Antarah ibn Shaddad
The Mu‘allaqah of `Antarah ibn Shaddad
Love and War
Introduction and Translation by: Kevin Blankinship
Before the dawn of Islam in the 7th century CE, the Arabian Peninsula was rife with turmoil. From the outside, the "great powers" of Rome and Persia fought for dominance; from the inside, Bedouin tribes struggled over territory and resources. Against this tumultuous backdrop, elite fighters on horseback created a warring culture of manly virtue, murâ’ah, marked by love of honor and driven by a lust for glory, plunder, revenge, and tribal loyalty. As one scholar put it, “war was effectively a religion.”

This combative ethos is preserved in poetry, the most celebrated art form in Arabic. Perhaps the best-known war poems are by Ṭantar ibn Shaddād, the son of an Ethiopian slave woman who fought in the War of Dāhīs between his own clan of ‘Abs and their rivals, Dhubyān. Most of his poems deal with this conflict or with the virtues of martial life. As a young man, Ṭantar fell in love with his cousin, Ablah, but couldn’t marry her due to his slave status until after he’d proven himself in combat. According to legend, his poetry and courage both so impressed Ablah’s mother that she finally gave consent to marry her daughter.

Today, readers remember Ṭantar best for his “hang ing or suspended ode” Mu‘allaqah, which in its own way captures the spirit of pre-Islamic Arabia like the other Mu‘allaqāt poets. In Ṭantar’s case, a second, anonymous epic poem called Šīrat Ṭantar would later secure his legacy.
The Poem

In the words of Sir William Jones, ‘Antarah’s “chief object in his [Mu’allaqah] poem was to blazon his own exploits and achievements.” Written as a qaṣīdah, the elite genre of classical Arabic poetry, the ode is framed as a journey that unfolds along a highly conventional structure, with innovations on a theme. The poet begins by reminiscing at the abandoned desert camp of his lover, ‘Ablah, imagining her and the day that she left (lines 1-25). This calls the poet back to the present, and he turns his attention to his camel, describing it using a flood of images (lines 26-39); animal description is common in pre-Islamic poetry, but it can be monotonous or jarring to modern readers.

He then addresses ‘Ablah directly (line 40), and, for the second half of the poem, demands that she praise him and his merits—generosity (lines 41-45), horsemanship (lines 50-51, 74-79), protection of comrades in war (lines 69-72), and so on. Battle and boasting are on full display, with graphic descriptions to rival those of Homer’s Iliad. The final lines (80-85) probably refer to a real skirmish, in which ‘Antarah, having already routed three enemies (lines 47-63), claims to have killed a man named Damdam, the father of two of his opponents. The poem ends on the stark image of this Damdam’s body left in the desert for the hyenas to pick apart, a fitting symbol of the horrors of war.

In the words of Sir William Jones, ‘Antarah’s “chief object in his [Mu‘allaqah] poem was to blazon his own exploits and achievements.” Written as a qaṣīdah, the elite genre of classical Arabic poetry, the ode is framed as a journey that unfolds along a highly conventional structure, with innovations on a theme. The poet begins by reminiscing at the abandoned desert camp of his lover, ‘Ablah, imagining her and the day that she left (lines 1-25). This calls the poet back to the present, and he turns his attention to his camel, describing it using a flood of images (lines 26-39); animal description is common in pre-Islamic poetry, but it can be monotonous or jarring to modern readers.

He then addresses ‘Ablah directly (line 40), and, for the second half of the poem, demands that she praise him and his merits—generosity (lines 41-45), horsemanship (lines 50-51, 74-79), protection of comrades in war (lines 69-72), and so on. Battle and boasting are on full display, with graphic descriptions to rival those of Homer’s Iliad. The final lines (80-85) probably refer to a real skirmish, in which ‘Antarah, having already routed three enemies (lines 47-63), claims to have killed a man named Damdam, the father of two of his opponents. The poem ends on the stark image of this Damdam’s body left in the desert for the hyenas to pick apart, a fitting symbol of the horrors of war.
1. Now have the poets left a rip unsewn?
   And did you see her old haunts, overgrown?

2. Oh tell me, ‘Ablah’s home! here in Jiwi’;
good day, peace and good will to ‘Ablah’s home.

3. Right there I propped my camel like a fort
   and scratched the itch to pause before I roam.

4. One time, ‘Ablah had settled in Jiwi’
   and we in Hazn, Sammân, Mutathallam.

5. Long live you scars of sand, left long ago.
   vacant after ‘Ablah, Mother of Haytham.

6. She joined our foes, who stun with lion’s roar;
   hunting you is hard now, Maldram’s daughter.

7. By chance, I loved her while I killed her kin,
   no idle boast— I swear—from all the slaughter.

ملخص المحتوى:

1. هل خادم الشعراء من طرفكم، 
2. يا دار نهلة بالهواء تعني
3. نفعت فيها نقي وأزدها
4. تغلب على البلاء وأطراف
5. كيفه من طول تقدم هذه
6. حلت بأرض الزمان أصبحت
7. عينها غرضا وأقبل قوياً

أبجد عنترة فصيده بسواح شعره يؤزق كل الشعراء: هل تركن الشعراء قبل مجالا للقول؟ ثم سأل نفسه: هل خرجت دار محبوبتك بعد أن غلبك الشك؟ وهو يهدى السؤال كشف حزنه المميت بين حب ورود أن صفقه، وبعث في أن يقول شيئا جديداً بلا mócى محبوبتك ورضيها. إنه بعد قديمته سواب شعره، ودعيت سوال الحب، وما مستصلان اتصالاً وثيقاً، فالشعر قوذه الحب والترحيل الظاهران في هذا المطلع.

تتم انتهف بخطب دار محبيته ضرورة، طالما أنها تتكلم فخوره من شكالها الذي كانوا فيها، وهو يقصدها وجهها، وسلم عليها (متي صاحت)، ودعوا لها بالسلامة، ثم قال: إنه وقف ناقله في هذه الدار، وكان الناقة من ضاحياتها قصر سائح

لي очист ما تستحقه دار محبيته من الكفك والتناسل والذكري، وأخبر أن أهل عبادة في مكان (هو الجواء)، وأن أهل هو في أمكن أخرى يطلعون البرج.