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**Reflections on the Origin  
of *Sīrat Dāt al-Himma***

For the majority of anonymous epic poetry it is very difficult to define the exact date and place of composition. Often the results of laborious studies are only approximate and a research worker has to content himself with stating the period and geographical area in which the composition of a given work has taken place.

As all other epic works, the romances of Arab chivalry originated from shorter forms and developed in the long process of evolution, first transmitted orally, then only recorded in writing. Having been altered and completed by subsequent story-tellers, copyists or editors of unified versions they multiplied in volume due to interpolations of different periods and origins.

The composition of the *Sīrat Dāt al-Himma* was the result of such a long evolutionary process. This huge (ca. 5 thousand pages) work comprises a pseudo-historical and half-legendary history of the Arabs and their wars against Byzantium from the period of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Mālik (685–705) till the end of the caliphate of the Abbāsids al-Wāṭiq (842–847). The final page of the work gives a brief account of later events from the history of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate ending with the incursion of the Salġūq Turks into Asia Minor. The romance has been enriched with the history of a North Arabic tribe, the Kilāb, and several generations of their leaders among whom the most famous are Dāt al-Himma and her son, 'Abd al-Wahhāb. Their amazing exploits constitute the main subject of the romance. The adventures of Dāt al-Himma which occupy a greater part of the romance (from chapter 6 till 70) are preceded by a short history of her forebears: al-Hārit, Ġunduba, aṣ-Ṣaḥṣāh and Mazlūm, her father. Initially the centre of the action is Al-Ḥiġāz, the dwelling place of the Kilāb and their rivals, the Banū Sulaym as well as birthplace of Dāt al-Himma and that of the principal negative character of the romance, 'Uqba. The place of action changes in consequence of the important historical events: the fall of the Umayyad dynasty and the 'Abbāsids coming to power. After a victorious war against



Byzantium the Kilāb and the Sulaym settled on the frontiers and from now on the main place of action becomes Melitene (arab. Malatya) where other principal figures of the romance are born: 'Abd al-Wahhāb, his faithful friend al-Baṭṭāl and 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd Allāh, the chief of the Banū Sulaym.

It has been already proved by Marius Canard that *Sīrat Dāt al-Himma* consists of two parts which differ in character and length: the first and shorter part comprising the history of Dāt al-Himma's forefathers which, because of the part played by Al-Ḥiğāz, may be called Ḥiğāzian (M. Canard calls it Syro-Umayyad) and the second and longer part, called Melitenian, recounting the life and exploits of Dāt al-Himma<sup>1</sup>.

Certain information about the date and place of the composition of the romance is provided by the text itself. Frequently and correctly used geographical names are situated in Northern Syria and Upper Mesopotamia and a relatively true picture of the Christian world indicates that a place for the composition of the work should be looked for in this region. The final account of the Turks, who under Aq Sunqur's command recaptured Ankara and restored the country of Islam to its old splendour, refers most probably to the Salğūq Turks and their inroad to Asia Minor; on the other hand, several episodes in the romance have been inspired by the first Crusade.

The closing date of the romance is the year 1163. A record in a preserved work by Samaw'al Ibn Yahyā al-Mağribī says that the author became acquainted with several chivalric romances, the *Sīrat Dāt al-Himma* among them, long before then<sup>2</sup>. There exist still other proofs that the basic structure of the romance and its main plots antedate by far the composition of the work in its present form.

Our presumption will be justified if we remember that in the years 1023–1079 supremacy over Aleppo and its environs was held by the emirs of the Kilāb from the Mirdāsīd dynasty, who in the beginning of the 9th century left Iraq for Northern Syria and recognized the Fāṭimid sovereignty<sup>3</sup>. As a matter of fact the migration of the Kilāb to this territory had started much earlier since already in 936–937 the emir of this tribe was appointed governor of Aleppo<sup>4</sup>. The history of the Mirdāsīds, who in the 11th century played an important part as the defenders of the frontiers, bears a striking resemblance to a whole series of vicissitudes of the Kilābs in the Melitenian part of the *Dāt al-Himma*. Both the parties being far away from the central authorities, carried on a de facto independent policy, protecting the border-land against the advance of Byzantium, entering from time to time into alliances with the Byzantine emperors, becoming influential at the caliph's court or falling into disgrace. The unsuccessful attempt to seize Aleppo made in 1030 by Romanus III, who was de-

<sup>1</sup> M. Canard, *Delhemma. Épopée arabe des guerres arabo-byzantines*, "Byzantion" X (1935), pp. 283–300; *Dhu 'l-Himma*, in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New ed., vol. II, Leiden-London, 1965, p. 237 ff.

