REINTERPRETING AL-BUHTURĪ’S ĪWĀN KISRĀ ODE: TEARS OF AFFECTION FOR THE CYCLES OF HISTORY

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Abstract

Scholars have conventionally interpreted the Iwan Kisra Ode as an anti-imperial ode critical of the Abbasids in a time of decline evinced by the murder of the Caliph al-Mutawakkil and the emerging power of the Turkic guards at Samarra. This article re-examines al-Buhturi’s own motives to demonstrate that an anti-imperial ode would be anathema to his interests and posits an alternative interpretation. The analysis is based on extensive Abbasid lore and a close reading of the ode. It suggests that the ode had the effect of redeeming the Abbasids in order to avoid civil strife in a time of danger.

In the winter of 861, the Caliph al-Mutawakkil was assassinated by Turkic body guards in a plot that implicated his heir apparent, al-Muntasir bil-lāh (d. 862).1 This event constituted the first patricidal regicide of Islamic history and forced the Umma—ostensibly sacred—to recall the profaning traumas of the first and second civil wars (fitan, sg. fitna).2 Sometime later

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1 This article draws on Chapter Five (Mythologizing Samarra) of the author’s dissertation, “Ardor for Memory: Mythicizing the Patricide of al-Mutawakkil in Court Poetry” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2002). I would like to thank Suzanne Stetkevych for her comments on earlier drafts. Research was conducted with the support of a Fulbright-Hays Training Grant, part of the Doctoral Dissertation Research Program of the US Department of Education. I am indebted to the Fulbright commissions of Egypt, Germany, and Spain for their assistance during 1998-1999. Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

during the post-Mutawakkil period, the court poet al-Buhturi (d. 897) composed an unusual, but intense poem. In it, he leaves behind haughty patrons and the urban setting of Samarra and ventures out to the ruins of a Sasanian palace at Ctesiphon, 24 miles south of Baghdad famed for its sole remaining ruin, Khosrow’s Arched Hall, or Īwān Kisrā.

The poem is unusual in several ways: first, unlike most of his poetry, which he addresses to a named benefactor or at least a recipient, the Īwān Kisrā poem is not a communication to a specific person. This otherwise audience-oriented poet was addressing no one in particular. Second, in contrast with his long poetic practice, this ode does not follow the conventional tripartite pattern of the ode composed of elegiac prelude (nasīb), journey section (raḥīl), then a third communal theme, such as praise (madīḥ) or lampoon (ḥijā’), nor the bipartite variety that elides the raḥīl. Instead, he begins with expressions of indignation and disappointment (roughly ll. 1-10), channeled into a short camel journey (roughly ll. 11-13), and then a tribute to the Sasanian palace (ll. 14-56). Yet again the tribute is saturated with a mood not of triumph but ultimately lyricism, for these are not present, but former glories. The more glorious the Sasanian achievements are, the more wistful the poet becomes. In effect, the “praise section” here is unexpectedly like the elegiac nasīb. Instead of triumphant closure, this poem gives us perpetual tears and yearning dedicated to the glory of the Sasanian.

Three modern scholars have taken al-Buhturi’s grief and praise for the Sasanian ruins as a veiled critique of the Abbasid dynasty as well as its cultural or poetic conventions. They note that al-Buhturi’s indignant tone resembles that of the brigand poet (ṣu‘lūk) of pre-Islamic times. As part of al-Buhturi’s protest, he lambastes the “vilest of the vile” and a “cousin,” all of whom have been taken to refer to specific people. Serrano argues that the poet’s choice of Persian abodes over the classical Bedouin sort suggests a harsh criticism, not only of the Abbasids, but of traditional Arab poetics and

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3 Though many odes by al-Buhturi are readily set to an occasion, this is not one of them, indicating that the exact occasion was not aesthetically relevant to the text. Al-Šayarafi speculates that the ode was composed in 883, though 861 is equally likely, see Hasan Kamil al-Šayarafi, Diwan al-Buhturi, 5 vols., ed. Hasan Kamil al-Šayarafi, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Ma’ārif, 1977) 5:2753.

culture. The assumption behind this theory is that al-Buhturi became disappointed in the Abbasids (and their culture) and lost faith, thus composing an anti-imperial ode. To date, this anti-imperial theory has not been challenged and stands as conventional wisdom in Arabic literary scholarship.

The anti-imperial reading generates irreducible problems. However, for Al-Buhturi meticulously developed a career that would protect his chief personal interests in life—his professional reputation as a poet in Iraq and his property in Syria. As for the first interest, we are told that he owned property in his hometown of Manbij, Syria, in the environs of Aleppo, and thus visited Manbij repeatedly while living in Iraq and petitioned the governor (wali) of Manbij in order to protect his property interests. This deep attachment, be it material, social or emotional, was symbolized and privatized in his ghazals to his legendary first love ‘Alwa (or ‘Alw) bint Zurayqa of Syria.

As for the second interest, the anti-imperial reading would stand as anathema to al-Buhturi’s public persona as court poet, specializing in panegyric that aims to build the public image of men of state: He is reputed to have shown an interest in this profession early as a teenager when he traipsed about the local mosque in Manbij reciting poetry and declaiming his first panegyrics by leaning out of the mosque to praise the humble merchants of onions and eggplants. These stories—regardless of their facticity—indicate a public reputation for panegyric, i.e. the business of magnifying Abbasid

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7 Ibn Khallikân, Wafâyât, 6:30

