

REMARKS ON ARAB SCHOLARSHIP IN THE ARABIC POPULAR SĪRA AND THE SĪRAT SAYF IBN DĪ YAZAN

Zuzana GAŽÁKOVÁ

Department of Arabic Studies, The Faculty of Arts, Comenius University
Bratislava, Slovakia, e-mail: gazakova@fphil.uniba.sk

*I must confess that orientalist were the Pioneers
in this branch of study in Arabic literature.¹*

ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Yūnis

The subject, which is going to be discussed here, represents a brief description of the general direction of 20th century research in the field of Arab popular epic and the *Sirat Sayf ibn Dī Yazan* conducted by Arab scholars and literary critics. Despite the fact that some of the studies which are mentioned in the following pages are out of date, discussing them is still profitable because they offer a complex review of the gradual development of scholarly opinion on the Arabic popular *sira*, which was marked until recently by many misconceptions and methodological confusion.

The enormous body of tales termed *as-sīra aš-šaʿbiya* is a unique product of a largely anonymous fluid tradition of public story-telling. Reciters with *rabābs* vividly performed *siyar* particularly on the evenings of religious festivals or in coffeehouses with the primary aim of entertaining the common people. Although public narration of *siyar* must have been a common feature of everyday life in the Arab world for centuries, it is only in the last fifty years, that serious Arab scholarship in the discipline of Popular literature and folklore began. "In Egypt it was officially recognized through the creation of a chair at Cairo University in the late 1950's, its first occupant being Dr. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Yūnis, of a Folk Arts Centre in 1958, and an Institute of Folk Studies under the deanship of Dr. Aḥmad Mursī."² "Also Iraq and Tunisia have set up folklore centers in an effort to collect and

¹ ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Yūnis: *Al- Hilālīya, at-Ta'riḥ wa al-Adab aš-Šaʿbī*. Maṭbʿat Ġāmiʿat al-Qāhira, 1954, p. 8.

systematically study the oral patrimony of the individual countries.”³ The scholarly interest in this area of research has revived and is becoming comprehensible and respectable as a literary problem. The number of dissertations and scholarly studies dedicated to the Popular *sīra* is on the rise, together with simplified versions of *siyar*,⁴ and *sīra* narration continues to be enjoyed, despite the disappearance of storytellers from coffeehouses, in other media of popular entertainment – radio and television. The real shift in attitude to this kind of literature is clearly seen, yet the long process of *sīra*’s return into the attention of Arab men of letters has not been fully completed. Arab Popular literature has not yet been recognized as proper literature by certain Arab authorities. Even after the remarkable triumph of *The Thousand and One Nights* since the early years of the eighteenth century, when Antoine Galland first translated it into French, “this most widely read book of Arabic authorship apart from the Koran has been facing attacks of censorships in certain Arab countries on the ground that the centuries-old Arabic classic contains obscene passages that pose a threat to the country’s moral fabric.”⁵

Oral delivery of the heroic tales has been observed for centuries in the works of Arab philologists, critics and men of letters. However, most of them take the form of negative judgment describing the Arabic *sīra* as a story with vulgar prose mixed with rhythmical pieces of verse. As Bridget Connely puts it in her book, “much of the polemic surrounding recitation stems from the fact that the central text of the culture itself is a “recitation”; indeed, the word *al-Qur’ān* means recitation⁶ and the command to recite was one of God’s earliest revelations.”⁷

Traditionally critical opinion towards the Arabic *sīra* is reflected in the book of Mūsā Sulaymān – *al-Adab al-Qaṣaṣī ‘inda al-‘Arab*⁸ (*Narrative Literature among the Arabs*). After a short review of the most famous examples of the heroic epic such as Gilgamesh or the Odyssey, the author gives his reasons why the Arab narrative tradition is in his opinion beyond doubt inferior to the world heroic epic heritage. He appears to evaluate *siyar*, which he collectively calls *al-qaṣaṣ al-buṭūlī* (*narrative literature*) through firmly rooted, traditional high, literary court aesthetics and therefore unsurprisingly he severely criticizes *sīra*’s language, style, literary tastes, weakness of characters, historical inaccuracies, as well as its primary objective of entertaining common people.⁹ Nevertheless, despite his harsh opposition and other inaccuracies (he sees the *Sīrat ‘Antar* as the longest of “al-

² Cachia, Pierre: *Popular Narrative Ballads of Modern Egypt*. Claredon Press, Oxford 1989, p. 6.

