

I



INTRODUCTION

The Aim and Scope of This Work

Nabaṭi poetry is the popular vernacular poetry of Arabia. Due to the great mobility of the Arab tribes, it is not easy to confine this poetic tradition to one particular locality; it is widespread throughout the Arabian Peninsula. The frequent droughts and famines and the political instability of Arabia in the past forced whole tribes and settlements to migrate to the north and east, carrying with them their Nabaṭi poetic tradition. But the indigenous home of Nabaṭi poetry is Najd, the vast territory that includes the central Arabian plateau and the areas around it. All renowned Nabaṭi poets come from Najd, and the diction of this poetry conforms to the colloquial speech of that region. People outside Najd who are familiar with Nabaṭi poetry are people who originally came from that region, where this poetry is most popular and whence it diffused to the periphery.

As is well known by the scholars in the field, the word *nabaṭī* originally referred to the language of the Nabataeans. However, its meaning was eventually extended by the early Arab philologists until it came to be applied loosely to any speech that did not strictly conform to the rules of classical Arabic. It is in this latter sense that the word was applied by learned compilers to the vernacular poetry of Arabia, in order to set it apart from the well-established and highly respected classical tradition. This usage of the word *Nabaṭi*, therefore, is not intended to imply that this poetry is linked in any way to the Nabataeans, but means only that it is composed in vernacular, rather than classical, literary Arabic.

Nabaṭi poets rarely use the term *nabaṭī* in reference to themselves or to their poetry, and many of them do not even know this sense of the word.¹ It is not certain when or by whom the term was first used in this context. Ibn Khaldūn, who was the first to write about this poetry, did not call it *nabaṭī* but reported that it was called *badawī*, *qaysī*, *ḥawrānī*, or *aṣma'īyāt* (1967:1125). The first recorded use of the word *nabaṭī* in reference to vernacular poetry is in a poem by Abū Ḥamzih al-ʿĀmrī, a Nabaṭi poet who died over four centuries ago. W. G. Palgrave, who claims to have traversed Arabia in 1862, mentions Nabaṭi poetry three

times (1865–1866:I, 169, 281, 335).² R. F. Burton (1878:224) also mentions Nabaṭi poetry, but mistakes Nabaṭi for Nabataean. The term now appears in the titles of many printed collections and anthologies.³

The Nabaṭi poet may be a town amir, a tribal sheikh, a desert warrior, a daring marauder, a poor farmer, or a member of the urban elite. As in ancient times, the people of premodern Arabia were a nation of poets. Poetic composition was not merely an artistic vocation practiced by professionals exercising their skills in composing panegyrics to wealthy patrons or in entertaining spectators and passive audiences. Poets did not constitute a special class and no formal training or initiation was involved in becoming a poet. But, while anyone could be a poet, there were, of course, different grades and ranks among them.

In premodern Arabia there was considerable reliance on the well-developed and highly stylized idiom of Nabaṭi poetry as a means of communication, especially on solemn or formal occasions. Tribal chiefs and town amirs as well as relatives and friends communicated with one another in poems. Tribal territories, grazing areas, water holes, desert roads and stations; grievances, threats, battles, and other events, large and small—all were recorded and described in poems. Thus, Nabaṭi poetry deals with a variety of topics ranging from the sublime to the most mundane and pertaining to collective as well as personal issues; but it remains, like classical Arabic poetry, predominantly boastful, panegyric, elegiac, and amatory.

Less than a generation ago, Nabaṭi poetry still constituted a vigorous and dynamic tradition; some of its acknowledged masters are still living today. The circumstances of its composition and the manner of its delivery and transmission still survive in the memories of many individuals, some of whom had participated personally in events commemorated by this poetry.