8 Ibid., 6:22.
men from the humblest upward. In his early twenties (the 840s), he judi-
ciously scaled the Abbasid hierarchy one patron at a time—focusing on
Ta’is and Syrians like himself—in order to reach the defining moment of his
career, in 847, when he delivered his first Abbasid caliphal ode at the
Jawṣaq al-Khâqâni palace in Samarra.9 Al-Buḥturi went on to serve a total
of six rulers: al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861), al-Muntasir (r. 861-862), al-
Musta’in (r. 862-866), al-Mu’tazz, al-Muhtadi (r. 869-870) and al-Mu’tamid
(r. 870-892), in addition to their viziers, commanders, judges, secretaries,
etc.10 He gave to generations a diwān collection larger than Abū Tammām
and al-Mutanabbī’s combined, chiefly because of his verbal endorsements of
the Abbasid empire.11 Even al-Muhtadi, known for his asceticism and dis-
like of poets, had to concede al-Buḥturi’s triumph in promoting the Abbasid
dynasty, despite the throes of time, calling him “the orator of our family and
the poet of our dynasty.”12 If we take 821 to be al-Buḥturi’s year of birth,
he was at the age of forty when the murder occurred, but continued to work
at the Abbasid court another twenty-nine years.13 I propose that the arch of
al-Buḥturi’s career was not propelled by faith in the Abbasids, but by the
understandable bourgeois interests of reputation and property.

One might counter argue that he finally became disappointed with the
Abbasids when he transferred his allegiance to the Tulunids of Cairo in 890.
A closer look at the ode and its context, however, will show that he redi-
ected his praise services just when Syria came under the property tax con-
tral of Khumarawayh Ibn ʿAḥmad Ibn Tūlūn.14 This would suggest that his
transfer of allegiance from the Abbasids to the Tulunids was motivated by
his property interests in Manbij. Safeguarding his interests, al-Buḥturi
remained particularly loyal to Tughja Ibn Juff, a military commander who
rose to the governorship of Syria. In a modern anti-monarchical era, it may
seem an alluring prospect to identify a court poet who finally denounces the
ideology of his patrons, but these are modern attitudes imported into a
medieval subject driven by the romantic dogma of poetic sincerity. Al-
Buḥturi was the consummate poet of the empire, why would he jeopardize
his life interests? Even this cursory examination should suggest that his

10 Samer Ali, “Praise for Murder?: Two Odes by al-Buhturi surrounding an Abbasid
Patricide,” in Writers and Rulers: Perspectives on Their Relation from Abbasid to Safavid
(Wiesbaden, Germany: Verlag), 1-38.
12 Muḥammad b. al-ʿImrānī, al-Inbā’ fi Ṭarīkh al-Khulafā’, (Leiden: Netherlands Institute
[Cairo: ʿĪsā al-Bāʾī al-Ḥalabī], 1973), 136.
13 EI², s.v. “al-Buḥturi”.
pragmatic goals, not faith in the Abbasids, spurred him to protect their reputation (and then the Tulunids’) during their reign and their legacy for generations thereafter.

Moreover, it would appear that the poet avoided methods of resistance employing direct confrontation. Given the executive power of the Caliph and the neo-Sasanian imperative of preserving his dignity, the method of resistance that courtiers generally found effective was change through engagement—and a measure of artifice. This principle of engaged resistance was captured in courtly advice manuals. In dealing with caliphs and sultans, if you are a courtier you must “teach them (tu'allimahum) as though they teach you, educate them (tu'addibahum) as though they educate you; if not, then stay as far away as possible!”15 The aim was to blandish, coax, nudge, guilt, or even shame the ruler into action using verbal artifice to preserve the dignity of the office. With respect to al-Buḥtūrī, we can note several examples where he seems to have used his skill and prestige as a state poet in order to influence caliphal policy.16

Literature is categorically indeterminant in meaning, and in this analysis of the Īwān Kisrā, I suggest in the spirit of collegial debate an alternative to the anti-imperial interpretation based on inter-reference with oral lore of the Abbasid era recorded by Abū Ḥanīfah Āḥmad al-Dinawārī (d. ca. 895) in his Akhbār al-Ṭiwāl. I will show direct allegorical parallels between Abbasid and Sasanian kings, which render the Īwān Kisrā ode not a critique but a redemption for the troubled Abbasids by a poet who was deeply invested in the institution he served.

In particular, al-Buḥtūrī names two Sasanian rulers in his ode who were targets of their son’s violence. Abbasid lore of the Sasanian period identifies al-Muntaẓir with one of the rebellious Sasanian sons.17 In this light, the Sasanians are tragically flawed like the Abbasids; sympathy for the former extends to

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16 For al-Buḥtūrī’s endorsement of al-Mu'tazz, see Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shābushtī, al-Diyārīt, ed. Kūrķis 'Awwād (Beirut: Dar al-Rā'id al-'Arabi, 1986), 150-156 and Ibn al-'Imrānī, al-Inbā', 118-119 and his praise ode jointly to al-Mu'tazz and al-Mutawakkil in al-Buḥtūrī, Diwān al-Buḥtūrī, 2: ode 277 on the occasion of al-Mu'tazz's circumcision and seating at Bulkuwāra. For al-Buḥtūrī’s failure to serve al-Muntaẓir as state poet, see Ibn al-'Imrānī, al-Inbā’, 117. Note also his decision to stigmatize, then redeem al-Muntaẓir in Ali, “Praise for Murder?” in Writers and Rulers, 1-38. While this may seem on the surface an about-face, it is telling that he suffered no negative consequences for besmearing the caliph, and in effect the two odes stand as a token of his preeminence. Moreover, he was never required to offer an ode of apology (i'tidhār) for his assault, since al-Muntaẓir urgently needed his poetic services.
the latter allegorically. More generally, the juxtaposition emphasizes Fate’s cycles of glory and decay. Rather than rebuking the Abbasids, al-Buḥturi in effect mythologizes the first regicide of the Abbasid dynasty in order to prevent schism (fitna) in a community already traumatized by civil wars.