³ Connely, Bridget: *Arab Folk Epic and Identity*. University of California Press 1986, p. 23.

⁴ Hūršīd, Fārūq: *Muḡāmarāt Sayf ibn Dī Yazan*. Dār aš-Šurūq, al-Qāhira, 1992.

⁵ Miller, Judith: *Egypt bans copies of 1000 night*. The New York Times, Monday, May 20, 1985.

⁶ Connely, Bridget: *Arab Folk Epic and Identity*. University of California Press 1986, p. 13.

⁷ “Recite, in the name of the Lord”, *al-Qur’ān*, 96,1.

⁸ Sulaymān, Mūsā – *al-Adab al-Qaṣaṣī ‘inda al-‘Arab*. Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, Bayrūt 1969.

⁹ Sulaymān, Mūsā – *al-Adab al-Qaṣaṣī ‘inda al-‘Arab*. Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, Bayrūt, 1969, p. 159.

ḥikāyāt”), I agree with Peter Heath’s view that “this work at least attempts to view popular literature in a comprehensive fashion.”¹⁰

For that reasons early scholarly discussions of popular Epic in the Arab world revolved especially around the evaluation and importance of this literary genre, as it was generally excluded from the realm of the Arab literature proper and traditionally assigned to so called “low art”.

The title of the article of the well-known Egyptian scholar Fārūq Ḥūršīd – *Makān as-Siyar aš-Šaʿbīya*¹¹ (*The Status of the Popular Siyar*) indicates that the author tries to defend the *sīra* and oppose the official criticism (*ḥilāf Aṣḥāb al-ḥukūma al-adabīya maʿa as-sīra aš-šaʿbīya*) conducted by traditional Arab literary and religious circles (*Aṣḥāb al-ḥukūma al-adabīya al-ʿarabīya, aṣḥāb ʿulūm ad-dīn*) who go against everything out of long-established rules and conventions. philological aspect came to be considered in their eyes a criterion of literary excellence. The author also points out the inaccuracy of terminology, which results in vague methodological criteria, and states that only a precise distinction between folklore and the Arabic *sīra* can assure successful scholarly treatment of this type of literature.

The specific focus of this study is the development of the scholarly opinion of Arab scholars who approached the *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dī Yazan*, the saga of the powerful Himyarite king Sayf ibn Dī Yazan, who liberates his people from oppression by the black Abyssinian king Sayf Arʿad. This *Sīra* does not enjoy so much attention from Arab as well as non-Arab scholars as, for instance, the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* or the *Sīrat ʿAntar ibn Šaddād*. Nevertheless, it is considered to be one of the most beautiful and fascinating Arab folk romances. The majority of the studies discussed here are confined to the last decades of the 20th century and the scholarly methodologies which were followed are marked by changing attitude to the *sīra* literature. In general, five areas of study attract the interest of Arab researcher among which examination of *sīra*’s historical background is dominant. One of the preferred strategies is to compare *sīra*’s narrative to real historical events from old or medieval Arab or possibly African history and the search for historical information contained in the *sīra* (*al-manḥağ at-tārīḫī, al-manḥağ at-tārīḫī al-muqāran*). However, oral narrative tradition represents a complicated coded system with specific regularities and irregularities whose inaccurate treatment as a direct historical source can result in many speculative theories. Nevertheless, it can help scholars to detect many different aspects of the past. Other studies focus predominantly on *sīra*’s language, narrative technique, structure, formulaic diction or compositional principles (*al-manḥağ al-bunyawī*), religious and social aspects (*al-manḥağ al-iğtimāʿī*) and the transmission of mythical and magical elements which occupy a large part of it (*al-manḥağ al-antrūbūlūğī*)¹² and which produce astounding evidence of worldwide contacts among peoples.