Recent changes in the political organization and socioeconomic structure of Arabia, however, have dealt a severe blow to the vitality and vigor of this poetic tradition; it is disappearing rapidly, and the number of its practitioners is decreasing at an alarming rate. Its popularity is diminishing and its propagation has become restricted to printed anthologies and to a limited number of enthusiasts and old-timers who engage in such activity to pass the time and lament the past. Nabaṭi poets have become silent or turned to such hackneyed themes as unfulfilled love, moral exhortation, and praise of government projects and officials. Their words can no longer arouse the masses and impel them to perform acts of manliness and chivalry. The modern generation can no longer understand the language of this poetry or appreciate its style and imagery. The traditional activities and life-styles which caused Nabaṭi poetry to flourish and from which it drew its material have in recent times become

radically altered or have disappeared along with the lore associated with them. The way of life characterized by incessant forays, perpetual feuds, constantly shifting tribal alliances, and the sudden rise and fall of emirates and sheikhdoms, which gave impetus to this poetry, now no longer exists. Raiding is virtually extinct and the establishment of a strong central government has put an end to the expression of tribal feuds and parochial conflicts. The traditional societies of the Arabian Peninsula are rapidly being transformed into modern states whose ties with the past are becoming very brittle. Educational institutions and the modern media of communication have also stripped popular poetry of its social role.

Serious and concentrated effort must be devoted to salvaging and studying this poetry and examining it in its proper social context before the tradition dies out completely and before its diction becomes even more difficult to understand. In addition to its aesthetic appeal, it is a valuable source—often the only one available—of information on the culture and history of premodern Arabia. Furthermore, certain enigmatic questions concerning the composition, transmission, and authenticity of classical Arabic poetry can best be resolved by taking a close look at this vernacular poetry, which is the direct descendant of the classical tradition.

This book is divided into an introduction and three parts. The first part consists of an overview of Nabaṭi poetry in the context of premodern Arabian society and culture. Nabaṭi poetry is so entwined with premodern Arabian life and so filled with allusions to historical events and traditional practices that, in order to perceive its real value and discern its true artistic quality, one must establish familiarity not only with its vernacular diction but, perhaps more importantly, with the way of life that determined its most salient characteristics. The first part of this study is therefore intended to give the reader a glimpse of life in premodern Arabia and to demonstrate that both Nabaṭi poetry and ancient Arabian poetry existed and flourished under essentially the same social and environmental conditions and fulfilled the same social and political functions.

The second part of this work will deal with the composition, transmission, and performance of Nabaṭi poetry. Evidence will be presented to show that composition and transmission in Nabaṭi poetry are separate activities and, consequently, that memory plays a great role in its transmission. The interaction between written and oral modes of transmission will be examined and a distinction will be made between specific and general modes of transmission. In the chapter dealing with performance, I shall discuss the traditional performance context and also touch upon the role of radio and television in altering this traditional context. I shall also give a brief survey of the various occasions for, and manners of, the singing of Nabaṭi poetry.

The third part of this work is comparative. There I shall analyze the

prosody of Nabaṭi poetry and examine its formal and historical affinities with classical Arabic poetry in order to demonstrate that the roots of this popular vernacular tradition can be traced back to the classical tradition and that, in fact, it never entirely lost touch with this tradition. The historical relationship of Nabaṭi to classical poetry is supplemented by their literary relationship; evidence will be presented to show that among Nabaṭi poets were some who knew how to read and write and who had direct access to the mainstream of Arabic literature. The topic of literacy in Nabaṭi poetry is of relevance, not only to the discussion of its relationship to the Arabic literary tradition as a whole but also to the examination of its composition and transmission, where it is maintained that the “oral” process and the “written” process coexist and overlap.

The concluding chapter is an examination of the composition and transmission of classical Arabic poetry in the light of its unmistakable kinship with Nabaṭi poetry. In this chapter I shall take issue with some scholars who have attempted to apply oral-formulaic theories—in particular the Parry-Lord theory—to classical Arabic poetry. I shall also attempt to clarify the nature of “orality” in relation to Arabic poetry, in order to demonstrate that the term “oral poetry” should not be considered synonymous with the term “oral-formulaic” poetry.

I must admit that I am more committed to the Nabaṭi poetic tradition itself than to any specific approach or theoretical model in my consideration of it. The object of this work is not to force on the reader a dry and rigid theoretical argument; my principal aim is rather to present a broad perspective of Nabaṭi poetry and to communicate some of the enthusiasm I feel about this tradition. If I can arouse the interest of others in this long-neglected field, I would consider my mission accomplished. With that aim in mind, I shall include many poetic examples and bits of information about famous Nabaṭi poets although, regretfully, much had to be left out.