The poet’s reaction to tragedy, moreover, is ultimately not one of self-centered indignation, as would befit the brigand poet (su’lūk). Rather, he gives us a second allegory of mature reconciliation. The poet depicts with touching sympathy a scene where oedipal tension is resolved in a joyful vignette of drinking and camaraderie. He envisions wine, not blood, being shed. In fact, al-Buḥturi’s own son, Abū al-Ghawth, makes an appearance linking the universal tensions between the young and the old with the poet’s own life. In the context of sin and tragedy caused by the regicide/patricide of al-Mutawakkil and the supremacy of the Turkic guards at the court, this scene of reunion and reconciliation moves the poet to tears and finally closure. The poet dedicates his tears to the mighty who fall tragically. In light of the parallel he establishes between the Sasanians and their Arab Abbasid successors, those tears extend to the Abbasids allegorically. Though old sins and the traumas are fully recognized, no person is beyond redemption in this ode. The only irredeemable “villain” is Fate, with its vicious cycles of glory, decadence and decay. It will become evident, in the course of this discussion, that the cycles of Fate underpin notions of history and the destiny of the community in medieval Islamic culture.

A noteworthy precursor to al-Buḥturi’s poem at Īwān Kīsrā was composed by Abū al-ʿAtāhiya (d. 825). A brief look will serve to illustrate al-Buḥturi’s tragic tone by comparison. The earlier poet similarly incorporated the memory of legendary Persian palaces, al-Khawarnaq and al-Sadr, in a poem to the Caliph al-Hādī (r. 785-786). The opening lines of Abū al-ʿAtāhiya’s poem commence with a typical recollection of ruins. Like al-Buḥturi’s remains, his are not the frail remains of camel nomads, but rather the ruins of bygone royalty. He proceeds with images of heavenly delight in the company of mythic companions who drink in the paradisiacal setting. The opening is marked as nasib by its recollection of ruins, images of delight, and memories of happiness, which remain sadly only memories. The nasib imagery extends unexpectedly for 17 lines in an ode that is only 23 lines in length. As if awakened from a dream, the poet then signals a change of mood that directs him toward his benefactor, the Caliph al-Hādī. In a crescendo of travel images, Abū al-ʿAtāhiya moves himself and his audience

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19 Ibid., 67-71.
20 Ibid., 66.
to the culmination of the ode, valorizing the benefactor who sustains the glory of the dynasty. Though technically he reserves only the last two verses for that valor, the whole poem in retrospect, we discover, valorized him from the beginning.\(^{21}\) As great as the palaces and joys of yore may be, those of the future, promoted by the benefactor, are even greater.\(^{22}\) As it turns out, the Caliph is “the lord of palaces and cities” above all. The patron is the hero who guards the future; he renews the glories that fade.\(^{23}\) In this short ode, the poet has provoked such intense yearning, and the gracious patron fulfills it completely.

Al-Buḥṭuri’s poem at Īwān Kirsā, in contrast, provides no resolution. At the outset, the poem’s unusual features—no single recipient nor typical structure—link it to the well-known but archaic Bedouin verse of the \(su'il\)k poet. The similarity with brigand poetry gives proponents of the anti-imperial interpretation some basis, so it would be worthwhile to clarify both the limits of that similarity \textit{and} the key differences that set Īwān Kirsā ode apart.

As a literary type, the brigand poet was the outlaw of Bedouin society who lived as an outcast of his tribe and was haunted by his crimes.\(^{24}\) His ethic is not that of tribal loyalty and duty, but antisocial individualism.\(^{25}\) At root, the brigand poet is alone against the world, relying on ruses and flight for survival, and identifies ultimately with beasts of prey.\(^{26}\) In like manner, al-Buḥṭuri’s poem begins with an indignant and mercurial tone, as evidenced in lines 1 and 10 particularly. The poet certainly opens with a voice associated with the brigand poet, but ultimately, his tone of bitterness and alienation relents. He escapes not to the open desert to commune with howling beasts, as would befit the brigand, but to the ruins of a luxurious palace, to the seat of an august empire. Suddenly, he has made an artistic and ideological decision, leaving the desert wilderness for the brigand and choosing the evidence of a bygone empire.

His defiant beginning (ll. 1-10, Appendix A and B) sharply disassociates him from a disappointing present that is readily perceived in the \textit{nasib} of his Samarran poetry. Assumptions of mistreatments, which underpin the anti-imperial reading,\(^{27}\) are consistent with the brigand-like rhetoric in the

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\(^{21}\) Ibid., 73.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.


\(^{25}\) Ibid., 88.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 91.

opening. The voice of the brigand poet echoes when one compares al-Buhturi’s tone to that of the pre-Islamic brigand, al-Shanfarah, in his renowned *Ode of the Arabs Ending in Lām* [Lāmiyat al-‘Arab]:

To recompense the loss of those who do not requite my kindness,

............
I have three companions—an emboldened heart,
a white polished sword,
a slender yellow bow (ll. 10-11).  

Like the brigand poet who is haunted by his past, who perpetually feels betrayed, al-Buhturi, too, conveys a similar spirit as his ode opens. It is not totally surprising that some scholars have in this vein presumed the poem to have been composed in 861, immediately after the murder, rendering it a kind of “pilgrimage” that enables the poet to recover from trauma. Here, one can see the rhetorical effect of his brigand-like themes, which give the artful impression of a poet cast out from society, anathematized. However, whereas brigand-hood is artistically a permanent state, pilgrimage is temporary and purposeful. The impression of pilgrimage, albeit illusory, gives context and meaning to the poem. It indicates a valid perception that there is something ultimately goal-oriented about the extra-societal interim. Dayf hints at this issue when he says that al-Buhturi composed the poem to “weep thereby his worry and grief at the murder of al-Mutawakkil.” More, however, is at stake than the murder of a single caliph or the poet’s inward feelings. Unlike the brigand whose problems are individual and whose solutions are antisocial, al-Buhturi channels anger and progresses beyond that.