¹⁰ Heath, Peter: *Thirsty Sword. Sīrat ʿAntar and the Arabic Popular Epic*. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City 1996, p. 19.

¹¹ Ḥūršīd, Fārūq: *Makān as-Siyar aš-Šaʿbīya al-ʿArabīya*, al-Kātib, Mağallat at-ṭakāfa al-insāniya, janāyir, 1964.

The noteworthy development of scholarly opinion can be seen in the other work of Fārūq Ḥūršid – *Aḍwā' calā as-Siyar aš-Ša'biya*¹³ (*Light Cast on the Arab Popular Epic*). This tiny book represents a brief general overview of the main printed examples of siyar, leaving out, however, the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. In the chapter dedicated to the *Sīrat Sayf*, Fārūq Ḥūršid studies this *sira* almost solely from the historical perspective. He delineates two main historical levels from which stem *Sīra*'s two main characters and examines old African and Yemeni history and *Sīra*'s possible connections with the Egyptian Mamlūk period. As Peter Heath also implies, "despite the drawbacks of this study which originated in the fact, that the research was conducted without the benefit of the historical information and the theoretical framework for understanding oral literature and performance that we now possess, this book deserves a great attention as a key introductory source."¹⁴

The next person to enter the discussion is Ilfah ʿUmar al-Adlabī. In his work *Naẓrat fī Adabīnā aš-Ša'bi* (*The View on our Popular Literature*)¹⁵ the *Sīrat Sayf* ibn Dī Yazan occupies considerable attention and the author discusses several topics, including challenging attempt to compare the hero's quests to Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. However, he does not go in greater details and therefore offers only a little of real scholarly value. Despite the fact that he earnestly reminisces about his listening to the *Sīrat Sayf* when he was a child, commenting on *Sīra*'s linguistic imperfections – especially on abundant unbearable repetitions (*kaṭrat at-takrār ilā ḥadd lā yuṭāq*) and presenting the idea that the poetry inserted in the prose does not have any particular value and function apart from prolongation of the narration, he fails to examine the *Sīra* within the overall cultural and social environment. Indeed, the *sīra*'s poetry exerts little influence on the course of narrative events, and as it follows the path of spoken Arabic towards linguistic simplification, "the poetry of *non-literature* fared even worse than prose for whereas tales were sometimes preserved once the language was recast into *grammatical form*, metrical compositions did not easily lend themselves to such a treatment."¹⁶

A different evaluation of *sīra*'s narrative corpus and its immense extent is presented by Nabīla Ibrāhīm in her book *Sīrat al-Amīra Dāt al-Himma*, where she defends popular reciters and their work and says that "their primary aim was to entertain the common people and for that reason they employed all possible means

¹² For the review of all methodologies (*manāhid*) see ʿUrābī Ḥuṭrī: *al-Bunya al-Uṣūriya fī Sīrat Sayf ibn Dī Yazan*. Nawwāra li-t- tarğama wa-n-našr, Al-Qāhira, 1994, pp. 10-111 and author's introduction.

¹³ Ḥūršid, Fārūq: *Aḍwā' calā as-Siyar aš-Ša'biya*. al- Mu'assasa al-miṣriya al-ʿamma li-t-ta'lif wa-t-tarğama wa-t-tibāʿa wa-n-našr, 1964.

¹⁴ Heath, Peter: *Thirsty Sword. Sīrat ʿAntar and the Arabic Popular Epic*. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 1996, p. 19.

¹⁵ al-Adlabī, Ilfah ʿUmar: *Naẓrat fī Adabīnā aš-Ša'bi: Alf layla wa layla wa Sīrat Sayf ibn Dī Yazan*. Manšūrāt Ittiḥād al-Kuttāb al-ʿArab, Dimašq, 1974.

