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**A puzzling cue of Yūsuf Ǧū Nuwās:
hypothesis on its interpretation and its connections
with non-written languages of Yemen**

Looking at classical Arabic literature about the well known Ḥimyar king Yūsuf Ǧū Nuwās (r. 522–525 c.ca), I found a tale concerning his accession to the throne, in which a puzzling sentence (retained so by Arab writers themselves) occurs. The same tale has been reported in many sources and versions, but most of them goes back to Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 729 or 732), who is actually one of the earliest Arab sources about Pre-Islamic Yemen. Unfortunately the version published in *Kitāb al-Tiġān* is perhaps the less accurate. But with comparison with other versions the text may be restored with good approximation.¹

According to Arabic Tradition, the king Zur‘a Yūsuf Ǧū Nuwās was acclaimed on the throne of Ḥimyar after having killed the usurper Laḥyā‘a Yanūf Ǧū Ṣanātir. This latter indeed had been foretold, probably by a soothsayer, that he would be killed by the most handsome Ḥimyarite “face” (*waġh*, a word which could also mean “nobleman”), so he started to harass (literally: “to do what the Sodomites do”) in turn all the young boys of the royal family in order to rob them of the dignity to be king. He built a room on this purpose, called *mašrab* (“tavern”), which could either be a “penthouse”, similar to the *mafraġ* of Yemeni houses,² or a basement, i. e. an underground chamber. The important thing is that this room had a small window (*kuwwa*) from which he could see, and be seen by, his guards and soldiers, standing somewhere, possibly in the court-yard.

When his turn came, Ǧū Nuwās, who was indeed a very handsome boy (*ġulām*), was able to hide a blade in his sandal-shoes by which he could kill

¹ The versions I consider here are: *Sīra al-Nabī*, I pp. 65–79 (pp. 14–15 of Guillaume’s translation); *Tiġān*, pp. 311–312; Ṭabarī *Ta’rīḥ*, vol. I pp. 918–919 (vol. V pp. 190–192 of Bosworth’s translation); *Aġānī*, XXII pp. 318–319. The *Tiġān* version of this tale has been edited with an English translation in my *ARABI – Part I*, p. 40–43.

² In *Sīra*, English translation, Guillaume, p. 14.

Ḍū Šanātīr. Then he cut his head and put it on that small window from which Laḥay‘a used to lean out to his soldiers down in the court with a tooth-pick in his mouth in order to let them know he had accomplished his goal.

Finally Ḍū Nuwas went out to the people who questioned him: «O Ḍū Nuwas, was it wet or dry?» (*Ḍū Nuwās, a raṭb aw yabās*).

The answer of Ḍū Nuwas recorded in sources looks like a linguistic puzzle; if not the version given by Abū al-Faraġ al-Iṣfahānī in his *Ktāb al-aġānī*, which is rather a paraphrase, its meaning would still be obscure. Here are the questioned sentences (vocalization hypothetical):

sal naḥmās iṣṭrabās lā ba’s (Tīġān)

sal taḥmās Ḍū Nuwās iṣṭraḥbān lā ba’s (Sīra)

sal naḥmās iṣṭarḥabān Ḍū Nuwās iṣṭraḥbān lā ba’s (Ṭabarī Ta’riḥ)

In the way they are written, many of these words are meaningless in Arabic. In translating the *Sīra*, Guillaume simply gave “ask the head”, and omitted the rest,³ following Ibn Hišām’s comment which states that *taḥmās/naḥmās* is a Ḥimyarī word for “head”; Bosworth too did not translate the sentences, but reported its “obscene reference”, recalling the interpretation given in *Kitāb al-aġānī*.⁴

Aġanī interpretation is indeed: *sa-ta‘lamu* [or *sa-tu‘allimu*] *al-aḥrās ist Ḍū Nuwās ist raṭbān am yabās*, that may be translated: “the guards will know [or will inform or will be informed] if Ḍū Nuwās’ bottom is a wet or a dry one”.

This is likely to be a correct interpretation, nevertheless some remarks on the ironic or obscene meaning of the sentences can be done. Moreover the mysterious words of the original, whatever language it be, would need an explanation.

Let us look firstly at the word *raṭb*, meaning “wetness”, of which *raṭbān* is the adjective, though rarely attested in this form; in this meaning it is the natural opposite of *yābis* (“dry”), as in Qur. VI 59. Arabic *lexica* reports that *raṭb* is also an adjective usually referred to a young boy or servant (a *ġulām*, i. e. exactly the target of Ḍū Šanātīr’s perversion) meaning: “having the tender moving and attitude of women”. Thus the opposition wet-dry includes, already in the question posed by the people to Ḍū Nuwās, the obscene or malicious double-edged joke.

Looking at the original sentence, the versions in *Tīġān* and *Sīra* are clearly corrupted because of the misunderstanding of copyists. But also the version in Ṭabarī is not totally correct.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Ṭabarī *Ta’riḥ*, English translation, Bosworth p. 191, note 484.

The first word, simply spelled *sl*, has been translated by al-Iṣfahānī as *sa-ta'lamu*; but it would better be read as a vernacular for *is'al* (“ask”), with dropping of *hamza*. In this concern I suggest to emend the *Āgānī* version from *sa-ta'lamu* into an imperative *ista'lim* (“ask information!”), which would also give an anaphoric shape to the cue.