The poet’s thematic progression is, however, arduous. The poet not only utters his intention to move toward his destination, but must justify himself (ll. 11-12). In line 13, he is once again driven to elaborate on his reasons. The Abbasids, though Muslim and linguistically Arab, were the ideological successors of the Sasanian dynasty in adopting its principles of monarchy. In artistic terms, al-Buhturi is summoning the misfortunes of Abbasid culture on the cusp of his transition to the ruins. These are, however, the ruins of a “parent” civilization that Abbasid’s both cherished and plundered. The

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28 Translation from S. Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 144.
30 Dayf, *‘Aṣr al-‘Abbāsī al-Thānī*, 231.
32 The Caliph al-Mansūr (r. 754-775) is said to have plundered Ctesiphon to use its materials for his new imperial city, Baghdad. However, when he sought to dismantle the Iwān Kisrā of the Sasanian palace, the goal proved too daunting and expensive to accomplish. He was forced to abandon the project having left barely a dent, ‘Abd al-Malik al-Thaʿalibī, *Thimār al-Qulūb fil-Mudāf wal-Mansūb*, ed. Muhammad Abū al-Fadl Ibrāhim, Dhakhāʾir al
poet’s journey thus redresses oedipal anxiety on the familial, dynastic, and civilizational level.

His first words of the glory for the Sasanians express open kindness and charity (ll. 14-15). Though the Arab poet shows goodwill toward them, he draws attention not only to their prosperous realm, but to their guarded northern frontiers along the Caucasus. That border is presented here as mythically inviolable, tiring, and baffling the human gaze. The phrasing evokes Qur’anic diction describing the effect of God’s craftsmanship on any gaze that might attempt to find flaws: It is He “who created the Seven Heavens in layers. In the Creation of the Compassionate, you do not see any flaws? Look again, do you see a single breach? Look again and again, your gaze will fall, tired and baffled.” The Sasanians’ level of perfection is, like God’s, not in vain. Al-Buḥṭuri’s reference to the frontiers raises a key theme he later develops: security of family, dynasty, and civilization. He rekindles the memory of a Sasanian realm whose prosperity is guarded by pragmatic, presumably iron-clad, defenses. In lines 16 and 17, the guarded prosperity of that empire stands antithetical to a vulnerable barren terrain. The verses, of course, establish an antithesis between the august heritage of the Sasanians and the “simple” abodes of Bedouins. It might even tempt one to consider al-Buḥṭuri’s subsequent verse as a veiled critique of Arab culture and of old Bedouin poetics. Certainly this would be likely if al-Buḥṭuri had continued with the voice of the defiant brigand. However, line 16 in particular distinguishes him thematically and poetically from the brigand who would precisely opt for the antisocial wasteland. More importantly, al-Buḥṭuri effectively disassociates himself from the voice of the brigand when he discloses a deep attachment to imperial heritage. As al-Buḥṭuri develops the themes of his ode at the “grave” of the Sasanian, it will become clearer that his commentary serves as an allegory for something more mythic and universal.

After contrasting desert wilderness with imperial glory, the impermanence of that glory takes precedence, and al-Buḥṭuri reframes the topic with a prominent use of the perfect tense. To compound the elegiac mood, the first subject of the verb is Time (i.e., Fate) itself (ll. 18-20). The mighty are not

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1 Arab, 57 (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1985), 181. Nevertheless, caliphs would make excursions to the nearby ruins, as did al-Mutawakkil (al-Ṭabarî, Ṭārîkh, 9:166).

33 Qur’ān 67:3-4.

immune from the vicissitudes of Time. As a villain, Time ensures decay, echoing the lamentations of the conventional *nasib* where Fate, and its metonymies (Time, Death, Days or Nights) victimize innocent life perennially.\(^{35}\) The poet, for a moment, dwells on the erstwhile glory of the Sasanians. Their bustling structures become fallen shells, reminiscent of tombs.

The poet, however, does not bear the weight alone. He finds solace in the company of remembered kings, such as Anūshirvān (ll. 21-23). At first it would appear that the poet is surrendering to reverie, but there seems to be deeper allegorical purpose. According to oral lore compiled by al-Dīnawarī, a contemporary of al-Buḥtūrī, Anūshirvān Khosrow I (r. 530-579) fought back the Byzantines in the celebrated battle of 540 wherein he seized Antioch, one of the most prized cities of the enemy.\(^{36}\) He was a model king for the Abbasids,\(^{37}\) but his legacy is not solely triumphant. Or rather, al-Dīnawarī’s narratives insinuate that he could repel the mighty Byzantines, but he could not avert oedipal strife at home.\(^{38}\) In effect, knowledge of Sasanian lore can enable us to see more clearly al-Buḥtūrī’s theme of civilizational security as it is shaken by family trauma.

Though Anūshirvān’s martial might was incomparable and his northern borders stretched securely between the Caspian and Black Sea, he could hardly remain immune from domestic upheaval. We are told that he had a son by a woman of exceptional beauty who was Christian.\(^{39}\) He wanted her to convert to Zoroastrianism as a gesture of her love for him, but she refused.\(^{40}\) The son, standing in solidarity with his mother, also refused to convert. This provoked the father’s anger and caused him to imprison the prince. While Anūshirvān was at the frontier fighting the Byzantines, he fell ill to a deadly disease. When the son received news, he escaped prison, assembled his allies, and captured a city for its financial resources.\(^{41}\) When the intelligence network delivered the news to the father, he declared the son an enemy of the state. Without regard for familial sentiment, he ordered the prince killed.\(^{42}\) The father miraculously recovered from his illness, hunted


\(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 70.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.
the son down, and had him killed without pause or clemency.\textsuperscript{43} Crisis was averted for the state, only to underscore the tension of oedipal replacement within the context of the family. Moreover, al-Dinawar hinted at the futility of attempting to avert Fate. He ominously foreshadowed in his narrative the fated replacement of the Sasanians by another younger civilizational system: “The Prophet . . . was born at the end of the reign of Anūshirvān.”\textsuperscript{44} On the rhetorical and symbolic level, the oedipal threat to Anūshirvān was artistically and psychologically linked to the threat of Muḥammad’s new order. Al-Buḥturi thus seems to allude to layers of oedipal strife that are familial, dynastic and civilizational.