¹⁶ Cachia, Pierre: *The Egyptian Mawwāl*. Journal of Arabic Literature VIII. 1989, p. 78.

and skills to capture and retain the attention of an audience and to make people enjoy their narration as long as possible so that they earned a sufficient living.”¹⁷

In her other work, *Min namādiğ al- buṭūla aš-šaʿbiya fi al-waḥy al-ʿarabī*¹⁸ (*Types of Popular Heroism in the Arab Consciousness*) and particularly in the chapter *al- Buṭūla al-qawmiya fi ḥidmati al-qaḍiya al-waṭaniya, sirat Sayf ibn Dī Yazan*, (*Heroism in the Service of National Concern*) Nabīla Ibrāhīm’s inquiries take several directions. She expressed not only her opinion on the necessity of studying Arabic *siyar* scientifically as an important part of the Arab cultural heritage, but also offers the summary of the Sīra’s narrative with commentary on the historical background of the Sīra. The summary of the Sīra provides a coherent representation of the story and is focused predominantly on what Lena Jayyusi calls a sīra’s *founding cycle*,¹⁹ abbreviating or completely omitting a great mass of loosely or closely connected episodes. As any summary is by necessity selective, she turned to this solution probably with the intention of avoiding the confusions and difficulty of comprehension which stem from sīra’s large number of characters and events. The summary is thus a relatively easy and pleasant read for those who want to be familiar with the general character of the story. On the other hand, as the multitude of characters and scenes which enter and leave the story are for the above mentioned reasons ignored, more detailed summaries or the original Arabic version should be consulted if it is necessary to be intimately acquainted with the concrete narrative patterns and compositional techniques.²⁰ In her further analysis, following the traces of the two central characters based on actual historical figures, King Sayf ibn Dī Yazan and his rival Sayf Arḥad, Nabīla Ibrāhīm did not move far from purely historical questions and gives her explanation why these personalities, historically separated by eight centuries are bound together in one work of art.

General investigation in the Arabic sīra, in which sociological methodology was followed, was conducted by Muḥammad Rağab an-Nağğār in his extensive unpublished doctoral thesis,²¹ which consists of two thick volumes. Concentrating on the social background and historical conditionality of this literary phenomenon, the author departs from the fact that the Arabic cycles reflect the current situation in the country or more precisely how common people viewed it. In the first volume he comprehensively treats all well known *siyar* and turns his atten-

¹⁷ Ibrāhīm, Nabīla: *Sirat al-Amīra Dāt al-Himma, dirāsa muqārana*. Dār al-Kātib al-ʿArabī, al-Qāhira, 1968, p. 108.

¹⁸ Ibrāhīm, Nabīla: *Min namādiğ al- buṭūla aš-šaʿbiya fi al-waḥy al-ʿarabī*. See chapter *al-Buṭūla al-qawmiya fi ḥidmat al-qaḍiya al-waṭaniya sirat Sayf ibn Dī Yazan*. Nadwat at-ṭaqāfa wa al-ʿulūm Dubay, 1993, pp. 95-149.

¹⁹ *The Adventures of Sayf ben Di Yazan, an Arab Folk Epic*. Translation Lena Jayyusi, Indiana University Press, 1996, Translation’s introduction, p. xxii.

²⁰ For comprehensive summary of the sīrat Sayf ibn Dī Yazan see M.C.Lyons, *The Arabian Epic, Heroic and Oral Story-Telling*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, volume 3, pp. 586-641 or Paret, Rudi: *Ein Arabischer Volksroman*, Hannover 1924, pp. 4-71.

