Note on the Text

The text of this edition is based on ten manuscripts and three printed editions. The first edition of Ḥmēdān al-Shwēʿir’s poetry is found in the first volume of Khālid al-Faraj’s Diwān al-Nabat, published in 1952 in Damascus. It presents the work of four major Najdī poets in the language of Nabatī poetry. It opens with the work of Ḥmēdān al-Shwēʿir, followed by that of the poets Mḥammad ibn Liʿbūn, ʿAbdallāh ibn Ribiʿah, and ʿAbdallāh ibn Sbāyīl. The edition by al-Fawzān, who originates from Ḥmēdān’s town of al-Qaṣāb, is also a critical study of his work. The edition by al-Ḥamdān, who was born in the nearby town of al-Bīr, adds some new fragments of verse, based on oral sources and manuscripts. In all of these editions, and in particular the last one mentioned, lines or words from Ḥmēdān’s verses are replaced by ellipses. The reasons given are that they contain sensitive materials: obscenity, or unflattering comments on some towns and clans. The manuscripts do not show such inhibitions.

The greatest number of poems by the earliest known Nabatī poet, Abū Ḥamzah al-ʿĀmirī, are found in the manuscript named after its owner, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Dhukayr. Many of the pages are ink-blotted; it is said that the manuscript fell in water. The eleven pages devoted to nine poems by Ḥmēdān did not escape this fate, but are in relatively good shape. The date of the manuscript is unknown.

The oldest known manuscripts with Nabatī poetry that can be dated with reasonable certainty are the two acquired by the French traveler Charles Huber, who visited the Rashīdī court in the northern Arabian capital Ḥāʾil in 1878 and 1883–84. It is not known where and from whom he obtained these manuscripts. But when he purchased them they cannot have been very old. They feature the work of the wealthy and learned poet Muḥammad al-ʿAbd Allāh al-Qāḍī from the town of ʿUnayzah in al-Qaṣīm province, who died in 1868, a little more than ten years before Huber’s visit. The poet ʿUbayd ibn Rashīd, nicknamed “the Wolf,” who together with his brother ʿAbd Allāh established the Ibn Rashīd dynasty in Ḥāʾil that, for much of the nineteenth century, eclipsed the Saʿūd princes in Riyadh, died in 1865. Generally speaking, the great majority of poets in the
Huber manuscripts are well-known names that recur in later published collections of Nabaṭī poetry.

The oldest poems in the Huber manuscripts, such as the verses of Quṭn ibn Qutn, al-ʿUlaymī, and Barakāt al-Sharīf, date from the seventeenth century. It is highly unlikely that these poems survived over a period of centuries solely through oral transmission. Three of the longer poems by Ḥmēdān are included in the Huber manuscripts.

Most of the Saudi collections of Nabaṭī poetry are based on two voluminous manuscripts. The great majority of Ḥmēdān’s poems are among those collected in the MS written by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Ibrāhīm al-Rabīʿī from ʿUnayzah (d. 1981/2 at the age of ninety-three). The other is Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Yahyā from the Sudayr region (d. 1993/4 at the age of ninety). The latter has not included poems by Ḥmēdān. But it is interesting to note that he obtained most of the poems from the poet Ibrāhīm ibn Juʿaythin (1844 or 1845–1943), who was known for his prodigious memory. Al-Rabīʿī used to accompany his blind father, who knew many poems by heart and was the rāwi, transmitter, of the work of the poet Muḥammad al-ʿAbd Allāh al-Qāḍī. Al-Rabīʿī and Ibn Yahyā were in correspondence and probably shared information on their common passion.

It is clear, therefore, that the written tradition of manuscripts was closely intertwined with the prevalent oral milieu in which Nabaṭī poetry flourished. And it was not a one-way street. Poems that were recorded in manuscripts would return to oral circulation when they were recited and again committed to memory.

This oral culture did not achieve the status of officially sanctioned cultural expression because that would conflict with the religious standard—though this did not stop some men of religion from indulging in it. This all helps to explain the sorry state of many of these manuscripts, the undoubted loss of many more, the uncertainty surrounding their origins, and their relative neglect until recently. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that the quality of the writing of many manuscripts reflects the semi-literacy of the scribes. Mistakes made by earlier copyists were likely to have been uncritically repeated. On the other hand, those who were more familiar with the living culture and formal requirements of meter and rhyme would have been tempted to add “corrections” as they saw fit. The older the poetry, like the work of Ḥmēdān, the greater the likelihood of distortions. Though the writing of many manuscripts leaves much to be desired, the task of
establishing the text was facilitated by the occurrence of most poems in more than one manuscript and the existence of the published versions.

While it is quite possible to write Nabaṭī poetry by using essentially the same system of orthography as the one used for classical Arabic, scribes with limited knowledge of literary Arabic often wrote the poems in an improvised, more or less phonetic manner. For instance, ṣawwim is commonly written by adding a nūn to the end of a word. If a word according to the vernacular pronunciation begins with a consonant cluster, due to the elision of the initial short vowel, the vocalic onset is written as a prefixed alif instead of sukūn on the first consonant, which may lead to misunderstandings.¹⁰⁹

For example, in one manuscript the first hemistich of a verse is written بِوْجَكَكْ أَمَيْدِيْنَا طَرَفْ, pronounced as w-in jāk mn ad-dinya ẓaraf, where the correct form would be وَإِن جَاكَ مِن الدِّينَا طَرَقْ. According to the metrical scheme of long syllables, it is scanned: win-jā-kim-nad-din-yā-ţa-raf. One way to dissolve consonant clusters for metrical purposes is to connect a final consonant with an initial consonant and add a short vowel, which in the above example is the vocalic onset, expressed by the alif before the mīm.¹¹⁰

I have not included all the poems and verses found in these sources. My reasons for this vary from mistakes in attribution to what I perceive to be an incompatibility of language and style with the body of Ḥmēdān’s work. Verses that are incomprehensible, because the context is missing or because they have been transposed from another poem in the same meter and rhyme, have also been left out. Some short pieces, mostly based on oral sources, seemed of dubious authenticity and little significance. Yet, despite numerous variant readings in the manuscripts and in the published editions, the overall impression I have of the material is of a surprising degree of conformity among the texts.

When choices had to be made, I considered factors such as what was contained in the other texts, the effect a reading would have on the meaning, and conformity to the meter. There are some differences in the order of sections of verse and individual verses, particularly in two of the long poems in ṭawīl meter on the subject of the poet’s self-imposed exile from his hometown of al-Qaṣab to Uthayfiyah, and the poem in which he encourages Uthayfiyah to rise up against its overlords in the town of Tharmadāʾ (poems 22 and 28). The political issues and ruling personalities mentioned in these poems are imperfectly known from the chronicles. It is also quite likely, especially in the case of complex and long
Note on the Text

poems, that parts of the original may have dropped out in the course of transmission. In the second half of these poems, where the poet switches from advice on how to deal with the vicissitudes of life to the political situation, variations in the order of verses from one source to the next may result in significant discrepancies in meaning. The chosen verse order is the one I deemed most satisfactory in the context of the poem and Ḥmēdān’s work as a whole.