The poem continues with glory on the surface betraying darker layers of inter-reference (ll. 24-26). The man (in the poem) who could command the motions of his soldiers stands in contrast to the man (in lore) whose overweening manner provoked domestic rebellion. The poet, however, pulls his audience closer to the source of his description. For the first time, he draws attention to the panel depicting the Battle of Antioch. Most importantly, he focuses on the psychic-artistic gaps between his verbal description, the actual panel, and the viewer’s eye (ll. 27-28).\textsuperscript{45} The viewer is not only invited to experience the panel visually, but to explore the panel vicariously by touch. One is enticed by a rich layering of artistry: the poet’s, the panel’s and one’s own imagination of sight and touch. The poet appeals to the senses to draw his audience into his poetic experience. At a critical moment, we are in effect invited to identify with the poet. The identification helps to transfigure the theme of imperial security to one of individual security, that is, mortality.

Precisely at the moment when we are welcomed into the poet’s experience, he introduces his son. Abū al-Ghawth makes an appearance as the libation bearer (ll. 29-30). In a haze of reverie, Anūshirvān, the Sasanian father, becomes Abū al-Ghawth the Arab son. These libations of wine are part of the iconography of immortality.\textsuperscript{46} Here the life-giving liquid does not flow from the ancients, rather the poet dreams of his son serving him the wine of everlasting bliss out of loyalty. This idyllic image stands conspicuously in tension with Anūshirvān’s own strife with his son. He implicitly questions the gap between ideals and realities, dream state and wakefulness. It is a question he soon asks explicitly.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{45} Motoyoshi, “Reality and Reverie,” 106, 107.
In the meantime, al-Buḥtūrī’s wine appears to be a promising liquid in times of tension (ll. 31-32). The poet’s resort to wine displaces tensions and evokes an image of reconciliation. In pre-Islamic times, the shedding of both wine and blood was associated with immortality,47 but the poet in the wake of references to bloodshed promotes instead restoration and contentment by wine. The beverage directly affects the heart. At last, an elite assembly of otherwise vying men gather in a mythic garden in a spirit of camaraderie and graciously share the drink of everlasting life.48

Within this garden scene, the next persona to join the gathering is Khosrow II Aparvīz (r. 591-628; l. 33) along with his prized minstrel, Balahbadh. Aparvīz is the last of the Sasanian royalty to partake in the communal wine; he too witnessed a tormented conflict with his son. Though he was born the son of a competent and scrupulous king, Hurmīzīd IV, according to al-Dīnawārī’s narratives, Aparvīz himself became a plague upon the land. He was unsuccessful in battle and unjust to nobles under his command.49 The nobility effectively dethroned him and gave his son, Shīrūya (r. 628-629), an ultimatum forcing the young man to order the execution of his corrupt father and replace him immediately.50 Shīrūya asked for one day to contemplate the matter.

The next morning Shīrūya drafted a letter of execution to be sent to Aparvīz. The son rose up against the “tyrannical” father and wrote a long shocking document that began with these words: “What will befall you is a punishment from God for the legacy of your misdeeds!”51 Both at the level of family and dynasty, the son/successor had replaced the father/predecessor and seized the symbols of his authority. On a civilizational level, al-Dīnawārī continues to synchronize the oedipal coup with the Islamic rise to glory and the Arab conquest of Mesopotamia: “It was in the ninth year of the Prophet’s migration.”52 Despite his Arab lineage, al-Buḥtūrī’s own attitude in the ode toward the Sasanian downfall is never less than sympathetic. Anūshirvān and Aparvīz sowed the seeds of their own tragedy, but al-Buḥtūrī voices their praise compassionately and offers them the bliss of wine and the joy of camaraderie; though he is an Arab, he promotes their memory in reconciliation. Perhaps the most unsettling line of the poem is when he begins to question the possibility of reconciliation in reality:

50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 108.
52 Ibid., 107.
A dream that closes my eye to doubt?
Or desire that alters my fancy and guesses? (l. 34)

These questions remain unanswered in the poem. Thus, for the remainder, he undertakes an extended effort to memorialize the Sasanians with implications for Abbasid social memory.

The rest of the poem, lines 35-56, rigorously eschews questions about conflict. Instead, al-Buṭṭurī launches a focused elegy of the Sasanians. The lyrical mood in this section enables the poet to maximize yearning and sympathy for the Sasanians. In this manner, he proposes a series of “recollections” in order for his audience to come to terms with the House of Sāsān, and by extension with the House of ʿAbbās.

The significance of al-Buṭṭurī’s words to the Sasanians is profound. As a luminary of Arab culture, he can implicitly make amends like no other orator for the violence that supplanted the House of Sāsān. The sight of the desolate building prompts him to voice the distress and sadness that Time brought upon it (ll. 36-37). Any suggestion of blame remains implicit, because the ultimate culprit is Time, the nasībic enemy of all organized human life. In line 39, the weight of Time is presented as an immovable beast upon the site (l. 39-40). Al-Buṭṭurī’s manner of recollection carefully evokes not blame but grief, because axiomatically the tragic turns of Fate are universally outside the realm of human control. The language of Fate and tragedy shifts attention away from human (Arab) culpability, but nevertheless offers the bygone Sasanians the veneration due to them as predecessors of the Arabs in Mesopotamia. In the formula of elegy, the greater the glory of the deceased, the greater the offering of blood or tears must be to placate the haunting claims of the dead. After admitting the injustice of plunder committed upon the Sasanian Arch by Time in line 40, he proceeds to celebrate the height of the ramparts and mountains that defend it (l. 41-42), the vastness of the Sasanian armies (l. 45), the size of crowds made to wait for audience (l. 46), and the talent of court minstrels (l. 47). In a critical moment, al-Buṭṭurī’s recollection technique reclaims these bygone wonders from the distant (alien) past. He brings them into the recent (Arab) past (l. 48-49). The poetic practice of nostalgia refurbishes Abbasid cultural memory of the Sasanian. The military divide between Arab and Sasanian, conqueror and conquered, is overturned in favor of a project to assimilate their heritage and credit them. As al-Buṭṭurī suggests, the past seems closer than one might think.

