

IV



POETRY AND REGIONAL POLITICS

In the previous chapter we saw that, among the nomadic tribes, poetry was a vehicle for political action. The poem of a desert warrior was a serious statement, a contemplated utterance made to record a specific event or to demand a specific action. In this chapter, I will discuss the political influence of poets among the settled population and will examine the dynamic role of poetry in the regional politics of premodern Arabia.

In premodern Arabia, central authority was generally weak or absent altogether. The settled regions were divided among themselves, and their relationships with one another oscillated between cooperation and confrontation. The whole of Arabia was torn by regional fragmentation and political disintegration. Each settlement had its own allies as well as adversaries among adjacent settlements and neighboring tribes. Nomadic tribes participated in the parochial rivalries of the settled people as kinsmen and allies. The instability of tribal politics, the subject of the previous chapter, paralleled the instability of regional politics.

This state of political turmoil is reflected and amply documented in Nabaṭi poetry. During the long period of turbulence that preceded the establishment of the modern Arabian states, Nabaṭi poetry flourished as a dynamic political institution. It was employed to mobilize public opinion and promote collective action, since it was the most popular medium of expression and the most effective channel of communication. Each settlement had its own poets who defended its political interests. Outstanding poets occupied prominent social positions and exercised great political influence. Their words had great impact on their audiences, and they possessed the power to rouse the masses as easily as they could calm them down. The people of premodern Arabia were ruled by eloquent persuasion rather than by outright force; therefore, the gift of poetry constituted an essential qualification for effective leadership. Many amirs and princes were accomplished poets who employed their poetic skills to achieve political ends.

‘Abdallāh and ‘Ubayd Ibn Rashīd

‘Abdallāh Ibn Rashīd and his younger brother ‘Ubayd rank high among princely poets. In addition to their political and military talents, they were gifted poets whose compositions still survive on the lips of the people and in print.¹ Their poetry is mainly an account of their heroic adventures and brilliant successes, as the following sketch will show.

‘Abdallāh Ibn Rashīd (of the Ja‘far clan of the ‘Abdih section of the Shammar tribe) founded the Rashidi dynasty about 1835 in Ḥāyil, the capital of Jabal Shammar, after a long and relentless struggle with their antagonist Ṣāliḥ Ibn ‘Alī. It is doubtful that ‘Abdallāh would have attained his dream of becoming lord of Ḥāyil and paramount chief of Shammar had it not been for the loyalty and undaunted courage of his redoubtable brother ‘Ubayd (nicknamed “the Wolf”). In their early years, ‘Abdallāh and ‘Ubayd were very capable and ambitious young men with charismatic personalities and unmistakable qualities of leadership. They even challenged and defied the orders of Ṣāliḥ Ibn ‘Alī, the then amir of Ḥāyil, who, claiming that war is costly, had refused to allow the people of Ḥāyil to go out and help their tribal confederates, the Shammar, who were constantly harassed in their own tribal territory by their traditional enemies, the ‘Anazah tribe. ‘Abdallāh and ‘Ubayd composed exhortative poems admonishing the people of Ḥāyil and urging them to revolt against their weak and ineffectual amir. Because they undermined the amir’s authority and constituted a real threat to his leadership, he persecuted them and had them expelled from Ḥāyil with their family. Their expulsion is celebrated in a short ditty composed by their mother (Ibn Raddās n.d.–1976:I, 243). ‘Abdallāh and ‘Ubayd themselves composed magnificent odes lamenting their sufferings and expressing their intense yearning for eminence and leadership (Musil 1928:300–304; Ibn Raddās n.d.–1976:II, 98; Ibn Sayḥān 1965–1969:II, 45). Here are three lines from a poem by ‘Ubayd addressed to ‘Īsā, the nephew of amir Ṣāliḥ. In these lines, ‘Ubayd taunts ‘Īsā for his cowardice and stinginess and suggests that al-‘Arfijiyih is more worthy of carrying his weapon (al-‘Arfijiyih is a woman from al-‘Arfaj, a branch of the al-‘Ulayyan, the princely family of Buraidah, who gained fame after she avenged her son by cutting his killer to pieces with a sword).

- 1 ‘Īsā says: War is costly. But I say: Then, why did the smith make the curved sword with a sharp edge?
- 2 Drench your sword with the blood of your adversary, or send it to al-‘Arfijiyih; let her give it blood to drink.
- 3 If nobility does not run in the blood of a man, he will not act noble when the time comes for noble action.

G. A. Wallin, who visited Ḥāyil in 1845 during the reign of ʿAbdallāh Ibn Rashīd, tells of ʿAbdallāh's early struggle, of how he vanquished his opponents, and of how he celebrated this in his poetic compositions.

During about ten years, as the inhabitants of Hāil told me, ʿAbd Allah bnu Alrashīd had governed the Shammar tribe. His predecessor, a cousin of his called Sālih bnu ʿAly, had, out of fear for the great credit and influence ʿAbd Allah possessed among the people, exiled him from the land. ʿAbd Allah resorted to Alriiād, regarded, after the destruction of Derʿiyé, as the capital of Negd and the residence of the Wahnāby princes of the family of Saʿood, where a prince then reigned called Turkey, a son of the hapless Saʿood and father of the present governor of Negd, Feisal. Here ʿAbd Allah joined in a warlike expedition which Feisal made to the environs of Alahsá. While still on the expedition, the report was brought to them that Turkey had been killed by his cousin, Almeshārī, who, declaring himself governor of Negd, had taken possession of the palace of the murdered, after having driven away from it his wives and women and other household. Keeping this news secret from their followers, the two leaders hastened their return to Alriiād, where they, after a short fight, and chiefly by a stratagem, contrived by ʿAbd Allah,² made themselves masters of the castle and the person of Almeshārī. The usurper was put to death, and Feisal proclaimed governor of Negd by ʿAbd Allah from the summit of the mosque, and acknowledged by the people in this dignity. Installed in his government, Feisal now declared ʿAbd Allah, to whose prudence and dexterity he chiefly owed his success in the whole affair, sheikh of the land of Shammar, instead of Sālih, who was deposed; but as he for the moment had no assistance to offer his friend, not any power to put him in the place he had appointed him to, ʿAbd Allah returned to his native land quite alone, trusting solely to his own personal qualities and the credit he had among his countrymen, for getting the better of his cousin Sālih. He had many hardships to endure here, part of which he has celebrated in vivid lines of his own composition; during the day he hid himself in the mountains of Agā, and at night he descended to the villages of Hāil and Kafār to the houses of some of his friends and adherents, who, in the meantime, roused up the people in his favour. As soon as a sufficient party was brought over to his side, he made head against his adversary and vanquished him. (1854:180–181)

The ex-rulers of Ḥāyil, who were ousted by ʿAbdallāh and his brother ʿUbayd, were given refuge and assistance by the people of Buraidah and

‘Unaizah, the two principal towns in the district of Qaṣīm, the southern neighbor of Jabal Shammar. This and similar actions on the part of Qaṣīm against Ḥāyil ushered in a long period of rivalry and bitter strife between them, which will engage our attention in this chapter.

