and Beeston), *EI2*. For an earlier attempt to piece together Kinda's history, see Olinder, *Kings of Kinda*. The historical accuracy of this account matters less, of course, than that it was traditionally held.

92. Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī,* 9: 96.

93. Al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī,* 9: 93.

94. "Kinda," *EI2*, 5: 118b.

95. Ibn Qutayba, *al-Shiʿr wa-l-shuʿarāʾ*, 149. See Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 52. According to one tradition, Labīd was also the author of the Prophet's favorite line of poetry, for which see Juynboll, "On the Origins," 191. His poetry itself was compared to a cloak (see Bonebakker, "Religious Prejudice," 93).

96. Stetkevych, *Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy*, 76–79.

patrimony, his very identity—exchanging it in Byzantium for the poisoned golden robe of Caesar, which spelled his death.[97] Just as some poetry was sanctioned and some not, some pre-Islamic poets were redeemed and coopted and some were not—and could not be.[98] As the "greatest poet," a king of Kinda,[99] Imruʾ al-Qays's fate was the latter.

97. Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 248–49. See also n. 88 regarding Ḥujr's death. Reference to clothes can be found throughout Imruʾ al-Qays's diwan, e.g., 29.17, 30.27, 51, 52, 74.10, 79.6, 96, 100.

98. See, e.g., Kister, "*Sīrah* Literature," 358–61. For Kaʿb's redemption as proto-Islamic, see Stetkevych, *Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy*, 74, 78.

99. As a king, the potential of confusing him with Muḥammad was greater, for which see Zwettler, "Mantic Manifesto."