In the next two lines, al-Buṭṭurī fulfills the obligations of a loyal poet grieving his deceased kin. Note here, however, that he cannot call for vengeance against the killers (Arabs) in the classical heroic mode, and thus offers libations of tears implicitly renouncing armed heroism (ll. 50-51). While his
tears and commemoration serve important social functions in Abbasid society, his choice of tears instead of blood as an oblation deserves notice. S. Stetkevych notes that pre-Islamic poetry of elegy is predominantly chanted for fallen kinsmen in battle.\(^53\) The heroic, manly ideal of tribal society was to protect the sanctity of a warrior’s blood by memorializing vengeance sought and achieved.\(^54\) As a counterpart to elegy composed by men, calls for vengeance composed by women do not offer libations of blood but tears.\(^55\) One can sense then in al-Buhturi’s decision to offer tears that he opts out of the external violence of bloodshed and instead subordinates himself to demands that are consistent with Abbasid imperial interests. If his ode to the Sasanians stands allegorically for the Abbasids, one can be sure that he offers tears and remembrance, not blood and vengeance, to the two families, dynasties, and civilizations. What we have then are tears sublimated into a token of self-redemption. The poem that began with the voice of the bitter brigand now concludes with renewed resolve to recollect the estranged past.

In the next lines, al-Buhturi recognizes the claims of the Sasanians on him through a bond of kinship not by birth, but by “favor” (i.e. cultural influence; ll. 52-55). In line 54-55, al-Buhturi nostalgically recalls the intervention of the Sasanians in pre-Islamic Arabia, though this event is commonly reported as a mixed blessing. His recollection re-invents a checkered event in order to honor Persian culture. According to Abbasid narrative, the Sasanian occupation of Yemen replaced an occupation by the Christian Aksumite commander Aryāṭ and his successor Abraha. Al-Buhturi’s first embellishment is to re-invent legend and lore, which indicate that the Sasanian armies faced Abraha not Aryāṭ; in fact the latter was dealt his fatal blow not by the Sasanians, but by his successor Abraha.\(^56\) Second, according to Abbasid sources, Anūshirvān sent Sasanian forces to expel Abraha’s army from Yemen, but the Sasanians exploited Yemen as a satrapy, and Anūshirvān ordered a series of massacres during the thirty year occupation of Yemen until the last Persian ruler converted to Islam in 628.\(^57\) Allowing a sweet innovation to triumph over a bitter memory, al-Buhturi seems to accentuate the positive by casting the Sasanians as the liberators and allies of the Arab race. There is some basis for this new artifice, since Aryāṭ and Abraha launched massacres of Jews in Yemen, and Abraha menaced the Holy House at Mecca in 570 because it rivaled his own in Sanaa.\(^58\) Though the

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\(^{54}\) Ibid.
\(^{55}\) Ibid.; ibid., 199.
\(^{57}\) Al-Ṭabari, *Tārikh*, 2:147.
Sasanians did not make themselves liked in Yemen, for Mecca the result of the Persian occupation thwarted further attacks on the Holy House. In a spirit of lyricism, al-Buḥṭûrī records the Sasanian occupation as an unequivocal “liberation” that supported pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arab dominion.

The ultimate verse then opens into a final expression of goodwill, based on this “positive” cultural experience with the Persians (l. 56). Al-Buḥṭûrī’s openness to other races, to be sure, needs to be seen in the context of Arab-Muslim sacral history. Benedict Anderson notes that the great sacral communities of the pre-modern world, whether Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, were imaginable first and foremost because there were super-ordinate principles that gave them a feeling of being at the center cosmically, regardless of their ethnic composition.59 The sacredness of the leader, history and, above all, language gave members of the community a sense of cosmic privilege, and most importantly, an impulse to domesticate people of wide ranging ethnicity.60 Indeed, conversion “to Islam” in the medieval period in most cases was not predicated on a change of heart; joining a new religion meant, above all, joining a new community.61 The equation of religious and communal identity, DeWeese explains, actually encouraged the expectation that people would come into the fold of their new religion not as individuals, but often as groups of kin or locality.62 One should note that from the perspective of the sacral community, such conversions were not baseless. The sacral efficacy of the community, by means of its leader, its history and language, promoted a tireless belief in the power of the community to redeem newcomers who were not pariahs, but fertile new ground for communal growth.63 One can imagine that al-Buḥṭûrī’s openness to other groups, after a splendid tribute to one of them, gave this poem an exceptional appeal among Muslims who were non-Arab. In effect, it validated their ethnic origin, whatever it may have been, and conferred upon them the privilege of membership in a vast sacral community.

Moreover, al-Buḥṭûrī’s poem contributes to a view of cultural assimilation that balanced the one extreme of the Shu‘ubiyya movement, which looked to Persian culture over all others for models, and the other extreme

60 Ibid., 13-24, 36.
62 Ibid.
of traditionalists who saw Arab culture as the only viable model.\textsuperscript{64} Al-Buḥṭuri’s approach promotes a synthesis of cultural contributions (“favors”). His elegy of the Sasanians heightens a sense of yearning for their abode, but within the context of his allegory, a yearning likewise for the Abbasid abode. He cultivates a hunger for memory of a dual past using the idiom of \textit{nasib} to evoke nostalgia. He and many others seek to nourish that desire by reclaiming knowledge of the Sasanian past.