The first major clash between these two power centers took place in 1841. It was touched off by an exchange of raids between a section of Shammar and a section of the ‘Anazah tribe, the allies of al-Qaṣīm. The Shammar were given assistance by Ibn Rashīd, and the ‘Anazah were badly beaten. This provoked the amir of Buraidah, ‘Abdallāh Ibn Mūḥammad, and the amir of ‘Unaizah, Yaḥyā Ibn Slem, who were so outraged by the defeat of their allies at the hands of Ibn Rashīd that they vowed to fight the latter in the streets of his capital. They hastily organized a considerable force made up of yeomen from Qaṣīm and tribesmen of ‘Anazah, and they proceeded against Ibn Rashīd. The combined forces of Qaṣīm and the ‘Anazah bedouins penetrated deep into Jabal Shammar until they reached Bag‘a, east of Ḥāyil; there, they were attacked by the forces of ‘Abdallāh and ‘Ubayd, who ultimately overcame them. On hearing a report (later proving to be false) that ‘Ubayd had been killed in battle, ‘Abdallāh had Yaḥyā killed to avenge his brother’s death.

‘Ubayd, who distinguished himself in the battlefield at Bag‘a, celebrated this event in an ode of over thirty verses (Ibn Rashīd 1966:79–85; Kamāl 1960–1971:III, 73–76). Doughty, who visited Ḥāyil in 1877, wrote of ‘Ubayd that:

He was a master of the Arabian warfare, a champion in the eyes of the discomfited Arab. Abeyd, as said, was an excellent kassād, he indited of all his desert warfare; his boastful rimes, known wide in the wilderness, were oftentimes sung for me, in the nomad booths. The language of the kasasid is as a language apart from the popular speech; but here I may remember some plain and notable verse of Abeyd, as that which says, “By this hand are fallen of the enemies ninety men. Smitten to death the Kusmān perished before me, until the evening, when my fingers could not be loosed from the handle of the sword; the sleeve of my garment was stiffened with the blood of war.” This he made of the repulse of an ill-commanded and worse starred expedition, sent out by the great Kasīm town Aneyza, against Ibn Rashīd. (1921:II, 42)

It is clear that Doughty is referring to the battle of Bag‘a and the poem composed by ‘Ubayd on that occasion, but his rendering of the verse “By this hand . . .” is inaccurate.³ Here are a few lines from the poem ‘Ubayd composed following the battle of Bag‘a; the last line is the one Doughty refers to:

- 1 The covetous enemies attacked our fields and gardens. They boasted that they would fight us in the streets of Gfār and Ḥāyil.
- 2 Whoever attacks our homeland will be met by prompt and stiff resistance. We are ready to march against our foes in the cold nights and hot days, and we sleep not.
- 3 We, the settlers and nomads of Jabal Shammar, advance in two columns, encouraged by fair maidens with long black locks.
- 4 We came to the field in the morning and found the enemy ready for a fight. The smoke of our gunpowder veiled the skies above.
- 5 We thank our lord, the Almighty, the Just; the Qaṣimis and the sons of Wāyil [the ‘Anazah tribe] were routed.
- 6 My gallant comrades quenched the thirst of their sharp swords. The hard ground of Bag‘ā flowed with the blood of our enemies.
- 7 We follow our sheikh Abu Mit‘ib; he is the feast of the hungry, the spring of the poor, and the protector of the weak.
- 8 As for me, ninety of the enemy I slew with the edge of my sword, and I fear not those who yearn to avenge them.

‘Abdallāh Ibn Slēm, the brother of the slain Yaḥyā, became the amir of ‘Unaizah and vowed to avenge the death of his brother and the defeat of the Qaṣimis. He started by hiring a jester named Ibn Hādī to assassinate Ibn Rashīd. Ibn Hādī was instructed to go to Ḥāyil and entertain people in the streets with his amusing prancing and astounding handling of the spear. It was hoped that when Ibn Rashīd heard of this new jester, he would have him brought to perform at his court. Once at court, Ibn Hādī was supposed to spring upon Ibn Rashīd and pierce him through the heart with the spear. Ibn Hādī was made to believe that with the right talismans and amulets around his neck no harm would come to him at the hands of Ibn Rashīd’s retainers after the assassination. The initial steps of the plan worked perfectly, but when Ibn Hādī was brought to the court he was overcome with fear and could not perform. He was arrested and questioned, but, when it was found that he was a dupe, Ibn Rashīd forgave him and allowed him to reside in Ḥāyil. This incident was celebrated by a poem composed by Ibn Rashīd himself (al-Mārik 1963–1965:I, 174–182). In the poem, Ibn Rashīd contrasts the method of his government with that of Ibn Slēm and portrays himself as a valiant, honorable man who runs the affairs of his domain with a balanced combination of force and diplomacy and who would never stoop to such low devices as the sending of a jester-assassin against an opponent; such is the practice only of cowardly men like Ibn Slēm. Here are a few lines from the poem; in the last, Ibn Rashīd pays tribute to his brother ‘Ubayd by uttering his name as a war cry.⁴

- 1 My country was a place of cold and hunger before I made it secure and prosperous with the cutting edge of the sword.
- 2 I protect it against those who seek to plunder it. With some enemies I fight and with some I make peace.
- 3 I run my affairs with intelligence and dexterity, money in one hand and the sharp saber in the other.
- 4 My heart is bold and in my hand is a sharp sword; it is not like your dancing, O Abu Hādī.
- 5 I am the brother of ‘Ubayd; I advance when the coward scuttles, and I stay awake when the lazy man goes to sleep.

When the assassination plot failed, Ibn Slēm sent out raiding parties to harry the supply routes and outlying settlements of Jabal Shammar. In response to these provocations, ‘Ubayd Ibn Rashid composed several poems addressed to Ibn Slēm, castigating him and reminding him of what had happened at Bag‘ā, and threatening him with dire consequences should he continue to meddle in the affairs of Ḥāyil (Kamāl 1960–1971:III, 61–63,68–69). In the following selection, ‘Ubayd contrasts the Rashidi military codes and practices with those of Ibn Slēm by saying that the former attack an enemy chief in the public square of his capital in the midst of his people, rather than attacking outlying settlements and defenseless villages, as is the practice of cowards and weak amirs like Ibn Slēm. He urges Ibn Slēm not to be misled by the mischievous amir of Buraidah and advises him to restrict himself to commercial activities and stay at home with his wife, for he is not of the stuff from which warriors and heroes are made.