This work is in no way meant to be the last word on Nabaṭi poetry. The field is too complex and extensive for one individual to master and say everything that can be said about it. The Nabaṭi tradition extends over a vast geographical area and spans a long period of time. The existing scattered treatments and published collections, though admittedly voluminous, barely scratch the surface of this rich field. There are, unfortunately, a very few examples of Nabaṭi poetry in its early stages, and we know little about poets of past generations, except perhaps about some who distinguished themselves in other fields as well, such as politics, trade, or learning. It will take a great deal of diligent research to fill some of the gaps existing in our knowledge of the history and development of Nabaṭi poetry. I therefore regard my own work as more in the nature of

a preliminary study which sets forth some of the considerations and problems involved in the investigation of Nabaṭi poetry.

Translation and Transliteration

The difficulties of translating poetry are well known and I need not dwell on them here. Poetic diction is compact and highly specialized. The poetic message is conveyed not only through the denotative meanings of words but also through the images, resonances, connotations, and associations they evoke. The affective properties and suggestive powers of a word are irretrievably lost once it is translated into another language. This makes the exact word-for-word translation of poetry impossible.

The difficulty is compounded when we are dealing with languages, cultures, and poetic traditions that are far apart. Not only are Arabic and English very different but, even more crucial, the aesthetic sensibilities and the world view of a desert Arab are quite different from those of an urban Westerner. There are Arabic words and idioms with no corresponding English equivalents. There are also concepts, images, and metaphors related to the desert environment and nomadic life that cannot be easily rendered for the Western audience. Nabaṭi poetry is, moreover, suffused with popular borrowings, religious allusions, and historical references that an outsider cannot understand without elaborate commentaries. When composing, the Nabaṭi poet assumes that his audience is thoroughly familiar with local traditions, history, and geography as well as with a large repertoire of other poems and lore.

Another difficulty in translating Nabaṭi poetry is best expressed in the words of H. A. R. Gibb in his discussion of the difficulty of translating classical Arabic poetry.

The general similarity in structure and content of the pre-Islamic odes may give, especially when they are read in translation, an impression of monotony, almost of bareness, mirroring with a certain rude force the uniformity of desert life, its concreteness, realism, absence of shading and of introspection. Where the poet is held almost wholly to specific themes, and his aim is to embellish those themes with all the art at his command, to surpass his predecessors and rivals in beauty, expressiveness, terseness of phrase, in fidelity of description and grasp of reality, then such poetry can never be satisfactorily translated into any other language, just because the thing said varies so little and the whole art lies in the untranslatable manner of saying it. (1963:21–22)

Added to all these difficulties is the fact that the rendition of a poem in one language into a poem in another language is, like poetic composition itself, a skill which, alas, we do not all possess. In belaboring these points, I am not trying to excuse any anticipated shortcomings on my own part, but rather to vindicate the artistic qualities of Nabaṭī poetry in the event that my translations fail to communicate these qualities.

In view of the number of poetic examples presented in this work, it would have been time-consuming and economically impracticable to present transliterations of all of them. Poetry will be transliterated only when necessary, as in the discussions of the prosody and language of Nabaṭī poetry and of the question of literacy. In the main, poetic examples will be given in translated form only, and, if an example is taken from a published source, reference will be given to that source so that anyone interested in the text in its original language can find it.

Names of classical authors and works, classical literary terms, and names of well-known historical figures are transliterated according to the system adopted by the Library of Congress for the transliteration of Arabic. However, colloquial lexical items, the names of tribal poets and less well-known Arabian chiefs and amirs, and the Nabaṭī verses themselves are transliterated according to the system described in chapter 7. The Library of Congress system, which employs a combination of two graphic symbols to represent certain sounds, is inadequate for transliterating vernacular Arabic which, unlike literary Arabic, allows consonant clusters in certain positions. For example, the literary pronunciation of the word meaning "Canopus" is *suhayl*, but in the colloquial pronunciation the vowel of the initial syllable drops and the word becomes *shēl*; thus, according to the conventional system for transliterating literary Arabic, the initial consonant cluster could be interpreted as a combination of two graphic symbols representing one sound only, namely, a voiceless alveopalatal fricative (*š*), and the resulting word (*šēl*) would then not mean Canopus, but "a load," "carrying." Place names will in general be given their most common Western orthography.