²¹ an-Nağğār, Muḥammad Rağab: *al-Baṭal fi al-Malāḥim aš-šaʿbiya al-ʿArabiya: Qaḍāyāhu wa Malāmiḥuhu al-Fanniya*. Risāla li duktūrāt. Kuliyat al-ʿAdāb, Ġāmiʿat al-Qāhira, 1976.

tion to the *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dī Yazan* especially in the third chapter – *al-Baṭal wa qaḍāyā at-taḥawwul ad-dīnī* (the Hero and Problems of Religious Transition) in which the author focuses predominantly on the struggle between religion and pagan magic (*aṣ-ṣīrāc bayna ad-dīn wa as-siḥr*). This conflict results in strange paradoxical confrontations where Islam stands against star, fire, idol worship or occult powers, Sayf against Sayf,²² sons of Sām against sons of Hām, good against evil. The existence of occult powers has always been associated with paganism. King Sayf himself cannot practice sorcery, but with the help of good sorcerers, pious men and magical objects, which were promised and enchanted for him, he successfully wins over all the enemies and spreads Islam faith all over the country. Therefore the abundance of magical elements and sorcery, which play a very important role in the narration, attracted Naḡḡār's attention and he explains that "common people of that time were under the profound influence of old pagan dogmas and beliefs which were in opposition to the new religion – Islam. The *Sīrat Sayf*, according to him, tells the story of the struggle between the new religion and old beliefs handed down for centuries in which a crucial mission to purify the new faith from pagan elements is apparent."²³ All in all, this *Sīra* represents for the author predominantly "the process of Arabization and consequent diffusion of Islam in Egypt with everything which such Arabization effected – language, religion and national assimilation."²⁴ He also reviews the various theories of other Arab scholars concerning the common people's aspirations and their possible motivation which determined the character of the *Sīra*. Despite the later criticism,²⁵ the importance of this broad study is apparent and it surely enhanced the academic value of the *sīra* literature in the Arab world.

Another noteworthy study on the *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dī Yazan* was carried out by Turayyā al-Manqūš in her lengthy work *Sayf ibn Dī Yazan bayna al-ḥaqīqa wa al-uṣṭūra wa al-amal*.²⁶ (*Sayf ibn Dī Yazan Between Truth, Legend and Hope*) She again studies the *Sīrat Sayf* predominantly from the general methodological perspective of historical philology. Her work has several strengths. Firstly, she offers an exhaustive analysis of historical, political and social background. She comprehensively examines old Yemenite, African history, medieval Egyptian Mamlūk history and relations between Abyssinians and Yemenites, Abyssinians and Egyptians or Muslims and Christians. Then she penetrates the details of the popular conception of the main hero Sayf who is seen, according to her, mainly as an accomplisher of three main missions:

²² Ḥimyarite Sayf ibn Dī Yazan against Abyssinian king Sayf Ar'ad.

²³ an-Naḡḡār, Muḥammad Raḡab: *al-Baṭal fī al-Malāḥim aṣ-ṣa'bīya al-cArabīya: Qaḍāyāhu wa Malāmiḥuhu al-Fannīya*. Risāla li duktūrāt. Kulliyat al-Ādāb, Ġāmi'at al-Qāhira, 1976, Volume I, p. 116.

²⁴ an-Naḡḡār, Muḥammad Raḡab: *al-Baṭal fī al-Malāḥim aṣ-ṣa'bīya al-cArabīya: Qaḍāyāhu wa Malāmiḥuhu al-Fannīya*. Risāla li duktūrāt. Kulliyat al-Ādāb, Ġāmi'at al-Qāhira, 1976, Volume I, p. 121.

²⁵ See below.

²⁶ Manqūš, Turayyā: *Sayf ibn Dī Yazan bayna al-Ḥaqīqa wa al-Uṣṭūra wa al-Amal*. Dār al-Ḥurriya, Baḡdād, 1980.

1. Economic mission – transferring the watercourse of the river Nile from Abyssinia to Egypt,
2. Political mission – subjection of Abyssinia to Egypt,
3. Religious mission – spread of Ibrāhīm's Islam in order to facilitate the victory of Muḥammad's Islam and destruction of all other religions which are in the opposition apart from Judaism.²⁷