- 1 So what, Ibn Slēm, if you attack our outlying settlements? Such bluff and pretense will not be to your advantage.
- 2 When *we* attack, we slay our enemies by the thousands, and our loot is thoroughbred mares.
- 3 When we attack, we attack the seat of the chief, and not the outlying villages; our war drums have been sounded in many a sheikhly camp.
- 4 Were we to hear a cry for help coming from the top of a high knoll, our sorties would come through any mountain pass to give assistance.
- 5 We drench our swords in enemy blood in defense of our country, riding our shod mares.
- 6 Do not let the blind amir of Buraidah lead you astray; and do not be deluded by the war dances of butchers in the market of your town.
- 7 Your brother was thrown from his horse in the battlefield; he was

slain by those who perfume their swords with the blood of their enemies.

- 8 If you want my advice, keep to your trade, and count your coins and small change.
- 9 Work for the price of a bed for your pretty wife, and sleep with her; and perfume yourself with the smoke of incense burners.

Ibn Slēm, however, continued to harass the tribes and settlements of Jabal Shammar, and in September 1845 seized some camels and their loads in a raid on a Shammar caravan. In protest, Ibn Rashīd wrote to Fayṣal Ibn Tirkī, the Saudi lord in Riyadh, who was then the nominal suzerain of the whole of Najd, including Qaṣīm and Jabal Shammar. Fayṣal promised action, and sent two agents called Farḥān and Ibn Sbēt with letters to Ibn Slēm upbraiding him and demanding that he restore the booty. After a long stay in ʿUnaizah, the agents failed to achieve restitution; therefore, ʿAbdallāh Ibn Rashīd decided to act on his own.

Gathering both nomadic and sedentary Shammar tribesmen to the number of some 300, and accompanied by his eldest son Talal, and his brother ʿUbaid, he marched on Qasim. Before the force had gone far, however, ʿUbaid and Talal forced the amir himself to return to Haʿil in order that he not be exposed to unnecessary danger. ʿAbd Allah agreed only with reluctance and after outlining the plan of battle, namely to have a small party attack an outlying flock of ʿUnaizah sheep and then to ambush the retaliatory force which the town was certain to send out in response. The plan worked to perfection. The ʿUnaizites fell into the trap, and several hundred of them were killed. In addition, ʿUbaid took a number of prisoners including ʿAbd Allah Ibn Zamil, the governor. Then ʿUbaid, breaking the traditional desert convention of respect for the person of a prisoner and ensuring the perpetuation of bitter enmity, had the governor and several of his relatives killed. Thus two consecutive governors of ʿUnaizah—and brothers to boot—had been killed by the ruling family of Haʿil. ʿUbaid, who in addition to his other distinctions, was a poet of note, composed an ode on the occasion of his victory. . . .

Faisal was angered by this senseless bloodshed for the sake of camels and similar booty, but, knowing the imam's stern religious nature and anticipating his reaction, ʿAbd Allah Ibn Rashīd had prepared a defense which was unusual if not unique, but which nevertheless worked. Messengers were immediately sent from Haʿil to the imam with a long letter of explanation, in which the *pièce de résistance* was a forty-five-verse ode written by the amir of Jabal Shammar himself. Dari Ibn Rashīd's account of its reception is

notable: ‘When ‘Abd Allah’s messengers reached Faisal, he spoke with them and said, “Muslims have been wrongly killed.” Then, when the council meeting [*majlis*] broke up, ‘Abd Allah’s men gave Faisal the letter containing the ode. At that, he was satisfied and said, “The Qasimis are still unjust and tyrannical people.”’ One cannot refrain from wondering where, other than in Arabia, a stern and pious ruler would have reversed his opinion on a serious matter because of a poem! (Winder 1965:154–155)

The full text of the poem composed by ‘Ubayd on this occasion appears in Kamāl (1960–1971:III, 63–64), and the text of the poem that the amir ‘Abdallāh sent to Fayṣal Ibn Tirkī appears in Ibn Rashīd (1966:94–101) and Ibn Sayḥān (1965–1969:II, 52–54). In his poem, Ibn Rashīd points out to Fayṣal that it was the people of Qaṣīm who started the whole affair; they were the ones who defied their suzerain and refused to abide by the written instructions that were sent with the agents. The following are a few lines from the poem of Ibn Rashīd. In the first line, he refers to the assassination attempt mentioned above, and in the last to the wounds inflicted upon himself when he attempted to subdue Mishārī Ibn S‘ūd who tried to usurp the Saudi throne by treacherously murdering his uncle Tirkī. Ibn Rashīd alludes to this incident in order to mollify Fayṣal Ibn Tirkī and remind him of services previously rendered.

- 1 After the plot to assassinate me failed, they [the people of Qaṣīm] set ablaze the fire of war in the summer heat.
- 2 He [Ibn Slēm] refused to return the camels he stole with their loads, although I sent him several messengers [in hope of peaceful reconciliation].
- 3 He refused to listen to reason, and I became weary of too much complaining [to you, Fayṣal] and pleading with him.
- 4 Seeing that he did not read the letters you had sent him, we went and taught him a good lesson in obedience; we slew him as we had slain his forebears.
- 5 This is the punishment he brought upon himself for not heeding your commands; he refused to follow the orders you sent with Farḥān and Ibn Sbēt.
- 6 O sheikh, we committed no treachery; we attacked them in broad daylight on swift mares.
- 7 ‘Ubayd—I pray to the lord that I may never lose him—God sent him against them like a shooting star or an earthquake.
- 8 When one of our people is attacked by an enemy, we give our souls and all else we possess in his defense.
- 9 It is our custom to protect our neighbor and we are quick to help whoever seeks our protection against a stronger foe.

- 10 We give food to the guests when their mounts kneel at our door,
and whoever comes seeking our bounty goes back home with his
hands full of gifts.
- 11 With gentle words I try to dispel malice from the heart of an
opponent, but I accept evil from no one.
- 12 It is to punish the recalcitrant that the smith made the sharp curved
sword; with it, we force those who go astray back to the right path.
- 13 When the time comes for war, I find joy on the battlefield.
- 14 I endure bravely like the mighty mountain which does not give way
under the steps of treading multitudes.
- 15 The evidence is on my body, the marks of wounds the like of which
I inflicted upon my opponent. People can tell genuine nobility from
pretense.

Mḥammad al-ʿAbdallāh al-ʿŌni

Al-ʿŌni is called the poet of strife and contention because his poetry is a reflection of the political turmoil of his time, and its content is inextricably linked to the turbulent events in the history of Arabia at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.⁵ Although he was born into a humble family, al-ʿŌni attained social eminence due to the popular appeal of his poetry and the powerful influence it exercised on the masses. In describing the effects of his poetry, he once said: "It is of no real consequence to lead an army. What is of real consequence is to be a poet like me. Here I sit peacefully by my hearth and coffee pots, yet with my words I can raise multitudes up in arms against each other for any cause I choose" (Ibn Khamīs 1958:14).