<sup>2</sup> M. Canard, op. cit., p. 238.

<sup>3</sup> M. Sobenheim, *Mirdāsīdes*, in: *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, vol. III, p. 585.

<sup>4</sup> J. Sauvaget, *Halab*, in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. III, p. 86.



feated and put to flight having left an enormous booty to the Arabs<sup>5</sup>, has been rendered in the romance in the form of several expeditions launched by the emperor Armānūs and driven back by the Kilābs. The conclusion of a peace treaty by Naṣr Ibn Ṣāliḥ Ibn Mirdās, who sent envoys to Constantinople and committed himself to pay tribute<sup>6</sup>, has been reversed and duplicated: it is the emperor Armānūs who having been captured by emir 'Abd al-Wahhāb was forced to sign a truce and laid under tribute. Punitive expeditions sent twice by the Fāṭimid caliph Az-Zāhir (1021–1035) against the Mirdāsids, the first of which ended in failure and the death of the founder of the dynasty, Ṣāliḥ Ibn Mirdās, in 1029 and the second in that of his son and successor. Naṣr Ibn Ṣāliḥ in 1035 (during the latter the caliph's commandor-in-chief secured the emperor's neutrality)<sup>7</sup> have their counterparts on the campaigns launched by caliphs against the Kilābs on concluding a peace and securing emperors' support.

A certain event which had taken place before the seizure of Aleppo inspired several episodes in the romance. The event referred to deals with the contest for Aleppo in 1009 between Sayf ad-Dawla's grandson from the Ḥamdānid dynasty and Maṣṣūr, a Ḥamdānid Mameluke in which the Kilāb took the side of the latter and contributed greatly towards his victory. When, however, the emirs claimed a promised reward Maṣṣūr invited them to feast in the course of which some of them were murdered and some others put in irons, Ṣāliḥ among them. In 1014, after three-year imprisonment, Ṣāliḥ managed to escape, handcuffed according to some traditions or, as others will have it, he regained his freedom by the means of a file secretly delivered him to his prison. He was hiding for some time, then organized the Kilābs, defeated Maṣṣūr and took him prisoner<sup>8</sup>. In the romance the heroes of these adventures are Dāt al-Himma and her son, the emir 'Abd al-Wahhāb. In one of the episodes the Abbasid caliph al-Amīn summoned Dāt al-Himma together with 'Abd al-Wahhāb and all the Kilābi emirs to his court where, at 'Uqba's instigation, they were arrested and cast into prison. However, one of their faithful servants set them free with the help of a file he had wrapped in his garments. Then, in their turn, the Kilābs attacked the palace and took the caliph prisoner (chapters 32–33). In another episode the caliph Al-Mu'taṣim pretending his goodwill called the emirs of the Kilāb to his court, immediately imprisoned them and kept them seven years in jail (chapters 41–42). The character of 'Uqba seems to resemble the implacable enemy of the Mirdāsids, Anuštikīn ad-Dizbarī, a Fatimid general, whose intrigues at Az-Zāhir's court led to the above mentioned penal expeditions in 1029 and 1035.

