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## The Mu'allaqa of the Black Knight

The historical and legendary character of the poet warrior, Antar ibn Shaddad is considered to be one of the most notable in Arab literary culture. Antar (of the Banu Abs), as he is most commonly known is also referred to as one of the "Ravens of Arabs". This term is used to denote great warriors of African descent and has been a prominent feature in folklore since before the advent of Islam.

His poetic compositions consist of personal accounts of life as a black slave (born of a free Arab father and a slave Ethiopian mother) and his subsequent conquests for emancipation and martial prowess. It was customary in Bedouin culture for children born of slave mothers to be raised as slaves, while remaining in the father's household. In order to obtain emancipation the child would have to prove himself as an able warrior and display his significance to the tribe.



Depiction of Antar and Abla

Aside from poems of military conquest much of his poetry is dedicated to his cousin Amla, whom he fell in love with and was included in The Mu'allaqat. The Mu'allaqat translates as the Hanging Poems or The Suspended Odes and is a collection of 7 pre-Islamic poems that were believed to be hung on top of the Ka'ba shrine in Mecca, marking their literary excellence.

**" Have the poets left in the garment a place for a patch to be patched by me; and did you know the abode of your beloved after reflection?**

**The vestige of the house, which did not speak, confounded thee, until it spoke by means of signs, like one deaf and dumb.**

**Verily, I kept my she-camel there long grumbling, with a yearning at the blackened stones, keeping and standing firm in their own places.**

**It is the abode of a friend, languishing in her glance, submissive in the embrace, pleasant of smile.**

**Oh house of 'Ablah situated at Jiwa, talk with me about those who resided in you. Good morning to you, O house of 'Ablah, and be safe from ruin.**

**I halted my she-camel in that place; and it was as though she were a high palace; in order that I might perform the wont of the lingerer.**

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**And 'Ablah takes up her abode at Jiwaa; while our people went to Hazan, then to Mutathallam.**

**She took up her abode in the land of my enemies; so it became difficult for me to seek you, O daughter of Mahzam.**

**I was enamored of her unawares, at a time when I was killing her people, desiring her in marriage; but by your father's life I swear, this was not the time for desiring.**

**And verily you have occupied in my heart the place of the honored loved one, so do not think otherwise than this, that you are my beloved."**

The full poem of Antar as well as the other 6 Mu'allaqat poems in English can be found in Arthur John Arberry's ['The Seven Odes'](#)

It has been disputed among early and contemporary scholars whether the event of hanging the poems on the shrine ever actually took place, the legend however is testament to the cultural significance the poems had in popular imagination. The collection also includes works by the 6 other equally renowned poets of the pre-Islamic era: Imru Al Qays, Labid, Tarafa, Zuhair, Amr ibn Kulthum and Al-Harith Ibn Hillizah.

Antar's poetic account of chivalry and romance not only paints a very stark image of the daily life of pre-Islamic northern Arabia (present day Saudi Arabia) and its customs, but also allows a reader to encounter a rich literary lore of the Arabic poetry. The poems were passed on as a verbal tradition and subsequently compiled into the Sirat Antar by Islamic philologists

The poems of Antar and the Mu'allaqat served as a muse for many artists to come. Renowned Arab artists such as Dia Al-Azzawi (Iraq), Rafic Charaf (Lebanon) and Ali Omar Ermes (Libya) have all used the Seven Odes and the legend of Antar as themes in their work. The Seven Odes was also incorporated as a theme into this year's [Jeddah Arts](#) with a group exhibition by Saudi artists titled ['Moallaqat'](#).

Owing to the exceptional display of linguistic artistry, the works of Jahili poets (dating to the Jahiliya or "time of ignorance") have managed to survive the subsequent purge of pre-Islamic culture by the advent of Islam, and in the coming centuries remained an intrinsic part of Arab folklore, carrying the legacy of ancient Arabia to the present day.



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