A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF ABU TAMMAM AND ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF HIS QASEEDAH

Dr. Syed Ali Hur Kamoonpuri

BROAD OVERVIEW
Abu Tammam (c.188 AH/ 804 AC – 231 AH/ 846 AC) is arguably one of the most brilliant and outstanding poets of the Abbasid period in the history of Arabic literature. Even though he died relatively young, he left behind for posterity a rich and diverse literary heritage which has been the subject of much study, analysis and criticism. This paper seeks to provide a brief outline of his life and career, with a view to delineating his contribution to Arabic literature through a quick glance at his anthological and poetic endeavours.

KEYWORDS: ABBASID, ABU TAMMAM, ADMONITION, ASCETICISM, HAMASAH, POETRY, ZUHD.

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF ABU TAMMAM
Habib bin Aws al-Tai, better known as Abu Tammam, was a ninth century Arabic poet, who is considered to be among the most preeminent and distinguished literary figures of the Abbasid period according to the historians and critics of Arabic literature.¹

He was born somewhere around the year 188 AH/ 804 CE² in the Syrian village of Jasim (Josem), which is located northeast of the Sea of Tiberias and near Hierapolis Bambyce.

It is believed that he belonged to the tribe of Tai, which is also the tribe to which the other famous poet of the period, al-Buhtari (d. 284 AH/ 987 AC), belonged. However, other scholars have claimed that Abu Tammam was actually the son of a Christian apothecary named Thaddeus, and that after converting to Islam, he changed his

². This is his year of birth as provided by Ahmad Hasan al-Zayyat and Umar Farrookh; Hannah Fakhoori, however, gives the year of his birth as 180 AH/ 796 AC.
father's name to Aws, forged for himself an Arab genealogy, and began to associate himself with the tribe of Tai.\(^3\) Because his father was poor, he decided to have his son work as an apprentice for a weaver so that he may learn the craft and earn his livelihood from it; however, the ambitious young man that Abu Tammam was, he had his eyes set on higher goals.

Abu Tammam moved to Egypt and began to frequent scholarly gatherings at the Mosque of Amr bin al-Aas, selling water to make ends meet. It was probably in this period that Abu Tammam first began memorizing poetry, and this was to play a major role in his later development as a poet.

It was also in Egypt that he first began composing his own poetry, but as he failed to make a decent living there, he moved to Damascus, and later on to Mosul in search of greener pastures. From Mosul, he paid a visit to the governor of Armenia, which was a part of the Arab Islamic empire at that time. The governor received him with warmth and generosity, and he was given a great deal of encouragement and support over there.

After 833 AC, Abu Tammam lived mostly in Baghdad, as he gained favour at the court of the caliph, al-Mo'tasim, who reigned from 833 – 842 AC, and this is where he established his reputation as "the most acclaimed panegyrist of the day."\(^4\)

From Baghdad, he visited Khorasan, where he enjoyed the favour of its powerful governor, Abdullah bin Tahir. Around the year 845 AC, he was in Ma'arrat un-Nu'man, and this is where he met the poet al-Buhturi (c. 820 – 897 AC).

The physical description of Abu Tammam, as provided by his biographers, is that he was tall in height and had a brownish complexion. His speech has been described as being exceptionally sweet and eloquent, though it had a small element of stuttering in it. This would perhaps account for why he would normally refrain from reciting his poetry in public, and instead have a Raawiah (narrator) accompany him for the purpose of reciting his poetry aloud.\(^5\)

Notwithstanding this slight speech defect, he was undoubtedly a very sharp, intelligent, and quick-witted poet, blessed with a prodigious memory, as


\(^4\)  ibid

\(^5\)  Zayyat, Tareekh al-Adab al-Arabiyy, pg. 212
acknowledged by his peers, for it is said that he knew more than fourteen thousand poems by heart.\textsuperscript{6}

Abu Tammam is believed to have died at a relative young age somewhere around the year 231 AH/ 846 AC in the city of Mosul and is buried over there.\textsuperscript{7}

**ABU TAMMAM AS AN ANTHOLOGIST**

Although Abu Tammam was a gifted and brilliant poet in his own right, he is arguably best known and remembered for his exquisite anthology of early poems known as the *"Hamasah"*. The *Hamasah* (lit. Exhortation) is one of the most celebrated anthologies of Arabic poetry ever produced, and is an invaluable resource and reference for Arabic poetry lovers and enthusiasts around the world. It is believed that he undertook the task of collating this work in and around the year 835 AC.

Through a twist of fate, Abu Tammam found himself snowbound in Hamadan, Iran, and since he had nowhere to go, he occupied himself with the impressive collection of books that were in the library of his host, Abu al-Wafaa Ibn Salama. He took advantage of the access he was provided to this library and compiled this poetical and literary masterpiece.

