Classic Poetry Series

Imru al Qays Ibn Hujr

- poems -

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Imru al Qays Ibn Hujr (500 - 550)

Imru` al-Qais bin Hujr al-Kindi (Arabic: □□□□ □□□□□ □□□ □□□ □□□□□□ / ALA-LC: Imrū’ al-Qays ibn □ujr al-Kindī) was an Arabian poet in the 6th century AD, and also the son of one of the last Kindite kings. He is sometimes considered the father of Arabic poetry. His qaseeda, or long poem, "Let us stop and weep" (Arabic: □□□ □□□) is one of the seven Mu'allaqat, poems prized as the best examples of pre-Islamic Arabian verse. Imru' al-Qais was born in the Najd region of northern Arabia sometime in the early 6th century AD. His father was said to be Hujr bin al-Harith (□□□ □□□ □□□□□□ / □ujr ibn al-□ārith), the Kindah monarchy's regent over the tribes of Asad and Ghatfan, and it is believed that Imru' al-Qais was born in the territory of Asad. His mother was said to be Fatimah bint Rabi'ah al-Taghlibi (□□□□□ □□□ □□□□□ □□□□□□□ / Fā□imah bint Ranī`ah al-Taghlibī).

Legend has it that Imru' al-Qais was the youngest of his father's sons, and began composing poetry while he was still a child. His father strongly disapproved of this habit in his son, believing poetry to be an unseemly pastime for the son of a king. His father also disapproved of Imru' al-Qais' scandalous lifestyle of drinking and chasing women, and eventually banished him from his kingdom, or so the legend goes. Later, when the tribe of Asad rebelled and assassinated his father, Imru' al-Qais was the only one of his brothers to take responsibility for avenging his death. Renouncing wine and women, he fought the tribe of Asad until he had exacted revenge in blood, and spent the remainder of his life trying to regain his father's kingdom.

Like many figures of early Arabia, which at that time lacked a formal writing system and relied on the oral transmission of stories, the details of the life of Imru' al-Qais are hard to determine with any certainty. Even so, historians have been able to compare the various stories written down by later biographers with clues from Imru' al-Qais' own poems and information about major historical events in the Persian and Byzantine empires to reconstruct a probable account of the life and ancestry of this most famous of the Jahili (pre-Islamic) poets.

According to one account, his full name and ancestry was Imru' al-Qais, son of Hujr, son of al-Harith, son of 'Amr, son of Hujr the eater of bitter herbs, son of Mu'awiyya, son of Thawr of the tribe of Kindah (Arabic: □□□□ □□□□□ □□□ □□□ □□□ □□□□□□ □□□ □□□□ □□□ □□□ □□□ □□□□□□ □□□ □□□□□□ □□□ □□□ □□□□□□). He was also referred to as "The Lost King" (□□□□□ □□□□□□ / al-Malik a□-□alīl), because he was never able to recover his father's throne.

The Poem of Imru al Qays

Stop, oh my friends, let us pause to weep over the remembrance of my beloved.
Here was her abode on the edge of the sandy desert between Dakhool and Howmal.

The traces of her encampment are not wholly obliterated even now.
For when the South wind blows the sand over them the North wind sweeps it away.

The courtyards and enclosures of the old home have become desolate;
The dung of the wild deer lies there thick as the seeds of pepper.

On the morning of our separation it was as if I stood in the gardens of our tribe,
Amid the acacia-shrubs where my eyes were blinded with tears by the smart from the bursting pods of colocynth.

As I lament thus in the place made desolate, my friends stop their camels;
They cry to me 'Do not die of grief; bear this sorrow patiently.'

Nay, the cure of my sorrow must come from gushing tears.
Yet, is there any hope that this desolation can bring me solace?

So before ever I met Unaizah, did I mourn for two others;
My fate had been the same with Ummul-Huwairith and her neighbor Ummul-Rahab in Masal.

Fair were they also, diffusing the odor of musk as they moved,
Like the soft zephyr bringing with it the scent of the clove.

Thus the tears flowed down on my breast, remembering days of love;
The tears wetted even my sword-belt, so tender was my love.

Behold how many pleasant days have I spent with fair women;
Especially do I remember the day at the pool of Darat-i-Juljul.2

On that day I killed my riding camel for food for the maidens:
How merry was their dividing my camel's trappings to be carried on their camels.

It is a wonder, a riddle, that the camel being saddled was yet unsaddled!
A wonder also was the slaughterer, so heedless of self in his costly gift!

Then the maidens commenced throwing the camel's flesh into the kettle;
The fat was woven with the lean like loose fringes of white twisted silk.

On that day I entered the howdah, the camel's howdah of Unaizah!
And she protested, saying, 'Woe to you, you will force me to travel on foot.'

She repulsed me, while the howdah was swaying with us;
She said, 'You are galling my camel, Oh Imru-ul-Quais, so dismount.'

Then I said, 'Drive him on! Let his reins go loose, while you turn to me.
Think not of the camel and our weight on him. Let us be happy.

'Many a beautiful woman like you, Oh Unaizah, have I visited at night;
I have won her thought to me, even from her children have I won her.'

There was another day when I walked with her behind the sandhills,
But she put aside my entreaties and swore an oath of virginity.

Oh, Unaizah, gently, put aside some of this coquetry.
If you have, indeed, made up your mind to cut off friendship with me, then do it kindly or gently.

Has anything deceived you about me, that your love is killing me,
And that verily as often as you order my heart, it will do what you order?

And if any one of my habits has caused you annoyance,
Then put away my heart from your heart, and it will be put away.