Turayyā al-Manqūš also leads a polemic against the opinion of Muḥammad Raḡab an-Naḡḡār on the role of abundant magic and the supernatural in the *Sira* (*al-mawrūt as-siḥrī*) which he presented in his doctoral thesis.²⁸ She states, that “the *Sira* from the first page does not represent a struggle between a new religion-Islam and sorcery embodied in old cults and paganism. According to her Islam in the Mamlūk period did not represent a new religion but the religion in a state of decline and for that reason there was a great need for other strong powers, which would be able to help Islam to regain its potent and powerful position. King Sayf does combat wicked and ruthless sorcerers, on the other hand good magicians help him to accomplish his missions.”²⁹ Worthy of note is also the last chapter of this book dedicated to the *Sirat Sayf* in contemporary Yemenite literature. Indeed, the influence of the *sira* literature on modern art can be another interesting topic which could contribute to *sira*'s general understanding.

Saʿīd Jaqīn, a Moroccan man of letters and professor at the Faculty of Arts of University of Muḥammad al-Ḥāmis in Ribāt, focuses in the first part of his work *Qāla ar-Rāwī*³⁰ on the narrative analysis of Arab Popular Epic, compositional principles and story patterns (*al-bunyāt as-sardīya*, *al-ḥiṭābiya wa an-naṣṣiya*). His work shows that he was influenced also by leading foreign linguists and men of letters such as Eco, Propp and Todorov. He treats *sira*'s immense narrative corpus, which he calls “*bunyat al-iṭnāb*”, from various points of view and introduces compositional terminology like – *bunya kubrā*, *bunya suḡrā*, *wazīfa markazīya*, *wazīfa asāsīya*, *waḡāʾ if farʿīya* and others. These terms are later subdivided and explained through passages from the most significant Arabic *siyar* including the *Sirat Sayf ibn Dī Yazan*.

In the introduction to *Daḡīrat al-ʿAḡāʾib al-ʿArabīya*,³¹ his other book chiefly dedicated to the *Sirat Sayf*, Saʿīd Jaqīn openly states that despite the fact that Arab researchers have attempted to treat and study Popular Literature, “their work is still “sporadic”, “unsatisfactory” and “insufficient” in many directions and the interest of Arab scholars in Arabic Popular *sira* is still “infrequent”. Consequently, the research is partial and limited and without close scholarly cooperation incom-

²⁷ al-Manqūš, Turayyā: *Sayf ibn Dī Yazan bayna al-Ḥaqīqa wa al-Uṣṭūra wa al-Amal*. Dār al-Ḥurriya, Baḡdād, 1980, p. 127.

²⁸ See above.

²⁹ al-Manqūš, Turayyā: *Sayf ibn Dī Yazan bayna al-Ḥaqīqa wa al-Uṣṭūra wa al-Amal*. Dār al-Ḥurriya, 1980, pp. 230-232.

³⁰ Jaqīn, Saʿīd: *Qāla ar-Rāwī, al-Bunyāt al-Ḥikāʾīya fī as-Sira aṣ-Ṣaḥbiya*. Bayrūt, al-Markaz at-Taḡāfī al-ʿArabī, 1997.

³¹ Jaqīn, Saʿīd: *Daḡīrat al-ʿAḡāʾib al-ʿArabīya, Sayf ibn Dī Yazan*. Al-Markaz at-Taḡāfī al-ʿArabī Bayrūt, 1994.

plete.”³² As the title suggests, a particular emphasis is placed on “*‘ağā’ib*” – wondrous things and miracles, because, as the author states, this *Sira* is saturated with magic to a degree unmatched elsewhere. The whole book gives an account of the interesting places, characters, magical objects, enchantments, supernatural actions and magical plants, which occur in the *Sira*, however, the work is principally no more than a detailed explanatory index of interesting places, motifs and characters, which are depicted only on the basis of the material given by the *Sira* itself. No additional information or sources where the same or similar motifs appear are mentioned as *Ḥuṭrī ‘Urābī*, for example, attempts to offer in his recent, very complex and the most complete study on the *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dī Yazan* published to date.³³