Survey of Sources

The first major work on Nabaṭī poetry was the voluminous *Diwan aus Centralarabien* (1900–1901) by Albert Socin. Socin was a diligent scholar and his collection is truly impressive but, as a pioneer, his work shows some serious drawbacks. The collection is based on manuscripts, some of which Socin had bought in Mesopotamia and others of which had been brought from Najd by Charles Huber. In addition, Socin had spent some time in Mesopotamia working with three expatriates: Muḥammad al-Ḥasāwī from al-Hasa whom he characterized as being

“terribly inept and in fact stupid” (ibid., 5); Musfir from ‘Unaizah who, says Socin, “had no endurance and finally ran away in anger because he could not take the intellectual work which I demanded from him paying him good money” (ibid., 4); and Muḥammad al-Efendi from Buraidah who is also accused of being inept by Socin, who goes on to say:

I had much trouble with him and when I exposed him to cross examination in cases which seemed to me problematic, he was impatient and even angry. . . . In time, Muḥammad al-Efendi learned how to explain things properly and understand what I was after. About metrics he understood—we can nearly say luckily—absolutely nothing. (Ibid., 3)

Later, Socin goes so far as to say of his informants: “As far as my informants whom I mentioned in §2–6, and who do have to a degree a certain reputation among their peers as singers, are concerned, none of them had any sense of rhythm. The rhythm did not always come out even when they were singing” (ibid., 55).

Socin presents the poetry in his collection as a linguistic corpus, with little regard for its artistic merits; and although on more than one occasion (ibid., 7, 45) he admits his inability to comprehend thoroughly the poems in his collection, he opens his discussion on the content of the poetry by asserting that it is “fairly valueless and insignificant” (ibid., 46–47). Such a pronouncement has the ring of reflexive reaction rather than reflective judgment. Socin’s work suffers from his insensitivity to Nabaṭi poetry and his unfamiliarity with the historical and social conditions of the Arabian Peninsula which this poetry reflects. His analysis is verbose and pedantic, his notes circuitous, and his translations not infrequently far off the mark. He despises his informants and denigrates their insight and intuition, and blames them for his own shortcomings without entertaining the possibility that his manner of conducting research and his technique of soliciting information might be faulty. Because Socin’s vision was marred by his racial and literary prejudices, his work turned out to be more a disparagement than a true appraisal of Nabaṭi poetry.

The small collections of G. A. Wallin (1851, 1852) and C. de Landberg (1919) and the sizable collection of Alois Musil (1928) are of a different quality from that of Socin. In translating and annotating the poems in their collections, these three distinguished orientalists put to good use their extensive knowledge of the history and ethnography of the Arabian Peninsula. The collections, however, are still deficient in many ways. In many places the translation is questionable, and in many verses the meter is irregular and some poems are deformed in various ways. Some of these defects can be attributed to oral transmission, and to the fact that these

compilers were not sufficiently familiar with the tradition to be able to distinguish competent informants from those who were not, and representative texts from nonrepresentative ones. Moreover, these compilers were generally unaware of the original versions of the poems. (In later chapters, it will be shown that, despite differing oral versions, most Nabaṭī poems have original versions which are in many cases written down during the process of composition or shortly after.) This is not meant to underrate the value of these collections, but only to point to some problems connected with them which make them useful as subsidiary data but not as the sole basis for a serious study of Nabaṭī poetry.

