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# TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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## ARABIC LITERATURE: POETICS AND STYLISTICS. VIII: FORMULAIC EXPRESSIONS IN *SĪRAT 'ANTAR*

### I

Works in the *sīra* genre, which have received the name “folk romances”, that is not quite correct, but convenient for scholarly purposes, make up an extensive branch of the Medieval heroic-romantic epic of the Arabs. In the first half of the 20th century, when European orientalist began to take a serious interest in them, numerous data was accumulated on the most popular Arabic “folk romances” and about their performance and performers [1]. Later, a systematic historical-cultural study of works of the *sīra* genre began [2]; in most of the latest works about the Arabic “folk romance”, historical-cultural issues still dominate [3], while insufficient attention is given to issues of pure literary criticism [4]. Some of them have been studied poorly, while others have never been examined at all. The latter include the issue on the features of the language of the Arabic “folk romance” as an element of technique of oral performance [5]. This is what we shall discuss in our work.

Thanks to the works of European scholars of the 19th century, who observed public performances of *sīra* in large cities of al-Shām and Miṣr, we have valuable information about Arab storytellers, the manner of their performance and their repertoire.

For example, it is well-known that in the first half of the 19th century, professional storytellers in Egypt performed several “folk romances”, while each storyteller specialized in performing a certain “romance”. Performers of the same “romance” joined groups, like departments of an organization. The group of *shu'arā'* performed *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, the group of *muḥaddithes* performed *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*, and the group *'Antariyya* performed *Sīrat 'Antar*. The first two “romances” were told “by heart”, while the last was read from a book. Verses, which are interspersed in the “romance” with prose fragments, were recited in a sing-song voice to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument. The storyteller emphasized the most important parts of the story by a change in voice, mimicry and gestures. There is also

information about the place where the session were held, the reaction of the listeners to the story, the payment to the storytellers, etc [6].

The reports of Lane and Clot-bey make it possible to propose the existence of well-known and firmly established principles of professional mastery and professional training of storytellers, handed down from generation to generation and preserving the “folk romances” and their reproduction in each performance session in a traditional, generally accepted form over the course of several centuries. Arab storytellers (and as far as two of the groups are concerned this is in no doubt) possessed the technique of oral creation.

Arab “folk romances”, as was already noted, are characterized by a combination of prose and poems. Their ratio changes from “romance” to “romance”, but usually the percentage of prose is much higher. In *Sīrat 'Antar* poems make up less than 10% of the entire text: in the majority of other “folk romances”, as we saw from a brief look at them, the percentage of poems is approximately the same. Only one exception is known — *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. According to Pantůček's calculations, in printed publications prose makes up 63% and poems 37%, and in the Berlin manuscripts the ratio is 51.5% and 48.5% accordingly [7]. Thus, poems make up a relatively small part of the text of most “romances”, although they perform important functions [8].

The poems were evidently borrowed from the *diwāns* of famous poets [9] and were inserted into the “romances” as a foreign element. Their language is more complex than the prose language of the *sīra* [10], and it is likely that the storytellers performed them by heart [11] or from a manuscript.

For these reasons, in examining the language of the *sīra* as an element of oral technique, we will restrict our attention to the prose language of the “folk romance” about 'Antar.