According to Fahad al-Mārik (1963–1965:III, 280), al-ʿŌni was born about 1870 in ar-Rbēʿiyyih, a hamlet near Buraidah. By that time, the political structure of Arabia was undergoing major shifts. Fayṣal Ibn Tirkī, the nominal suzerain of Arabia at the time, had already demoted al-ʿLayyān, the traditional ruling house of Buraidah, and given the amirship of the town instead to the family of Ab-al-Xēl. After the death of Fayṣal in 1865, a civil war broke out between his two sons, ʿAbdallāh and Saʿūd, which led eventually to the disintegration and collapse of the Saudi dynasty. The total eclipse of the Saudi dynasty was brought about by its former vassal, the Rashidi dynasty, before the end of the nineteenth century. After Fayṣal Ibn Tirkī had passed away, the administration of the Saudi realm became the responsibility of his eldest son, ʿAbdallāh, who, despite his military prowess, was an inept politician. Among his political mistakes was his attempt to wrest the amirship of Buraidah from the family of Ab-al-Xēl and give it back to al-ʿLayyān, who promised to give more sincere allegiance to Riyadh. Instead of achieving this political

objective, ‘Abdallāh Ibn Fayṣal ended up losing Buraidah and eventually the whole district of Qaṣīm to the new rising star of Arabia, Mḥammad Ibn Rashīd, the scion of ‘Abdallāh Ibn Rashīd, founder of the Rashidi dynasty. To protect himself from the plot hatched against him in Riyadh, the amir of Buraidah, Ḥasan al-Mhannā Ab-al-Xēl, adroitly sought the friendship of Ḥāyil by marrying his sister to the amir Mḥammad Ibn Rashīd, and his daughter to Ḥmūd al-‘Ubayd, the cousin of the amir.

The keen and observant Mḥammad al-‘Ōni was a witness to all these political developments. Shortly after he was born, his family moved to Buraidah, where there was more demand for the services of his father, who “worked with mud” (i.e., was a master at building mud houses). The young al-‘Ōni impressed people by his alert mind and quick intelligence. The amir of Buraidah, Ḥasan al-Mhannā, decided to sponsor this exceptional youth and took him into his household and raised him with his own children; in the words of Brāhīm al-Ḥsēn, “he ate with them and dressed like them, they gave him weapons and they taught him horseback riding.” In other words, al-‘Ōni was raised in a princely house frequented by dignitaries of various towns and chiefs of various tribes, a house in which history and politics were the usual topics of conversation. Thus, he assimilated a great deal of information concerning the history and genealogies of Arabia, and he also observed how political actions are conceived and executed.

This rich background, coupled with his exceptional intelligence and handsome appearance, made of al-‘Ōni not only a captivating poet but also a charismatic personality and a wise counselor, whose advice and friendship were sought by such giants in local politics as Mbārak aṣ-Ṣabāḥ, ‘Abdal‘azīz Ibn Sa‘ūd, ‘Jēmī as-Si‘dūn of the al-Mintifiḡ tribe, and Sa‘ūd Ibn ‘Abdal‘azīz Ibn Mit‘ib Ibn ‘Abdallāh Ibn Rashīd. His poetic genius and thorough knowledge of Arabian affairs enabled him to manipulate various genealogical and historical facts in such a way that he was able to influence the minds of the masses and play on their sentiments with his poetry.

In his early years, al-‘Ōni was totally dedicated to the cause of the house of Ab-al-Xēl. He composed poems eulogizing leading members of this family and defending the political interests of Buraidah. But since there was at that time a political alliance between Buraidah and Ḥāyil, as well as an affinal relationship between the two houses of Ab-al-Xēl and Ibn Rashīd, al-‘Ōni composed poems eulogizing Mḥammad Ibn Rashīd and his wazir and cousin Ḥmūd al-‘Ubayd.

The friendship between Ḥāyil and Buraidah did not last long. ‘Abdallāh and Sa‘ūd, the two sons (of different mothers) of Fayṣal Ibn Tirkī, were rapidly dissipating the vast dominion passed on to them by their illustrious father. The diminishing influence of the weakened Saudi government left

central Arabia a power vacuum which was gradually and quietly filled by Mḥammad Ibn Rashīd, the enterprising amir of Ḥāyil. As the Saudi government became weaker, local amirs would seek the assistance of Mḥammad Ibn Rashīd, who was always ready to give it, as if he were totally disinterested and simply responding to his sense of Arab chivalry; although later he would annex to his realm those very territories he had come to liberate. The people of al-Qaṣīm became suspicious of Ibn Rashīd's annexation policy. Therefore, the amir of Buraidah, Ḥasan al-Mhannā, and the amir of 'Unaizah, Zāmil as-Slēm, both capable men, reconciled their differences and united in preparation for a show of strength against Ibn Rashīd, their northern neighbor. These developments caused the pendulum of al-Qaṣīm to swing back to the south. The confederates of al-Qaṣīm made common cause with 'Abdarrāḥmān Ibn Fayṣal Ibn Tirkī (who became the governor of Riyadh after the death of his two older brothers) in order to stop the southern march of Ibn Rashīd. But by then the Saudi strength was completely sapped and Riyadh was no match for Ḥāyil. The final showdown between al-Qaṣīm and Ḥāyil came in 1891.

The Qaṣimis, led by Zāmil, began mobilizing in late December of 1890; Ibn Rashīd, realizing that the struggle must this time be decisive, mustered as many troops as he could from Shammar and allied tribes and marched to a plain called al-Mulaida, twenty miles west of Buraidah, to meet and fight with al-Qaṣīm. The fight was lengthy, lasting perhaps a month, with many ups and downs, and seemed at first to go in favor of al-Qaṣīm.

The decisive point in the engagement came in January 1891 when Muhammad Ibn Rashīd decided on the classic Nejdī military manoeuvre of the feigned retreat coupled with a surprise counter-attack. He headed toward Dalfa'ah, a town some eighteen miles due west of Buraidah. The Qaṣimis followed as Ibn Rashīd had planned, and he counter-attacked. But the counter-attack was a spectacular one. Ibn Rashīd massed several thousand camels in the centre and stampeded them forward against Zamil's oncoming forces by setting fire to the bundles of brush which had been tied to those in the rear. The infantry followed close behind the camels, and cavalry and camelry simultaneously attacked the flanks. The Qaṣimi army was destroyed and scattered with casualties between 600 and 1,200 killed—including Zamil himself, his son, and others of his House. Hasan Ibn Muhanna' of Buraidah lost his hand and was interned in Ha'il for the rest of his life. Of those who were spared, many fled as far as Kuwait, Iraq or Syria. The triumphant Shammar ruler followed his brilliant military success with political consolidation. He appointed Salim Ibn Subhan governor of Buraidah

and still another of the Zamil clan to the comparable post in 'Unaizah. Indisputably the master of Nejd, Muhammad returned home to Ha'il, which for more than a decade to come was to eclipse its southern rival. (Winder 1965:277)