The collections made by H. H. Spoer (1912), Spoer and E. N. Haddad (1929, 1933–1934), C. Bailey (1972), and H. Palva (1976) present other problems. These collections consist of poems and historical narratives collected outside the Arabian Peninsula from informants who were not natives of the Peninsula. Most of these poems and narratives were given by the informants not as representative examples of the poetry and history of their own native land but, the informants maintained, and the investigators agreed, as material originating in the Arabian desert. This is borne out by the general similarity of the poems and narratives to versions collected in the Arabian Peninsula. But the narratives in these collections are badly garbled because the incidents, people, places, and the whole sociocultural milieu with which narratives and poems deal are somewhat foreign to the informants. Furthermore, due to the informants' unfamiliarity with many poetic idioms in the original versions of the poems, and to the difference in pronunciation and syllabic structure between the Peninsular colloquial and their own colloquial dialects, the forms and meters of the poems in these collections are terribly distorted. These distortions cannot be considered simply the result of oral transmission; whatever changes a poem may undergo in this process, it must still retain a reasonably cohesive form and a strictly regular quantitative meter or else it will not be admitted as a poem by the qualified native audience. As for the narratives, we can compare, for example, the garbled narrative recorded by Palva which deals with the rise and strifes of the princely family of al-Rashīd in Ḥāyil with the far more coherent and more accurate versions collected from native informants in the heart of Arabia by Palgrave (1865–1866), Charles Doughty (1921), and Lady A. I. N. Blunt (1881). (See the indices of these works under Rashīd.) Comparison can also be made with the long version dictated to Wadī^c al-Bustānī by prince Ḍārī Ibn Fuhayd Ibn ʿUbayd Ibn Rashīd (Ibn Rashīd 1966) which is accurate enough to be considered a primary source on the history of premodern Arabia. All in all, these collections are valuable as examples illustrating the kinds of changes Nabaṭī poems and the narratives associated with them undergo once they migrate outside the Peninsula and are

recited by nonnative informants; but they cannot be considered truly representative of the genuine vernacular poetry of the Arabian Peninsula.

There are many collections of Nabaṭi poetry published in Arabic, but most of them are printed on cheap paper with many orthographic errors and with no commentaries at all. Most collections tend to contain the same poetic texts, but from different sources and with varying degrees of accuracy.

The pioneering collection of Kh. M. al-Faraj (1952) is, however, exemplary. It has a good introduction and copious explanatory notes with brief biographical information on the poets. The collection of A. Kh. al-Ḥātam (1968) is also excellent. He repeats most of the material used by al-Faraj, but adds much more material, especially from earlier periods. The most comprehensive is the collection of M. S. Kamāl (1960–1971). The collection made by M. S. Ibn Sayḥān (1965–1969) is good in that it is not simply a repetition of the same old material.

Later collections are more specialized. M. A. al-Thumayrī (1972) gives us a good selection of short poems that have become popular as folk songs. F. al-Rashīd (1965–1972) gives us a large collection of poems by poets from his home town, al-Rass. A. M. Ibn Raddās (n.d.–1976) devotes his book to the compositions of bedouin poetesses, and explains each poem thoroughly. A. A. al-ʿUbayyid (1971) appends several poems to his book on the al-ʿAwāzīm tribe by poets of that tribe. F. M. al-Firdaws (n.d.) devotes his anthology to his own poetry and that of kinsmen in his tribe, al-ʿIjmān, with a few other poets from other tribes.

The collection made by Mandil al-Fuhayd (1978) is especially interesting. The circumstances of his life brought Mandil into contact with famous poets and transmitters of poetry from various tribes and settlements. He is an authority not only on Nabaṭi poetry but also on bedouin customs and tribal history. His collection contains the best examples of bedouin poetry, with some information on tribal poets and tribal events. Unfortunately, this collection is badly produced, but that is certainly no fault of the scrupulous but nearly illiterate Mandil.

Short poems composed by various poets concerning various events are sprinkled throughout F. al-Mārik's four-volume *Min Shiyam al-ʿArab* (1963–1965). This work is a collection of well-documented anecdotes relating to premodern Arabia which are useful as background information for understanding the sociocultural context of Nabaṭi poetry. Those interested in the true chivalrous poetry of bedouin knights, mostly from the ʿAnazah tribe, will surely enjoy reading *Abṭāl min al-Ṣabrāʿ* by M. A. al-Sudayrī (1968). Besides the poems, al-Sudayrī gives thrilling accounts from the lives of the poet-knights. The resemblance of this collection to the *Ayyām al-ʿArab* is truly amazing.