Al-Buḥṭuri redeems the once-estranged Sasanians as well as the Abbasids by lamenting the cycles of Fate and offering tears of affection and devotion. In this article, I have illustrated how al-Buḥṭuri’s \textit{Iwān Kisrā} can be read as an allegory with reference to oral lore of the Abbasid era recorded by al-Dīnawarī in his \textit{Akhbār al-Tiwāl}. From this perspective, al-Buḥṭuri raises vividly the archetypal issues that ultimately transform a sordid palace scandal into a tragedy of universal relevance and appeal. Composed after the murder, the poem forced larger questions on the stage, such as who/what is fundamentally to blame, who deserves their fate, and why power is cyclical. The poet’s response, no doubt, is that of an imperial poet concerned not with other-worldly redemptions, but those of this one.

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{EI}, s.v. “Shu‘ubiyya.”
APPENDIX A
TRANSLATION

1 I saved myself from what defiles my self
   and rose above the largess of every craven coward.
I endured when Time shook me,
   seeking misery and reversal for me.
Mere subsistence from the dregs of life have I.
   Days have rationed it inadequately.
Stark is the difference between him who drinks at will twice a day
   and him who drinks every fourth day.

5 As if Time’s inclinations are
   predicated on the vilest of the vile.
My purchase of Iraq was a swindler’s ploy,
   after my sale of Syria, a trickster’s sale.
Do not test me endlessly about my knowledge
   of these ordeals to deny my misfortunes.
You once knew me as a man of qualities,
   disdaining petty matters, undaunted.
But the scorn of my cousin,
   after heartfelt kindness and amity, disturbs me.

10 When I am scorned, I am likely
   to be seen rising not where I spent the night.
Sorrows attend my saddle. I direct
   my stout she-camel to Madâ’in [Ctesiphon].
I console myself for such luck
   and find solace in a site for the Sasanians, ruined.
Perpetual misfortune reminds me of them;
   misfortune makes one remember and forget.
They live the good life, shaded by guarded peaks,
   which tire and baffle the gaze.

15 Its gates, on Qabq Mountain, are secure, extending to the
   uplands of Khilâţ and Muks.\textsuperscript{66}
The abodes are unlike the ruins of Su’dâ,
   in a wasteland, bare and plantless.
Heroic feats—were it not for my partiality—the


\textsuperscript{66} The traditional northern border of the empire between the Caspian and Black Sea.
feats of ʿAns and ʿAbs would not surpass them.

Time despoiled their era of vitality. It
devolved to worn-out rags.

As if the Arched Hall, for lack of humanity, and sheer abandonment,
is a grave’s edifice.

20 If you saw it, you would know that the nights
are holding a funeral in it after a wedding.

It would inform you of a troop’s marvels,
their record does not gray with obscurity.

When you see a panel of the Battle at Antioch,
you tremble among Byzantines and Persians.

The Fates stand still, while Anūshirvān
leads the ranks onward under the banner

In a deep green robe over yellow.
It appears dyed in saffron.

25 Men in combat are under his command.

Some are quiet and hushed.

Some are intense, rushing forward with spear-points.

Others are cautious of them, using shields.

The eye depicts them very much alive:
they have between them speechless signs.

My wonder about them boils till
my hand explores them with a touch.

Abū al-Ghawth [poet’s son] had poured me a drink without stinting,
for the two armies, a draft

30 of wine. You would think it a star
lighting the night or sun’s luscious kiss.

You see, when it renews joy and
contentment for the drinker, one sip after the other,

That it was poured into glasses—into every heart.
It is beloved to every soul.

I fancied Kisrā Aparvīz handing me
a drink and al-Balahbadh [king’s minstrel] my companion.

A dream that closes my eye to doubt?
Or desire that alters my fancy and guesses?

35 As if the Arched Hall, by its wondrous craftsmanship,
were hollowed in the cliff of a mountain side.

It would be thought, from its sadness—
to the eyes of morning and evening visitors—

Distraught like a man torn from the company of loved ones,
or distressed by the breaking of nuptials.

Nights have reversed its luck. There, Jupiter
whiled the night but as a star of misfortune.
It shows hardiness, but the cruel weight of Time
is fixed upon it.

40 It’s no stigma that it was ravished of
silken carpets, stripped of damask drapes.

Towering, its ramparts rise high,
It looms over the summits of Ṣamawah and Quds.

Donning white clouds, you do not

45 glimpse of them but cotton tunics.

It is not quite known: Is it the work of humans for jinn
to live in or the work of jinn for humans?

Yet, as I gaze upon it, it attests
its builder is among kings not the least a cipher.

As though I see generals and troops,
as far as the eye can see.

40 As though foreign embassies suffer in the sun.

They are dismayed standing behind crowds, kept waiting.

As though minstrels in the Hall’s center
croon lyrics between plum-like lips.

As though the gathering were the day before yesterday
and the hurry of departure just yesterday.

As though the seeker of their trail could hope
to catch up with them the morning of the fifth day.

50 It was built up for joy forever, but
their domain is for condolence and consolation now.

It deserves that I lend it my tears,
tears committed to affection, devoted.

I feel this, though the abode is not my abode
—by blood—nor this race my race.

Beyond their graces toward my people,

55 they seeded, out of their goodness, fine sprouts.

They backed our dominion and buttressed its might
with warriors under armor, zealous.

They helped against Aryāt’s regiment
by stabbing chests and spearing.