The anthology consists of ten sections which contain a total of 884 poems, most of which are merely fragments excerpted from longer poems. The sections are classified according to the subject of the poems, and their headings are as follows:

1. Al Hamasah (Exhortation to Fortitude)
2. Al Maraathi (Elegies/Dirges)
3. Al Adab (Etiquettes and Manners)
4. Al Nasib (Amatory verses)
5. Al Hijaa (Satires)
6. Al Adyaaf wal Madih (Hospitality and praise)
7. Al Sifaat (Descriptions)
8. As-Sayr wa an-Nu'as (Travel and Repose)
9. Al Mulah (Pleasantries)

\textsuperscript{6} ibid, pg 212.
\textsuperscript{7} Hannah Faakhooori gives the year of his death as 228 AH/ 834 AC.
10. Madhammat an-nisaa (Dispraise of women).

Abu Tammam was quite eclectic and inclusive in his choice of poems for this anthology, and he chose to include poems from different periods, with some of them dating back to the Pre-Islamic era of Jahiliyyah, while others were contemporaneous to the period in which he lived.

Critics have expressed their praise and admiration for the superb taste Abu Tammam displayed in his selection of poetry, and some have even gone to the extent of averring that Abu Tammam displayed a greater degree of brilliance and excellence in his choice and selection of poetry than he did in the composition of his own original poems. Even the great Arabic scholar and commentator, al-Tabrizi, is known to have remarked that Abu Tammam "is a better poet in his Hamasah than in his own poetry."9

To this date, the Hamasah is considered to be one of the most precious and reliable treasuries of early Arabic poetry, and the poems included in it are indeed characterised by exceptional poetic and artistic beauty. It is therefore not surprising that it has inspired a large number of commentaries, many of which have been enumerated by the 17th century historian and bibliographer, Hajji Khalifa.10

A later anthology by the same name was compiled by the poet, al-Buhutri (d. 284 AH/987 AC), and the term has been used in modern times to mean "heroic epic."

Other collections of a similar nature are ascribed to Abu Tammam such as Fuhoool al-Sho’araa, Al-Ikhtiyaaraat min Shi’ri Sho’araa, Muktaar Ash’aaril Qabaail and Al-Wahshiyaat, and these have also received a fair amount of critical acclaim.

THE POETIC OUTPUT OF ABU TAMMAM

It is ironic that Abu Tammam's original poems have not received as much scholarly attention as his poetic anthologies. His poems have been somewhat neglected owing

9. ibid; see also Nicholson, Reynold A., A Literary History of the Arabs, pg 130.
to the phenomenal success of his compilations. However, it is clear that they enjoyed great repute in his lifetime.

His poems are said to represent a stylistic break from the prevailing oral-based concepts of Arab poetry, often describing historical events and figures, such as the conquest of Amoría, and the campaign of Ali Babek and his killing. His poetry is also distinguished for the purity of its style, the merit of its verse, and the excellent coverage of various subjects, and has been linked to the prevailing Mutazilite philosophy of the Abbasid period. His *Divaan* was published in Cairo in 1875.

A look into Abu Tammam's *Divaan* or collection of poems, reveals that his poems commonly revolve around the description of contemporary events that were of historical importance. Opinions varied sharply concerning the quality of his works even during his lifetime, and more so after his death, with many critics going to extremes in praising his poetry and expressing their unfettered admiration for his poetic genius, while others focusing all their critical attention on specimens of his less inspiring and more prosaic poetry, dismissing his poetic output as unoriginal and lackadaisical. While the elegance and purity of his language has been much appreciated, his sometimes excessive use of complex stylistic features and complicated poetic and literary devices has been disapproved of by many critics.

Abu Tammam emerged as a poet at a time when Arabic and Islamic civilization was in its so-called "golden period", with Abbasid rule being at its zenith, and intellectual and literary activity being at its pinnacle, thanks to the monumental translation projects that were undertaken during that period, which brought the scholars and men of letters in contact with the literary heritage of older civilizations. It is undeniable that this milieu had an inevitable impact on the scientific and literary output of the period in general, and the poetic output of Abu Tammam in particular. Abu Tammam thus became among the first of the Arabic poets to employ complex logical arguments in his poetry such as reasoning by deduction, and other similar logical and philosophical devices in order to enhance the power and appeal of his

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verses, even though in some instances, this added an undesirable level of complexity and ambiguity to his poetic output.

Nevertheless, Abu Tammam remains a hugely important figure in the history of Arabic literature, and his works have had an enduring impact on the development and evolution of Arabic poetry across centuries. He is therefore rightly remembered as one of the giants of Arabic poetry in the Abbasid period, and his contributions to this field cannot be ignored or dismissed.

In conclusion, it might be worthwhile to quote the Syrian poet and essayist, Adonis, who aptly summed up the remarkable contributions of Abu Tammam and his poetic mission in the following words: "Abu Tammam started out from a vision of poetry as a sort of creation of the world through language, comparing the relationship between the poet and the word to the relationship between two lovers, the act of composing poetry to the act of creative procreation." 14

TRANSLATION OF A SPECIMEN OF ABU TAMMAM'S POETRY ON ADMONITION AND ASCETICISM 15

أتأمل في الدنيا تجد وتعمر
وأنت غدا فيها تموت وتقبر

Do you place hope in this world while struggling and building in it.
When tomorrow you will die and be buried in it?