The earliest Nabaṭi poet whose memory still survives in people's minds

is the half-legendary and half-historical Rāshid al-Khalāwi who is remembered as a great poet and a reliable stargazer. His poems are unusually long; one of them reaches 1,500 lines. A. Ibn Khamīs has written a treatise on al-Khalāwi's life and poetry (1972). Ibn Khamīs has also recently published a collection of poems and anecdotes relating to life in the Arabian desert in the past (1978).

These are the most important collections of Nabaṭi poetry; there are other titles, of lesser importance, listed in the bibliography. Some of these collections are based on oral sources, whereas others are based on written ones. Outside of these collections, there is still much Nabaṭi poetry that needs to be collected from oral and manuscript sources and published.

Although printed collections of Nabaṭi poetry are relatively abundant, native scholars have been generally unwilling to admit this poetry as a proper subject for academic discussion because they believe it fosters religious and political strife. The religious and political status of classical literary Arabic presents both methodological and practical problems in collecting and publishing vernacular materials in the Arab world. Classical Arabic is revered as the language of the Qur'ān, and it is the language of daily prayer, education, the press, public media, and official functions. Though only a few literates achieve proficiency in it, all Arabic speakers are effectively exposed to it through daily prayers and the public media. This classical language unites all speakers of Arabic into one large community. It is believed by many that encouraging vernacular lore is a covert attempt to intensify regional differences and sow political discord and cultural disintegration among the Arab people. Vernacular lore is viewed as a force hostile and destructive to Arab unity. Such attitudes have been effective in hampering research in this area, but not in silencing the people, who continue to recite poetry and lore in their local dialects.

Despite this discouraging intellectual atmosphere, some native scholars have ventured to write on Nabaṭi poetry. Al-Faraj wrote a good introduction to the collection he published in 1952. A. al-ʿUthaymīn wrote a well-researched article (1977) in which he demonstrated the utility of Nabaṭi poetry as a source on the history and society of premodern Arabia.

The best available introduction to the field of Nabaṭi poetry is *al-Adab al-Shaʿbī fī Jazīrat al-ʿArab* (1958) by A. Ibn Khamīs. In this book, Ibn Khamīs gives well-chosen examples with copious notes, and provides short biographical sketches on some poets, a few of whom he knows personally. He discusses the prosodic, stylistic, and thematic features of Nabaṭi poetry and draws parallels between it and classical Arabic poetry. But, like most introductory works, this one lacks methodological rigor and theoretical orientation. Sh. al-Kamālī has also written a similar work entitled *al-Shiʿr ʿinda al-Badw* (1964).

Work in the Field

I have been effectively exposed to Nabaṭi poetry since my childhood. I have heard it quoted or recited almost every day of my life at home or elsewhere. My home town, ʿUnaizah, is famous for its outstanding Nabaṭi poets, some of whom I know personally. However, I owe my early introduction to Nabaṭi poetry chiefly to my maternal grandfather, Mḥammad as-Slēmān aṣ-Ṣwayyān, an excellent raconteur of anecdotes and a gifted reciter of poetry. His polished style and elegant delivery have fascinated me and captured my imagination since I was a small boy; it was he, more than anyone, who opened my eyes to the rich field of this poetry.

My lifelong exposure to Nabaṭi poetry was supplemented by four months (August–December 1978) of intensive work in the field. This period was divided between Riyadh and ʿUnaizah. While in Riyadh, I benefited from the few hours I spent with Mandīl al-Fuhayd, the national authority on the authenticity and attribution of Nabaṭi poetry. Until recently, Mandīl was the producer of a program on the Saudi Arabian national radio entitled *Min al-Bādiyah*, which deals with Nabaṭi poetry and bedouin life. The program (which I monitored closely while in Saudi Arabia) is now produced by Brāhīm al-Yūsif, who was kind enough to introduce me to Mandīl al-Fuhayd. To express his encouragement for my research project, al-Yūsif took me with him on two occasions to the recording studios of the radio station in Riyadh to observe the recording session and to meet the poets who came to have their poems recorded and broadcast. At the recording studios I met the poet Fahad al-Firdaws, whom I later visited several times in his home, and who volunteered some interesting information concerning his tribe, al-ʿIjmān, and explained to me some of the poems composed by Rākān Ibn Falāḥ Ibn Ḥiṭlēn, the famous chief of al-ʿIjmān, who died at the end of the last century.