I find myself thereafter completely enamored
by noble men of every race and origin.
송투 나스이 어망 무다니스yb 나스이
와-타라파 투 아만 자마 루 키키 지비
와-탐사크투 히나 자자안디다-마루 림타시 와-나르시
부라히언 민 수바바티 라이시 نيدي
타파كات-하 아야모 타치파 백시
와-바르뒤 만 바이나 와르디 리핀
알링 나모레유 와-와르디 키플시

와-카안나 민-자만아 아스바حاول 마흐무-라
한 하우아 마아 알아키시 알아키시
와-시드라시 라이라 퀘트라투 까박인
바다 바위 쉬하아마 바아타 와키
나 타르질니 무자윌란리-히티비리
바다 하.deleteById 발랄아 턱킬라 마시키
와-카디만 아히탄 다한 바틴
아버지 알 다니야티 쉬무스
와-라قاد 라반니 무부우우 뿌 ًامم
바다 린 린료 진바야히 와-우시

와-이다 마 루시투 톤트 육디란
안 우라 하이라 무식힌 하이 kamu暑시
하다라트 라할야 함무무나 와-와키자- 루 마다-니 ًانسي
updatedAt ًان-이 라 logistics 와-باس
이-마할린 민 니 니따나 다르시
아드카라티닝-무 알쿠투투 타와들이
와-라قاد 두드키루 알쿠투투 와-우시키
와-우무 무사피들나 피 지일 ًاilyn
머칠림이가스럽 푸-유우라 와-유قس

무할라킨 바부루 ًالا 잡바리 알-قابل
ق vedere 하라타_rat 브라바 무시키
خيلحام 유 라타카운 카-알라 현다
피 기바린 민-인 알바비시 무리시
와-마사唪 lawla 브마하바투 민них
유 누قصير شماز추 ًانسي 와-كار시
낮라 다-다루 ًامدادحننا ًاني ج-جيد
데이 항냐 헤냐 전다-아 루بسي
فة-كاًاننا ج-임 BindingFlags 위-ان시키 와-익할레다 작니유라 IT
law tarāhu ʿalimta anna l-layāli
jaʿalat fihi maʿtaman baʿda ʿursi
wa-hwa yunbika ʿan ʿajāʾibi qawmin
lä yushābu l-bayānu fihim bi-labsi
wa-idhā mā raʾayta šūrata antā-
kiyyata ṭaʿāta bayna rūmin wa fursi
wa l-manāyā mawāthilun wa-anūshir-
wān yuzjī s-suʿufa tahtat d-dirafṣi
fī-khḍirārin min-i l-libāsi ʿalā aṣ-
fa-ra yakhtālu fi šabīghaṭati warsi

wa-ʿirāku r-rijāli bayna yadayhi
fī khuṣūtīn minhum wa-iğhmādī jarṣī
min mushīṭīn yahwī bi-ʿāmilī rūṣīn
wa-mulīṭīn min-i s-sīnānī bi-tursī
taṣīṭī l-Ṭaynu annahum jiddu aḥyā-
ʿīn lahūm baynahum iṣḥāratu khursī
yaghtalī fihīmin r-tiyābiya ḥattā
taṭaqarrāhumu yadāya bi-lamṣī
daq saqānī wa-lam yuṣārīd abū l-gaw-
ṭīhīlī bi-ʿāmulīn ṭurūṣī
wa-tawahhamtu anna kisrā aḥbarī-
za muʿāṭīyīna wa-l-balāḥbadha unṣī
ḥulumun muṭbiqūn ʿalā sh-shakki ʿaynī
am amānīn ghayyarna ṣannī wa-ḥadsī

wa-kanna l-iwānā min ʿajabi ʿan-
ṭātī jawbun fī jannī arʿana jilṣī
yuṭaża ṣannī min-i l-kaʿābatī idh yab-
dū lī-ʿaynay muṣabbīḥīn aw mumassī
tuẓajīn bil-ṣirāqī ʿan unṣī aḥfīn
ʿazza aw murḥaqan bi-taṭliq ʿīrsīn
ʿakasat ḥazzahu l-layālī wa-bāta l-
mushtarī fīḥī wa-hwa kawkabu nāḥṣī
da-hwa yubdi tajalludan wa-ʿalayhī
kalkalun min kalākīlī d-dāhilī mursī

lam yaʿibhu an buzza min busuṭī d-dī-
bājī wa-stulla min sutūrī d-dimaqṣī
mushmakhīrrun ta‘lū lāhu shurufātun
ruṣ‘at fī ru‘ūsī radwā wa qudsī
lābisātun min-i l-bayādī fa-mā tub-
ṣīrū minhā illā ghala‘īla bursi
laysa yudrā aṣūn‘u insin li-jinnin
sakanūhu am ṣūn‘u jinnin li-insi
ghayra annī arāhu yashhadu anna lam
yaku bānīhī fī l-mulūkī bi-nikṣī

fa-ka‘annī arā l-marātība wa l-qaw-
ma idhā mā balaghtu ākhira ḥissi
wa-ka‘anna l-wuṣūda dāhīna ḥasrā
min wuqūfīn khalīfa z-zihāmī wa-khunṣī
wa-ka‘anna l-qiyāna waṣṭa l-maqāṣī-
ri yurajjī‘na bayna ḥuwwīn wa-lu‘ṣī
wa-ka‘anna l-liqā‘a awwalū min am-
si wa-washka l-firāqi awwalū amsi
wa-ka‘anna l-ladhī yuridu t-tībā‘an
ṭāmī‘un fī luḥūqīhim ṣubḥa khamṣī

‘ummirat li-s-surūrī dahran fa-ṣārat
li-t-ta‘azzī ribā‘uhum wa-t-ta‘assī
fa-lahā an u‘īnahā bi-dumū‘in
mūqafātīn ‘alā ṣ-sabābātī ḥubṣī
dḥāka ‘indī wa-laysat-a d-dāru dārī
bi-qṭirābīn minhā wa-lā j-jinsu jinsī
ghayra nu‘mā li-ahlihā ‘inda ahli
gharāsū min zakā‘īhā khayra ghursi
ayyadū mulkanā wa-shaddū quwāhu
bi-kumātīn taḥta s-sanawwari ḥumṣī

wa-a‘ānū ‘alā kātā‘ib aryā-
ṭa bi-ṭa‘nin ‘alā n-nuḥūrī wa-dā‘āsī
wa-arānī min ba‘dū aklafū bi-l-āsh-
rāfī ṭurra man kulli sinkhīn wa-issī