Al-'Önī composed many poems eulogizing his patron and personal friend 'Abdal'azīz Ibn 'Abdallāh al-Mhannā Ab-al-Xēl, who fell in the battle of al-Mulaida. After the death of 'Abdal'azīz, al-'Önī attached himself to his brother Mḥammad Ibn 'Abdallāh al-Mhannā and fled with him to Kuwait to escape the wrath of Ibn Rashīd. It is no accident that Ab-al-Xēl, as-Slēm, and other leading families of al-Qaṣīm, along with al-Sa'ūd, sought refuge with Mbārak Ibn Ṣabāḥ of Kuwait. Ibn Ṣabāḥ was becoming more and more concerned about the expansionist designs of Ibn Rashīd, especially since the latter coveted Kuwait as a seaport and perhaps a naval base for the growing Rashidi empire. Therefore, Ibn Ṣabāḥ welcomed all dissident elements of Najd, knowing that one day he could make use of them against Ibn Rashīd.

That day was not too far off. Mḥammad Ibn Rashīd was a shrewd man; he knew that, although Kuwait was a small country, its amir Mbārak could easily enlist the help of the Ottomans or the British against him. Therefore, he made no overt advances. Ibn Ṣabāḥ himself was a master politician, and knew how to save his small country by creating tension and strife among his opponents. For 'Abdal'azīz Ibn Sa'ūd, the young son of 'Abdarriḥmān Ibn Fayṣal Ibn Tirkī who was destined to regain the right of his ancestors to the kingship of Arabia at the very beginning of this century, attending the court of Ibn Ṣabāḥ was a valuable lesson in diplomacy and international politics, especially since Kuwait was an international port open to the world and teeming with foreign visitors and political agents.

The clash between Ḥāyil and Kuwait did not come until after the death of Mḥammad Ibn Rashīd. On his death bed, Ibn Rashīd (who was childless) warned his nephew and heir, 'Abdal'azīz Ibn Mit'ib Ibn 'Abdallāh Ibn Rashīd, never to provoke Ibn Ṣabāḥ. The young 'Abdal'azīz, however, was not a skillful politician but a reckless desert warrior. He soon forgot his uncle's advice and began to make excursions against Kuwait and the eastern tribes. These hostilities precipitated the major battle of aṣ-Ṣarīf, which was fought on the soil of al-Qaṣīm between the forces of 'Abdal'azīz Ibn Rashīd and Mbārak Ibn Ṣabāḥ. Before discussing this battle, we must review the condition of the Najdi fugitives in Kuwait and the role of al-'Önī in all of this. The following account is a paraphrase of one published by Fahad al-Mārik (1963–1965:III, 280–291) as it was related to him by the late 'Abdal'azīz Ibn Zayd, once the Saudi ambassador to Syria and Lebanon, who was a close friend of al-'Önī.

As Kuwait and Ḥāyil were in a state of war, the Najdi fugitives under the leadership of ʿAbdarriḥmān Ibn Fayṣal Āl-Saʿūd made of Kuwait not only a refuge but also a base from which they undertook raiding expeditions against Ibn Rashīd, in the hope of one day liberating their homeland. During one of these expeditions, a few days after Ibn Saʿūd and his followers had quit Kuwait to raid the tribe of Ḡhatān in Najd, Ibn Ṣabāḥ sent a messenger to Ibn Saʿūd telling him that Kuwait and Ḥāyil had just concluded a peace agreement in which each promised to cease immediately all hostilities against the other; therefore, Ibn Saʿūd and his followers must abandon their expedition. Ibn Saʿūd sought the council of the leading men in his party. Al-ʿŌnī, who happened to accompany Ibn Saʿūd on this expedition, vehemently opposed abandoning it and proposed a stratagem to foil the peace agreement. The following is a paraphrase of what al-ʿŌnī told Ibn Saʿūd.

“Our primary concern is not necessarily to please Ibn Ṣabāḥ or to seek his approval. We seek to liberate our homeland from the Rashidi tyrant and recover our legitimate positions among our people; therefore, we must not lose sight of our objective. In fact, because of the peace agreement between Kuwait and Ḥāyil, we can no longer count on the help of Ibn Ṣabāḥ in our effort to liberate our land. To renew tensions between Ḥāyil and Kuwait, we must go on with our expedition, plunder some camel herds from the subjects of Ibn Rashīd, and sell them in the market of Kuwait. Certainly this will anger Ibn Ṣabāḥ, but we can tell him that we had left on this expedition before the signing of the peace agreement; therefore, the expedition is not covered by the agreement. With the money we earn from the plundered camels, we can buy provisions and leave Kuwait to escape the wrath of Ibn Ṣabāḥ, and to make further raids against Ibn Rashīd. As for Ibn Rashīd, once we carry out this raid, he will hear of it long before Ibn Ṣabāḥ has time to send him a letter of explanation and apology, and he will understand this to be a violation of the peace agreement. After we leave Kuwait for the second time and make our second raid in Najd, Ibn Rashīd will be led to conclude that Ibn Ṣabāḥ is deceiving him and that his apology for the first raid was only a ruse. This will certainly lead to the deterioration of relations between Kuwait and Ḥāyil and the resumption of hostilities between them. Thus, even if Ibn Ṣabāḥ drives us out of Kuwait, in the end he will plead with us to come back and join him against Ibn Rashīd.”

ʿAbdarriḥmān Ibn Saʿūd followed the advice of al-ʿŌnī and, indeed, everything went according to plan. Ḥāyil and Kuwait resumed hostilities and Ibn Ṣabāḥ prepared to attack Ibn Rashīd in the latter’s territory. While Ibn Rashīd was camped in the desert south of Iraq, “he received news that Mubarak al Sabah, with a strong force including Saʿdun Pasha and his Muntafiq tribesmen and a contingent of the Dhafir tribe, as well

as the Sa‘udi princes, to whose call the ‘Ajman and Mutair tribes had rallied in strength, had left Kuwait for the Shauki valley beyond the Dahna sands whence it had reached Buraida, the capital of Qasim” (Philby 1955:258).

The forces of Ibn Ṣabāḥ and Ibn Rashīd met in a vast plain lying some distance north of Buraidah between aṣ-Ṣirīf and aṭ-Ṭirfiyyih (hence the battle, which was fought at the close of the nineteenth century, is called the battle of aṣ-Ṣirīf by some and the battle of aṭ-Ṭirfiyyih by others). Here is how Philby describes the battle.