The main concern of his work – *al-Bunya al-Uṣṭūrīya fī sīrat Sayf ibn Dī Yazan* (*The Fabulous Structure of the Sīrat Sayf ibn Dī Yazan*) is a comprehensive investigation of the roots of a great number of fragments of legends incorporated in the *Sira* and their anthropological extension. He presents not only his choice of the most important incidents, motifs, characters, places and other mythical and magical elements which he calls together “*al-canāṣir al-uṣṭūrīya*” (*elements of legend*), but also a detailed observation of their transmission and pseudo-historical connections providing other literary sources and parallels in which these motifs and elements appear (al-Qur’ān, al-Mas‘ūdī, al-Qazwīnī, Ibn Kaṭīr, Alf Layla wa layla and others). The author also treats major traditions of scholarship in the Arabic popular *sira* and Popular Literature generally and comments on similarities and parallels found in various popular genres. In contrast to scholars encountered so far, *Ḥuṭrī ‘Urābī* dedicated a whole section to the language of the *sira* in which poetry occupies considerable attention. Only recently *as-sīra aṣ-ṣa‘bīya* started to be viewed as literature which has its genesis in oral tradition that is to say as an entity with different structural principles and different mode of composition. *Ḥuṭrī ‘Urābī* is one of those who generally treats the *Sira* as a principally oral art distinct from the written literature and appears to value poetry as an inseparable and significant component of this literary genre. He comments extensively on the distinct diversity of rhyme structures and especially on the great variety of functions which poetry performs – many of them tightly bound with principally oral delivery (*al-ilqā’ aṣ-ṣifāhī*, *al-inṣād al-ṣifāhī*) of this genre.

Although Arab scholars have done important groundwork, serious study of the *Sīrat Sayf* and other Popular *siyar* has only begun. Many Arab men of letters and intellectuals in recent decades recognized the value of the indigenous folk heritage (*turāt ṣa‘bī ṣifāhī*). Thanks to this dramatic change the age-old scientific polemic against the popular vernacular story arts has nearly faded away and new directions of investigation of Arab Popular Epic have been introduced (e.g. a new distinctive approach to Popular Literature in the Arab world in which the musico-

³² Jaqṭīn, Sa‘īd: *Daḥīrat al-‘Ağā’ib al-‘Arabīya, Sayf ibn Dī Yazan*. Al-Markaz at-Taḳāfī al-‘Arabī. Bayrūt, 1994, p. 7.

³³ *‘Urābī, Ḥuṭrī: al-Bunya al-Uṣṭūrīya fī sīrat Sayf ibn Dī Yazan*. Nawwāra li at- Tarḡama wa an-Naṣr, Al-Qāhira, 1994.

logical aspect and the actual performance of the *sīrat Banī Hilāl* was taken into the account – *dirāsāt aškāl adā' as-sīra* – was conducted by Muḥammad Aḥmad ʿUmrān in his book *Mūsīqā as-Sīra al-Hilālīya*.³⁴

Also foreign scholarship in this branch of study in Arabic literature underwent a very significant development of scientific approach from critical assessment conducted by Gustave E. von Grunebaum and historical questions, which concentrated on *sīra*'s authorship and time of composition, to new comparative methodologies conducted by trained folklorists, ethnographers and ethnomusicologists, who concentrate on *sīra*'s musical aspect. However, in this case a major hindrance has been difficult accessibility of the original reciters with musical instruments and written forms of *siyar* cannot completely substitute its actual spontaneous hearing. New approaches combine literary criticism and examination of oral manifestations and concentrate predominantly on facilitating identification, preservation and promotion of this fluid cultural heritage. They are slowly turning away from questions of sources of origin and focusing on linguistic aspects and formation of narrative traditions. However, despite the better start in the serious research caused by actual scientific discovery of the Arab oral tradition, foreign scholarship still lacks a modern comprehensive study primarily dedicated to the *Sīrat Sayf ibn Ḍī Yazan*.

³⁴ Muḥammad Aḥmad ʿUmrān: *Mūsīqā as-Sīra al-Hilālīya*. Al-Maḡlis al-Aʿlā lil-ṭaqāfa, al-Qāhira, 1997.