The analogies drawn above allow to presume that the composition of the Melitenian part of the *Sīrat Dāt al-Himma* took place in north Syria in the Mirdāsīd period and soon after their submission to the Salḡūk rule in 1079. The results of M. Canard's

<sup>5</sup> M. S o b e r n h e i m, *Šibl ad-Dawla*, in: *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, vol. IV, p. 373 f.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> M. S o b e r n h e i m, *Ṣāliḥ b. Mirdās*, in: *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, vol. IV, p. 116 f.



studies, however, take us back even further. In his articles<sup>9</sup> he has proved convincingly that a cycle of legends recounting the famous emir of Melitene 'Amr (or 'Umar) Ibn 'Ubajd Allāh al-Aqṭa' of the Banū Sulaym constitutes the epic nucleus of the Melitenian part of the romance. Most probably the legends came into being soon after the glorious death of 'Amr in battle-field in 863. After the fall of power of this tribe and on their passing over to Byzantium in the 10th century the Kilāb adopted these legends and transformed them into the epic of their own tribe attributing heroic deeds of 'Amr to Dāt al-Himma and to her son. The fact that some epizodes of the Sīrat Dāt al-Himma are of an earlier date does not contradict our hypothesis. If we reconsider the important part played by the Kilāb in north Syria in the 10–11th century (analogous to the one played by the Sulaym in Upper Mesopotamia in the 9th century) the conclusion we come to again is that a transformation of the legends of 'Amr and addition of the epizodes derived from the history of the Mirdāsīd emirs must have taken place in the days of their glory in the area dominated by them yet still under the Fatimid sovereignty.

A close reading of the text testifies to the hypothesis that the Melitenian part of the romance took shape during the reign of the Shi'ite Fatimids. In this part (and only in it) a special homage is paid to the descendants of Al-Ḥusayn, the second son of Ali. These extremely pious and noble characters are either great warriors or venerable martyrs. This fact will come into prominence if we remember that the Fāṭimids traced their origin to Fāṭima, a daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad in the Al-Ḥusayn line. Dāt al-Himma is the honorable name attributed to the principal heroine of the romance, her real one being Fāṭima. The increasing power of the Salḡūk Turks has found its reflection at the end of the romance where, under Aq Sunqur's command, they crush the Byzantines and take control over the Abbasid caliphate. In the romance itself they do not play any important part being usually represented as the squads of archers within the anonymous mass of people who make up the caliphs' army. It is proper to add that the Turkish mercenaries served in the Mirdāsīd army. Late in their reign the Mirdāsīd recognized the Salḡūk sovereignty; Aleppo was lost in 1079 and in 1086 it received a Salḡūk governor, Qāsim ad-Dawla Aq Sunqur, appointed by Malikšāh<sup>10</sup>.

In the Melitenian part of the romance another interesting fact can be observed: the caliphs use the title "imām" more often than "ḥalīfa" or "amīr al-mu'minīn" which is characteristic of the Shi'ite Fāṭimids. The fact that the presence of the so-called "Blacks" in the Dāt al-Himma's army is a matter of particular importance in this part of the romance seems to confirm our hypothesis. They are held in estimation for their extraordinary valour but at the same time they are often a troublesome stirring up seditions and even taking sides with Byzantium. The revolts of the black slaves were not uncommon in the history, yet the growing significance of the Sudanese

<sup>9</sup> M. Canard, op. cit., pp. 183–188; *Les principaux personnages du roman de chevalerie arabe Dāt al-Himma wa'l-Baṭṭāl*, "Arabica" VIII 2 (1961), pp. 158–173.

<sup>10</sup> J. Sauvaget, op. cit., p. 86.



slaves purchased for military service is particularly characteristic of the reign of Al-Mustansir (1035–1094) and especially of the regency of his mother, a former Sudanese slave<sup>11</sup>.

The first Crusade is the event slightly traced in the romance. Apart from a single allusion to the campaign launched by a Frankish king with the intention to conquer Jerusalem (chapter 61) references are made to a noble and courageous Frankish king, Kunda farūn (chapter 18) and to the treacherous and deceitful emperor Bimund whose historical counterparts are Godefroy and Boemund. Several geographical names such as Antioch, Tripoli, Jerusalem, Ascalon, Tiberias might also be reminiscences of the first Crusade. This would prove that the final version of the romance as al-Mağribī knew it, had been drawn up in a place a good distance off from the military operations. In this period (i.e. before 1163) the Fatimids no longer held any territory in Syria and the only great cultural centre under their domination was Cairo.