Ibn Rashīd—‘Abdul ‘Aziz Ibn Mi‘ab, the successor of the great Muhammad—lay camped at Sarif, some distance back in the *Nafud*, with his Shammar and a loyal contingent from Buraida which had revolted from his allegiance and closed its gates. Mubarak Ibn Subah lay at Tarafiya with his allies—Sa‘dun of the great Muntafik tribe of ‘Iraq; ‘Abdulrahman, father of the present *Wahhabi* ruler, with a *Najdi* contingent and a contingent from Buraida. Ibn Rashīd sent out a small cavalry patrol to reconnoitre the enemy and a brisk fire was opened on it by a similar force operating from Tarafiya. On hearing the sounds of firing Ibn Rashīd gave the order to advance, and Ibn Subah doing the same, the battle took place on the first slope of the *Nafud* and on part of the Tarafiya plain. Ibn Subah was decisively defeated and the enemy occupied his camp, while he and his allies took to flight and were only saved from the attentions of parties sent out in pursuit by the victor by a timely and very heavy fall of rain. The slaughter had been heavy during the encounter itself and the flood, they say, ran bloodred, carrying before it the corpses of the slain and depositing them in rows on the edge of the wide *Sabkha* depression along the east side of the Tarafiya basin. ‘Abdul ‘Aziz Ibn Sa‘ud, still a mere boy, was simultaneously laying siege to Riyadh, but raised it as soon as he received news of the defeat and withdrew to Kuwait. Meanwhile Ibn Subah fled *via* Zilfi, and the *Najdis* were remorselessly pursued as far as the confines of ‘Aridh, many villages being sacked and burned by the pursuers. Ibn Rashīd himself marched straight on Buraida, whose gates were opened to him by treachery, and taught its people the dreadful consequences of rebellion by executing 180 of its citizens and exacting enormous fines from the rest. . . . But the harsh and vindictive treatment of the vanquished by the victor had made the name of ‘Abdul ‘Aziz Ibn Rashīd hated throughout Najd, and ‘Abdulrahman, safely arrived at Kuwait, had foretold that Najd would soon return to its rightful rulers—a prediction whose fulfil-

ment began in the following year at the hands of a son, for whom destiny had so much in store. (1928:321–322)

Following the battle of aş-Şirīf, al-‘Ōnī composed an apologetic poem in which he explained that the defeat of the Kuwaiti forces was due not to lack of courage on the part of Mbārak aş-Şabāḥ, but rather to lack of wise counsel. He pointed out that the prophet Muḥammad himself was defeated in the battle of Uḥud; therefore, defeat is not a sign of God’s wrath, just as victory is not a sign of His pleasure. Al-‘Ōnī argued in his poem that there is no shame in defeat; shame lies in submission and in neglecting to avenge defeat. The poem ends with various threats in the name of Ibn Şabāḥ against Ibn Rashīd (al-Ḥātam 1968:II, 241–243).

Unlike his uncle Mḥammad, who managed to annex the whole of Najd to his dominion after the battle of al-Mulaida, ‘Abdal‘azīz Ibn Rashīd was unable to follow up his spectacular military victory at aş-Şirīf with any political gains. On the contrary, his cruel treatment of the conquered populations prepared the way for a general uprising against him and in favor of ‘Abdal‘azīz Ibn Sa‘ūd, who was able to recapture Riyadh in 1901 as an initial step toward the reestablishment of Saudi rule and the complete extinction of the Rashidi dynasty.

To protect himself and to avenge his humiliating defeat at aş-Şirīf, Ibn Şabāḥ appealed to Great Britain for help, and at the same time gave full material and political support to ‘Abdal‘azīz Ibn ‘Abdarriḥmān Ibn Sa‘ūd, who was able, in a bold and heroic adventure, to recover Riyadh after killing the Rashidi governor, ‘Ajlān Ibn Mḥammad. After establishing Saudi authority in ‘Aridh and the southern district, Ibn Sa‘ūd sent for the Qaşīmī fugitives in Kuwait, including members of the families of Ab-al-Xēl and as-Slēm, the legitimate rulers of Buraidah and ‘Unaizah. In the meantime, Ibn Şabāḥ suggested to al-‘Ōnī, who was still a refugee in Kuwait, that he compose a poem urging the people of al-Qaşīm who had sought refuge in Kuwait, Mesopotamia, and Syria, to unite and rally behind Ibn Sa‘ūd, in order to oust the Rashidi tyrant and liberate their homeland. Al-‘Ōnī composed such a poem, in which he addressed the people of al-Qaşīm by their war cry, *Awlād ‘Alī*. It is related that when the poem was recited in al-Mēdān, the quarter in Damascus where the people of al-Qaşīm had established themselves, the Qaşīmīs were so moved by it that they sold all their possessions, bought all the guns and horses available in Damascus, and sallied forth to liberate their homeland. Some of them are even supposed to have left their shops and homes open and unattended in their haste to join the others. The poem was called *al-xalūj* because its prelude was inspired by a *xalūj* (a camel bereaved of its newly born calf) which al-‘Ōnī heard crying throughout the night at

the palace of Ibn Ṣabāḥ. He began this poem, which has over seventy lines, by admonishing the wailing camel for crying so over such a trivial loss; he then recounts his own losses and urges the Qaṣīmīs to rise up against Ibn Rashīd (Kamāl 1960–1971:V, 30–38).

- 1 But, O camel, I cannot count my losses—there is no remedy for my grief, and I find no relief in complaining.
- 2 Were I to find solace in crying, O camel, I would cry every white day and every night.
- 3 If crying would bring back the lost ones, I would shed tears till my eyes became parched.
- 4 I would cry over the events that are tormenting my soul; I would cry over the humiliation of the openhanded valiant ones.
- 5 I would cry over my dear ones whenever the wind blows; I would cry all my life till my soul was seized by death.
- 6 I would cry over the homeland where we grew up, bordered on the north by lofty escarpments,
- 7 And bordered on the east by the sand dunes of al-Arāxim; it is situated between al-Lwā and as-Sirr. I remember those sand dunes—oh, how beautiful they are.
- 8 A homeland in Najd that was once a haven, a refuge sought by those burdened by hard times.
- 9 She resembles a fair chaste maiden; in her beauty my homeland outshines all fair maidens.
- 10 The covetous lower their eyes when they pass by her; they fear the gallant youths who grew up in her courts.
- 11 She is our mother—oh how sweet was her flowing milk; she nourished us, she raised us, we are her children.
- 12 She is kind to us; no mother is so devoted to her children as she is to us; she is loving, but we are ungrateful.
- 13 We wear silk and satin while she is naked; she wails and cries, but none takes pity on her.
- 14 No one expressed indignation when she was stripped of her clothing; and no one cares what befell her after that.
- 15 Oh, I sigh and say, “How disheartening!” Woe to us; how can we bear to watch our mother being violated before our eyes?
- 16 Hail! rider on a fine mount which steals distances with its swift pace; a spirited wild beast, it is startled by its own shadow.
- 17 An eight-year-old barren camel, never suckled by a calf, and never couched to carry loads.
- 18 Now that an urgent matter has come up, saddle it, but hold tight to the rein lest it jerk away.