And your two eyes do not flow with tears, except to strike me with arrows in my broken heart.
Many a fair one, whose tent can not be sought by others, have I enjoyed playing with.

I passed by the sentries on watch near her, and a people desirous of killing me;
If they could conceal my murder, being unable to assail me openly.

I passed by these people at a time, when the Pleiades appeared in the heavens,
As the appearance of the gems in the spaces in the ornamented girdle, set with pearls and gems.

Then she said to me, 'I swear by God, you have no excuse for your wild life;
I can not expect that your erring habits will ever be removed from your nature.'

I went out with her; she walking, and drawing behind us, over our footmarks,
The skirts of an embroidered woolen garment, to erase the footprints.

Then when we had crossed the enclosure of the tribe,
The middle of the open plain, with its sandy undulations and sandhills, we sought.

I drew the tow side-locks of her head toward me; and she leant toward me;
She was slender of waist, and full in the ankle.

Thin-waisted, white-skinned, slender of body,
Her breast shining polished like a mirror.

In complexion she is like the first egg of the ostrich-white, mixed with yellow.
Pure water, unsullied by the descent of many people in it, has nourished her.

She turns away, and shows her smooth cheek, forbidding with a glancing eye,
Like that of a wild animal, with young, in the desert of Wajrah.

And she shows a neck like the neck of a white deer;
It is neither disproportionate when she raises it, nor unornamented.

And a perfect head of hair which, when loosened, adorns her back
Black, very dark-colored, thick like a date-cluster on a heavily-laden date-tree.

Her curls creep upward to the top of her head;
And the plaits are lost in the twisted hair, and the hair falling loose.

And she meets me with a slender waist, thin as the twisted leathern nose-rein of a camel.
Her form is like the stem of a palm-tree bending over from the weight of its fruit.

In the morning, when she wakes, the particles of musk are lying over her bed.
She sleeps much in the morning; she does not need to gird her waist with a working dress.

She gives with thin fingers, not thick, as if they were the worms of the desert of Zabi,
In the evening she brightens the darkness, as if she were the light-tower of a monk.

Toward one like her, the wise man gazes incessantly, lovingly

She is well proportioned in height between the wearer of a long dress and of a short frock.

The follies of men cease with youth, but my heart does not cease to love you.
Many bitter counselors have warned me of the disaster of your love, but I turned away from them.

Many a night has let down its curtains around me amid deep grief,
It has whelmed me as a wave of the sea to try me with sorrow.

Then I said to the night, as slowly his huge bulk passed over me,
As his breast, his loins, his buttocks weighed on me and then passed afar,

'Oh long night, dawn will come, but will be no brighter without my love.
You are a wonder, with stars held up as by ropes of hemp to a solid rock.'

At other times, I have filled a leather water-bag of my people and entered the desert,
And trod its empty wastes while the wolf howled like a gambler whose family starves.

I said to the wolf, 'You gather as little wealth, as little prosperity as I.
What either of us gains he gives away. So do we remain thin.'

Early in the morning, while the birds were still nesting, I mounted my steed.
Well-bred was he, long-bodied, outstripping the wild beasts in speed,

Swift to attack, to flee, to turn, yet firm as a rock swept down by the torrent,
Bay-colored, and so smooth the saddle slips from him, as the rain from a smooth stone,

Thin but full of life, fire boils within him like the snorting of a boiling kettle;
He continues at full gallop when other horses are dragging their feet in the dust for weariness.

A boy would be blown from his back, and even the strong rider loses his garments.
Fast is my steed as a top when a child has spun it well.

He has the flanks of a buck, the legs of an ostrich, and the gallop of a wolf.
From behind, his thick tail hides the space between his thighs, and almost sweeps the ground.

When he stands before the house, his back looks like the huge grinding-stone there.
The blood of many leaders of herds is in him, thick as the juice of henna in combed white hair.

As I rode him we saw a flock of wild sheep, the ewes like maidens in long-trailing robes;
They turned for flight, but already he had passed the leaders before they could scatter.

He outran a bull and a cow and killed them both, and they were made ready for cooking;
Yet he did not even sweat so as to need washing.

We returned at evening, and the eye could scarcely realize his beauty
For, when gazing at one part, the eye was drawn away by the perfection of another part.

He stood all night with his saddle and bridle on him,
He stood all night while I gazed at him admiring, and did not rest in his stable.

But come, my friends, as we stand here mourning, do you see the lightning?
See its glittering, like the flash of two moving hands, amid the thick gathering clouds.

Its glory shines like the lamps of a monk when he has dipped their wicks thick in oil.
I sat down with my companions and watched the lightning and the coming storm.

So wide-spread was the rain that its right end seemed over Quatan,
Yet we could see its left end pouring down on Satar, and beyond that over Yazbul.

So mighty was the storm that it hurled upon their faces the huge kanahbul trees,
The spray of it drove the wild goats down from the hills of Quanan.

In the gardens of Taimaa not a date-tree was left standing,
Nor a building, except those strengthened with heavy stones.

The mountain, at the first downpour of the rain, looked like a giant of our people draped in a striped cloak.
The peak of Mujaimir in the flood and rush of débris looked like a whirling spindle.

The clouds poured forth their gift on the desert of Ghabeet, till it blossomed
As though a Yemani merchant were spreading out all the rich clothes from his trunks,

As though the little birds of the valley of Jiwaa awakened in the morning
And burst forth in song after a morning draught of old, pure, spiced wine.

As though all the wild beasts had been covered with sand and mud, like the onion's root-bulbs.
They were drowned and lost in the depths of the desert at evening.

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