In Riyadh I also met several times with Mḥammad al-Ḥamad al-ʿMiri; I spent many happy hours listening to him reminisce about the famous Nabaṭi poets whom he knew personally. He was very kind to me and very generous with his time and knowledge; he provided me with valuable information on Nabaṭi poetry and allowed me to peruse his manuscripts and copy whatever I wanted.

After I had finished my work in Riyadh and had gone to ʿUnaizah, I was fortunate to learn that ʿAbdarriḥmān al-Brāhīm ar-Ribīʿī, an authority on Nabaṭi poetry and a poet in his own right, had bought a house in our neighborhood into which he moved a few days before my arrival. Almost every day while in ʿUnaizah, I would meet with ar-Ribīʿī in the mosque after performing the ʿaṣr (late afternoon) prayer, and he would take me to his house to drink coffee or tea and talk about poetry and

poets or read from his manuscripts for about half an hour. Then, we would go to the house of ‘Abdallah as-Slēmān Ibn Ḥasan, where old-timers would get together every day at this time to “chew the cud of the past,” as they say. Ibn Ḥasan himself (affectionately nicknamed *al-xāl*, “the grand-uncle”) is a well-known poet, and his house is a meeting place for Nabaṭi poets and people interested in Nabaṭi poetry. There, the conversation is always about poetry and old times. Occasionally someone would pick up the written *dīwan* (collection of poetry) of Ibn Ḥasan and recite choice poems from it (Ibn Ḥasan is blind and illiterate and does not memorize his poems, so he could not do the reciting himself). Sometimes a poet would bring a newly composed poem with him. He would read it to the people present and then ask for their opinions, which might vary from approval to sharp criticism. This would go on for about an hour, or until sunset, when it was time for the first evening prayer, which we would perform together. Then, ar-Ribī‘ī and I would head back home in my car.

I also had the good fortune to meet several times with the well-known poet Ḥamad al-Mḥammad al-Jābir, who happened to be a good friend of my maternal uncle Šālḥ al-Mḥammad aṣ-Šwayyān. I would usually go to see him in his house after the last evening prayers, and he would read to me from his poetry or from the poetry of his great-uncle ‘Abdallah Ibn Jābir, who was one of the most outstanding poets of ‘Unaizah at the end of the last century, even though he died very young.

In ‘Unaizah I also met with ‘Alī as-Sālm al-‘Bād and ‘Abdarriḥmān al-‘Aḡīl. Al-‘Bād gave me a small manuscript of Nabaṭi poetry to copy and we had several sessions together which I recorded on cassette tapes. Al-‘Aḡīl is now in the process of collecting and editing an anthology of poets from ‘Unaizah. He put the whole collection at my disposal and, to my delight, he provided me with a few poems composed by my late father, ‘Abdallah al-Brāhīm aṣ-Šwayyān. My good friend ‘Abdarriḥmān al-‘Abdalmiḥsin ad-Dkēr gave me a most valuable manuscript of Nabaṭi poetry, which was passed on to him by his late father, and also a tape recording of a performance by Ibn Šāfi, the outstanding player of the *ribābih*, who died some years ago (the *ribābih* player chants verses of poetry while bowing his fiddlelike instrument).

Most of all, I am grateful to Brāhīm al-Ḥsēn, the amir of aṣ-Šbāx hamlet near Buraidah, who supplied me with intimate details concerning the life of the famous poet Mḥammad al-‘Abdallah al-‘Ōnī who died about 1923, and dictated to me two poems by that poet. Brāhīm al-Ḥsēn knew a great deal about al-‘Ōnī because he is from the al-Mhannā family, who held the amirship of Buraidah until removed by Ibn Sa‘ud early in the century and who patronized al-‘Ōnī in his early years as the national

poet of Buraidah. Much of the information in chapter 4 has been graciously provided by Brāhīm al-Ḥsēn.

In conclusion, I wish to express my deepest appreciation and heartfelt gratitude to all the above-mentioned people for their generous help and encouragement. I must point out that I consider none of them to be merely an informant. They are all my teachers and mentors, and they taught me more about Nabaṭi poetry than anyone else could have.