- 19 Pay no mind to the saddlebag, there is no time for fancy trappings;
just carry a waterskin and balance it with your provisions.
- 20 Hearken, O messenger! you must travel day and night, and must
not let your eyes taste sweet slumber.
- 21 After traveling for ten and five days due west, you will reach
al-Mēdān. Then, let your mount graze loose.
- 22 When you come to the afternoon market, you will meet sturdy lads
who tread on flowing silken garments with their leather sandals.
- 23 They will ask you, "O good man, let us have your tidings—the land
of Najd, what happened to it after we left?"
- 24 Tell them that the men of al-Qaṣīm and other regions rose up to
liberate their homelands from tyranny,
- 25 Except for your homeland which you fled, leaving her crying for
revenge. She pines for past generations [who were more gallant
than you]; I feel sorry for her.
- 26 She is terrorized by strangers—shame upon you—and your fair
ladies are scattered, homeless, with none to protect their honor.
- 27 Your grandsires are also beaten for no reason; they were revered
in the past, but today, in their old age, the hair is plucked from
their honorable beards.
- 28 O Awlād ‘Alī, the time has come to show your mettle; may he who
wastes his life seeking material gain be deprived of the Lord’s mercy.
- 29 O Awlād ‘Alī, know that life is short, and that only a man’s
praiseworthy deeds will survive him.
- 30 This is a perilous venture that only an exceptional man can under-
take. O Awlād ‘Alī, which of you says, I am for it?
- 31 Know that wrestling with danger is the only way to eminence; to
achieve your noble goals you must persevere.
- 32 Rise up and with the help of God pay your debts; you are not base
men, you are noble.

At first, al-‘Ōnī was committed to the cause of Ibn Sa‘ūd; and in two exceedingly long poems, one consisting of ninety-six lines (Kamāl 1960–1971:V,7–14) and the other of one hundred and eighty-four lines (ibid., V,15–29), al-‘Ōnī, who had accompanied his patron and personal friend Mḥammad al-‘Abdallah al-Mhannā Ab-al-Xēl back to Buraidah, gives a detailed and accurate historical account of the campaign of Ibn Sa‘ūd against Ibn Rashīd from the time he left Kuwait until the time he captured al-Qaṣīm.

Al-‘Ōnī at first enthusiastically supported the cause of Ibn Sa‘ūd, but later sided with Ibn Rashīd. Al-Faraj (1952:II,264) and al-Ḥātam (1968:II,234) explain this change of position as the result of vacillation

and caprice on the part of al-ʿŌnī and his propensity for creating tension. In my opinion, however, this is not a satisfactory explanation, because it overlooks the political realities that made al-ʿŌnī change his position, which I shall now discuss.

After Ibn Rashīd was driven out of al-Qaṣīm, Ibn Saʿūd gave the amirship of Buraidah to Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥasan al-Mhannā Ab-al-Xēl. This angered Mḥammad al-ʿAbdallah al-Mhannā, Ṣāliḥ's cousin; he went back to Kuwait accompanied by his friend al-ʿŌnī. Later, Mḥammad made peace with his cousin and came back to Buraidah, but al-ʿŌnī, who was never to set foot in Buraidah again, remained with the paramount chief of the al-Mintifiḡ tribe, Siʿdūn as-Siʿdūn, and his son ʿJēmī. In the meantime, Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥasan seems to have misunderstood the intentions of Ibn Saʿūd to reimpose Saudi hegemony over al-Qaṣīm, and thought that once al-Qaṣīm was liberated from Ibn Rashīd, its affairs should be left completely in the hands of its native amirs. In his dealings with Ḥāyil and the Turks, he exhibited a degree of autonomy that did not please Ibn Saʿūd, who killed him and appointed his cousin Mḥammad al-ʿAbdallah in his place. Mḥammad, however, continued to pursue Ṣāliḥ's secessionist policy and began secret correspondence with Ḥāyil. This brought upon him the wrath of Ibn Saʿūd, who banished him to Iraq and took the amirship of Buraidah away from the family of Ab-al-Xēl. Thus Buraidah's prospects of independence were crushed forever, and Ab-al-Xēl lost all hope of a political comeback.

While these developments were taking place, al-ʿŌnī was staying with Ibn Siʿdūn, the paramount chief of the al-Mintifiḡ tribe. It must be understood that al-ʿŌnī devoted all his sympathies and loyalty to the cause of Buraidah, and to the house of Ab-al-Xēl, who had raised him. When he saw the tragic end of this house at the hands of Ibn Saʿūd, al-ʿŌnī became disillusioned with him and crossed over to the Rashidi side. His move might have been encouraged by his host, Ibn Siʿdūn, who himself had switched to the side of Ibn Rashīd. Now, we must review the political situation in Ḥāyil from the time that al-Qaṣīm fell into the hands of Ibn Saʿūd to the time that al-ʿŌnī left the al-Mintifiḡ tribe to join the court of Ibn Rashīd.

By the end of 1904, virtually the whole of al-Qaṣīm had come under the control of Ibn Saʿūd, and at dawn, on April 13, 1906, ʿAbdalʿazīz al-Mitʿib Ibn Rashīd was killed in battle at a place called Roḡdat Mhannā. By this time, the Rashidi dominion had shrunk considerably and had become confined to the Jabal Shammar district. After his death, ʿAbdalʿazīz was succeeded by his son Mitʿib, but soon the affairs of Jabal Shammar fell into disarray. Mitʿib and two of his three brothers were assassinated, while the youngest brother, Saʿūd, was smuggled to the safety of Madinah by the as-Sabhān, his maternal uncles. The murderers

were Sulṭān, Saʿūd, and Fayṣal, the sons of Ḥmūd Ibn ʿUbayd Ibn Rashīd. Sulṭān became the ruler of Ḥāyil, but in less than a year he himself was murdered by his brothers Saʿūd and Fayṣal. Saʿūd Ibn Ḥmūd then became ruler of Ḥāyil. Soon, however, the as-Sabhān brought Saʿūd Ibn ʿAbdalʿazīz al-Mitʿīb Ibn Rashīd back to Ḥāyil, and made him amir, after they murdered Saʿūd al-Ḥmūd.

At about this time, al-ʿŌnī arrived in Ḥāyil and immediately became actively engaged in the politics of Jabal Shammar, employing his poetry in the service of the Rashidi cause. He composed long poems eulogizing the young Rashidi amir, Saʿūd ibn ʿAbdalʿazīz, and his regent, Ibn Sabhān. He also composed several poems on the war between Ibn Rashīd and Ibn Shaʿlān, chief of the Rwalah bedouins.