Thus the composition of the Melitenian part of the romance underwent most probably the following stages:

1. A cycle of legends dealing with the Banū Sulaym and their famous leader, the Melitenian emir 'Amr ('Umar) Ibn 'Ubayd Allāh al-Aqṭa' which originated in Upper Mesopotamia shortly after his death in 863.

2. The adoption of these legends by the Banu Kilāb emirs, transformation of the principal characters and enrichment of the existing plots with new episodes derived from the history of the Mirdāsids.

3. The romance finally took shape in Cairo before 1163. It is likely that the above version was subject to alterations their extent however, is impossible to ascertain.

As for the first and shorter part of the romance, called here Ḥiğāzian and recording the history of Dāt al-Himma's ancestry, large fragments of it have certain features in common with "The Tale of 'Umar an-Nu'mān" incorporated into *The Arabian Nights*. Close reading of the text provides us with further information confirming M. Canard's suggestion that the two parts of the *Sīrat Dāt al-Himma* are each a version of two cycles of different periods and origins. Some important hints are to be found in the announcements of future events, so typical of this literary genre. In the beginning of the romance the narrator informs us that "the first to be told is the story of Al-Ḥārīt and his son Ġunduba, whereafter the tale of emir Aṣ-Ṣaḥṣāḥ ..." Next two foreshadowings take the form of prophetic dreams: one refers to the coming births of Ġunduba and Aṣ-Ṣaḥṣāḥ (beginning of chapter 1), the other fortells the birth and future vicissitudes of Aṣ-Ṣaḥṣāḥ (end of chapter 1). None of these announcements makes reference to Dāt al-Himma. She is mentioned for the first time at the end of the tale of Aṣ-Ṣaḥṣāḥ, not till his death while Mazlūm, her father is being introduced (beginning of the chapter 6).

The elimination of the fragments of the Ḥiğāzian part signed with the name of Nağd ibn Hišām al-'Amirī gives quite interesting results. What consequently remains is a certain homogenous whole covering the history of Al-Ḥārīt, Ġunduba and partly

<sup>11</sup> M. Canard, *Fāṭimids*, in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. II, pp. 850–862.

that of Aṣ-Ṣaḥṣāḥ. A sequel to the story of Aṣ-Ṣaḥṣāḥ form tales shawing marked affinities with "The Tale of 'Umar an-Nu'mān". According to Nisba Al-'Āmirī, the narrator of the romance was affiliated to 'Āmir's tribe closely related to the Kilāb. Worthy of notice is the information given by Ruṣḍī Ṣāliḥ<sup>12</sup> about the existence of the work by Nağd Ibn Hišām al-Hāsimī al-Hiğazī entitled the "Sīrat Ğunduba". A brief summary shows it clearly that the reference is made to the same fragments of the Hiğāzian part which are signed with the name of Nağd Ibn Hišām al-'Āmirī. The title hero of the Sīrat Ğunduba bears the name of Dū al-Himma which in its feminine form was transferred to the main heroine of the Sīrat Dāt al-Himma, most probably after the Hiğāzian part containing the tale of Nağd Ibn Hišām had been in-corporated to the hitherto existing structure of the romance. It is to be regretted that Ruṣḍī Ṣāliḥ did not give the source he had made use of while discussing the Sīrat Ğunduba.

On the basis of the above considerations it can be presumed that the different elements which entered into the creation of the romance are as follows:

1. The tale of Nağd Ibn Hišām which for a long time existed independently under the title of the Sīrat Ğunduba and which constitutes the original core of its Hiğāzian part.
2. Later interpolations which are partly in common with The Tale of 'Umar an-Nu'mān.
3. The Melitenian part, the heroine of which is Dāt al-Himma. It is quite impossible to give an exact date for the actual uniting of the Hiğāzian and Melitenian parts. The work by Al-Mağrībī offers no hints in this respect. The lack of reference to Dāt al-Himma in the narrator's anticipate events and in the prophetic dreams in the beginning of the romance makes it possible to presume that for a long time both parts of the romance have existed separately.

<sup>12</sup> Aḥmad Ruṣḍī Ṣāliḥ, *Funūn al-adab aš-ša'bi*, vol. II, Cairo 1956, p. 70 ff.