Then the non-existing word *iṣṭaṭbān* should be split in two (*ist raṭbān*, i. e. “the bottom of an effeminate”) as shown in *Āgānī*. finally the expression *lā ba's*, commonly used in Arabic to say “not bad”, “no problem”, appears to be a corruption for *yabās* (“dry”), again following *Āgānī*, but the *rasm* of the expression could also be read in some other way.

The most puzzling word remains thus the second one, whose *rasm* has been variously dotted (*naḥmās*, *naḥmās*, *taḥmās*, and other lectures might be proposed). Ibn Hišām, adding a comment to Ibn Ishāq, says that *taḥmās* is a Ḥimyarī word for “head”, but al-Iṣfahānī has “the guards”.

My proposal is to read it as *tiḥmā-s[u]* or *taḥmā-s[u]*.

Though not attested in Classical Arabic, *tiḥmā* (or *taḥmā*) could be a *tif'āl* nominal stem⁵ from the root ḤMY (“to protect, to guard”) meaning “guards”, eventually intended as a collective “the corps of guardians”.

An expression *ṭḥmy gnn*, intended as an architectural term “enclosure of the fertile area” occurs in Qatabanic inscription Ja3200=MuB8. Though the reading is not certain, it could be also interpreted as a “court of garden” or “courtyard”.

E. Rossi⁶ reports a word *ḥomiyeh* in a Yemenite dialect meaning “parte sottostante la casa, cortile”. This is in fact the place where the guards of the story were supposed to stay when Dū Ṣanātīr used to look out on them from the small window of the *mašrab*.

Thus *tiḥmā/taḥmā* would stand for “[those of] the court”, i. e. “the guards”.

To this word, I suggest, is added a 3rd person singular masculine pronoun *-s[u]* (“his”), that would recall some non-Sabaic South Arabian languages; it and also occurs for feminine in Modern South-Arabian languages. To this the witness of H. F. Von Maltzan⁷ may be added, who reported to have heard near Zabīd in Yemen a pronominal suffix *-es* for *-hā*. The expression he quoted, *aḥadk-es* = “I took her/them”, shows two “South-Arabian” features: the *-k* suffix for first person in perfect tense and the *-s* for the suffix pronoun.

The sentence still lacks a detail for a better fitting with Abū al-Faraḡ translation: the disjunctive particle *am* (“or”). A possibility is that *lā* would actually stand for something similar to classical Arabic *wa-illā* (“otherwise”).

⁵ Such a stem is usually considered a *mašdar* of II verbal stem (*fa'ala*), but it may also be used as a concrete of III verbal stem (e. g.: *miṭāl / timṭāl*). Is is also given as current in some Yemenite dialects for the *mašdar* of the V verbal stem (see Rabin 1951, p. 37, quoting Rossi 1938, p. 249).

⁶ Rossi 1940, p. 305.

⁷ Maltzan 1873, p. 245; see also Rabin 1951, p. 50.

Thus I would thus restore the sentence in *Sīra*, *Tīḡan* and *Ṭabarī* with the following:

sal tiḡmā-s[u] Ḍū Nuwās ist raṭbān [wa-il]lā yabās.

“Ask his guardians [weather] Ḍū Nuwās is a wet [= effeminate] bottom or a dry [= still untouched] one”.

Of course I would not affirm that this sentence has been ever uttered by Ḍū Nuwās. But tales about him did likely originate in the VI century and were handed down until Wahb b. Munabbih caught it during his long life – it is said he died at the age of 90 – most of it spent in Ṣan‘ā’. It seems anyway not impossible that a Yemenite vernacular of the VI century or even later could show such a South-Arabian-like features, and that these features were preserved by storytellers to give a genuine “ḥimyaritic *nuance*” to the tale, even though it became by time unintelligible to Arab audience.

This interpretation supposes that the language of the sentence is a vernacular which preserved some features (lexical, morphological and phonological) peculiar of old South Arabian languages, possibly still in use in those times. Among these,⁸ in my opinion, the most important is the occurrence of a 3rd person masculine suffix pronoun in *-s*, which in Yemen disappeared in written documentation around the end of III century CE, to re-appear only in the XIX century. It must be noticed indeed that this was never recorded by Arab philologists among the linguistic features of what they called “Himyaritic”, such as, for example, the article *am-*, the 1st and 2nd person perfect suffix in *-k*, the negative particle *daw*, the preposition *ḡanḡ*, etc.

Some reflections thus might be advanced about the nature of the language of this sentence and the possible surviving of vernaculars of non-Sabaeen South Arabian type, or even the possible surviving of some of their linguistic features, despite of the disappearing (or non-existence) of their written tradition. And it may be considered as an example of what in the X century CE al-Hamdānī, describing the speeches of Yemen, defined as “complicated” (*muta ‘aqqad*), “middle between correct and incorrect” (*mutawassiṭ bayna al-faṣāḡa wa-l-lukna*), or even “unintelligible” (*ḡutm*).⁹

⁸ The proposed imperative *sal* recalls what al-Hamdānī (*Ṣifa*, p. 248) reports about the imperative *sima*‘, instead of Classical Arabic *isma*‘, among the features of the speech of Sarw Ḥimyar and Ḡa‘da, in Yemen; the proposed meaning of *tiḡmā* points to a Yemenite dialectal form; also the adjective form *raṭbān* in the answer of Ḍū Nuwās may sound more “South-Arabian”, compared to the form *raṭb* of the question.

⁹ *Ṣifa*, p. 248–249.

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