The reign of Saʿūd Ibn Rashīd was a relatively stable period in the turbulent history of Ḥāyil, and lasted for about ten years. But, as in the case of most Rashidi amirs, a tragic end was in store for him; he was shot dead by his distant cousin ʿAbdallāh Ibn Ṭalāl. Al-ʿŌnī played an important role in this palace affair. Because Saʿūd Ibn Rashīd had ascended the throne of Ḥāyil when he was only ten years old, several factions emerged in the palace, which included those of the mother of the young amir, members of the as-Sabhān family, and the palace slaves and retainers. At the same time, members of the rival branch of the Rashidi family were stripped of all political power in order to stifle any ambitions they might have of usurping the throne from the young amir. ʿAbdallāh Ibn Ṭalāl Ibn Rashīd and his brother Mḥammad were not pleased with this arrangement, and with time they became more and more discontent. Al-ʿŌnī also became disenchanted with the policies of Saʿūd and went over to the side of the sons of Ṭalāl, ʿAbdallah and Mḥammad. Along with some other men, al-ʿŌnī began to meet regularly in the house of ʿAbdallah and Mḥammad Ibn Ṭalāl (which was in a quarter of the town called Lubdih) to discuss the affairs of Ḥāyil and the situation in the palace. Saʿūd as-Ṣāliḥ as-Sabhān heard of this; he went to the amir and told him that the sons of Ṭalāl and the people of Lubdih were holding regular meetings and were most likely conspiring against the throne. The amir sent his chief slave, named Dirʿān, to order those assembled to break up their meeting and never meet again. That the amir should send a slave carrying his sword to enter the house of noble men and princes and order them not to meet or to express their concern for the welfare of their town was too much to bear. ʿAbdallāh and Mḥammad Ibn Ṭalāl decided to take the matter into their own hands; they were encouraged by a poem composed by al-ʿŌnī on this occasion in which he urged them not to accept humiliation from the slaves of the palace. Their plan was to assassinate the amir. This was done by ʿAbdallāh Ibn Ṭalāl, who was himself immediately cut down by his victim's slaves,

while his brother Mḥammad was thrown in jail. The throne of Ḥāyil passed to ‘Abdallāh Ibn Mit‘ib, the nephew of the slain amir, who was then only thirteen years old.

Al-‘Ōnī composed several poems elegizing ‘Abdallāh Ibn Ṭalāl and expressing the hope that the latter’s brother Mḥammad would be freed and that the star of the Ṭalāl branch of the Rashidi family would soon rise above that of all others. He exerted a great deal of energy and employed much cunning to obtain the release of Mḥammad Ibn Ṭalāl (al-Mārik 1953–1955:III, 292–298). Before long, Mḥammad Ibn Ṭalāl was set free and appointed governor of al-Jōf, north of Ḥāyil. However, under the indecisive leadership of ‘Abdallāh Ibn Mit‘ib the political organization of Jabal Shammar soon began to disintegrate, and Ḥāyil was besieged by the forces of Ibn Sa‘ūd. Mḥammad Ibn Ṭalāl hastened from al-Jōf to Ḥāyil, not so much to usurp the amirship of Jabal Shammar as to somehow rectify the worsening situation. This move was enough to terrify the amir and to drive him to the camp of Ibn Sa‘ūd, the enemy of Ḥāyil, to seek refuge. Unlike ‘Abdallāh Ibn Mit‘ib, Mḥammad Ibn Ṭalāl was a man of courage and initiative. He made a serious attempt to restore the glory of Ḥāyil, but the odds against him were overwhelming. Beside him was al-‘Ōnī, who was composing poems in his name or, as the Arabs say, “*alā lṣān ibn Rišīd*” (“on the tongue of Ibn Rashīd”), urging the various sections of the Shammar tribe, in the name of their tribal honor, to rally behind their amir to protect their capital. These poems are as stirring and powerful as *al-xalūj*, the poem discussed above, but they did not have the same effect. At that point in time in the long history of Arabia, the heroic age was fading, to be replaced by a new political order which ultimately undermined the effectiveness of the Nabaṭi poets. Instead of responding to the appeals of Ibn Rashīd as they were communicated through the poems of al-‘Ōnī, the various sections of the Shammar tribe crossed over to the side of Ibn Sa‘ūd. In 1921 the citizens of Ḥāyil opened the gates of their town to his armies. The amir Mḥammad, al-‘Ōnī, and a few others locked themselves inside the castle and refused to come out until Ibn Sa‘ūd gave them pledges of safe-conduct.

After the capitulation of Ḥāyil, Ibn Sa‘ūd took Ibn Rashīd and al-‘Ōnī with him to Riyadh along with others whom he wanted to keep under close watch. They were given strict orders never to be seen together at any time in any place for any reason. A few months later, al-‘Ōnī accompanied some of ar-Rashīd to attend the funeral of a Rashidi child. On the way back from the funeral, the men stopped by al-‘Ōnī’s house. They were talking about the past and lamenting the good old days when they were surprised by the men of Ibn Sa‘ūd, who had come to break up their meeting. Al-‘Ōnī, in view of the topic of conversation at the time and the warnings of Ibn Sa‘ūd, became seized with fright and tried to

hide. This aroused the suspicions of the police, who arrested him; and Ibn Sa‘ūd send him to Ibn Jalawī to be imprisoned in a miserable dungeon in the city of Hufūf. In prison, al-‘Ōnī composed poems apologizing to Ibn Sa‘ūd and asking various members of the family of Ibn Jalawī, as well as other men of weight like Ibn Haḍḍāl, the supreme chief of the al-‘Amārāt tribe, to intercede on his behalf and persuade Ibn Sa‘ūd to release him. In these poems, al-‘Ōnī describes the dreadful conditions of the underground prison, which lacked sunshine and fresh air. His legs were locked permanently in a wooden contraption resembling stocks, which prevented any movement and caused open sores to fester on his legs. He complains that he was constantly tearing rags off his garment to wrap around these bleeding wounds. His pleas for pardon fell upon deaf ears. As a result, he lost all faith in humanity, and in his total despair he turned to God and composed his famous poem entitled *at-tōbih*, his last poem. In this poem he expressed his bitterness and disappointment with his friends, who had failed to secure his release. He also talked about penitence, death, the hereafter, and the mercy of God. At last al-‘Ōnī was set free, only to die soon after, in 1923, of tuberculosis.

When people talk about al-‘Ōnī, they call him “the poet of Najd, the famous one.” His poetry is the poetry of action and exemplifies the power of words and the important function of poetry in Arabian society. It is related that the poet Brāhīm Ibn J‘ēṭin once warned al-‘Ōnī, “Your poetry will bring death upon you”; but he died the death of a hero and his name will never be forgotten. Al-‘Ōnī, the last poet of the heroic age in Arabia, was the victim of change in the political order. The emergence of statehood in Arabia rang the death knell for Nabaṭi poetry as a viable political institution.