تلقح آمالا وتزجو نتاجها
وعمرك مما قد ترجيه أقصر

Attaching your ambitions with this world, you hope for its results,
But your lifespan is much shorter than what you would hope (for it to be).

تحوم على إدراك ما قد كفيته
وتقبل بالأمال فيه وتدبر

You roam about in pursuit of that which you have already been assured16,
Turning all your hopes towards it, and constantly planning for it.

15. Nukhbatul Adab, pp 315-316
16. The poet is referring to livelihood and sustenance over here. He chides us for roaming around endlessly and going out of the way in tirelessly labouring and toiling in pursuit of sustenance, even though it has been guaranteed by God (See: The Holy Quran: 11: 06)
وهذا صباح اليوم ينعاك ضوءه وليلته تنعاك إن كنت تشعر

This is today's morning – it's light is giving news of your death,

It's night too, if only you could perceive.

ورزقك لا يعودك إما معجل على حاله يوما وإما مؤخر

Your sustenance is not going to escape you; rather it will come to you,

either immediately taking its course or with delay.

ولا حول محتال ولا وجه مذهب ولا قدر يزجيه إلا المقدر

No ploy can divert it from your path;

Nor can any decree be driven away except by that which is predetermined.

وقد قدر الأرزاق من ليس عادل

Sustenance has been distributed evenly among the creations by Him Who never turns away from justice in that which He determines.

ولا تأمن الدنيا وإن هي أقبلت عليك فيما زالت تخون وتقدر

Thus do not consider yourself safe from (the evils of) the world, even if it turns towards you with its face, for it will still remain treacherous and beguiling.  

فما تم فيها الصفو يوما لأهله ولا الرنق إلا ريثما يتغير

The poet is warning us that even if the world shows us its goodness, we must not forget that its pleasures are transient and short-lived, and that it is, by its very nature, inclined towards treachery and betrayal.

17. Here Abu Tammam employs a very clever pun, and he was known for playing with words in this fashion. He uses derivatives of عدل in two different ways. عدل عن عدل means to turn away or deviate from something, hence, when the poet says that sustenance has been distributed by someone who is not عدل, that initially strikes the reader as being a blasphemous statement, until one notices the preposition عن after it, which completely alters the meaning, and thus the verse means that sustenance has been distributed by One Who never deviates from the course of justice in making His decisions.

18. The poet is warning us that even if the world shows us its goodness, we must not forget that its pleasures are transient and short-lived, and that it is, by its very nature, inclined towards treachery and betrayal.

19. الصفو here connotes happiness and felicity.
Never has there been unperturbed serenity in it for its inhabitants\textsuperscript{20} 
Nor is there ever bitterness (lit. dirt/filth) except that it changes with time.

وما لاح نجم لا ولا ذر شارف على الخلق إلا وحبل عمرك يقصر
No star ever shines nor does the sun ever rise over the creations, 
Except that the rope of your age (i.e. your lifespan) becomes shorter.

تطهر وألحق ذنبك اليوم توبة لعلك منه إن تطهرت تطهر
Purify yourself, and follow up your sins with repentance; 
Perhaps you may become pure due to its purity

وشمر فقد أبدى لك الموت وجهه وليس ينال الفوز إلا المشمر
Start getting ready, for death has already shown you its face, 
For none attain success except those who prepare (in advance)!

فهذي الليالي مؤذناتك بالبلى تروح وأيام كذلك تبكر
So these are the nights signaling to you your impending doom; 
They come at evening as do the days, and also in the morning.

وأخلص لدين الله صدر ونية فإن الذي تخفيه يوما سيظهر
Devote your heart and intention exclusively to the religion of God, 
Because what you conceal today will come to light one day.

وقد يستر الإنسان باللفظ فعله فيظهر عنه الطرف ما كان يستر
A human being may cover up his actions with words, 
But often his eyes give away that which he was hiding.

\textsuperscript{20}. The poet is alluding to the fact that no one enjoys undisturbed or uninterrupted calm and peace of mind in this world, because it is full of all kinds of trials and tribulations.

\textsuperscript{21}. شمر means to: get ready for, gird oneself for, gird (up) one’s loins for, apply oneself to, get to work, embark upon, set out to……

\textsuperscript{22}. يلم denotes wear; impairment, damage, degeneration, deterioration, decay, decomposition, disintegration; erosion and corrosion.
لا بد يوما أن تصير لحفرة في أثنائها تطوى
بأثنائها تطوى إلى يوم تنشر

For it is inevitable that one day you will end up in a hole (i.e. the grave),
In which you will be covered until the day you will be resurrected.

\(^{23}\) تطوى denotes being shrouded, enclosed, enshrouded or entombed in something, especially a grave.