

## **The Pre-Islamic Battle of Dhū Qār: From History to Collective Memory<sup>1</sup>**

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## Abstract

This article traces how Arabic literature, dating from the ancient Abbasid period to the current Saudi–Houthi War, has commemorated the pre-Islamic battle of Dhū Qār. Modern poets commemorate the battle of Dhū Qār in light of later conflicts between the Arabs and their rivals, the Persians, and they portray the pre-Islamic Arabs as a united people who triumphed over the Persians. The Banū Shaybān clan’s success in protecting its identity has been developed as a source of inspiration for Arabs, who are reconstructing a collective memory of the battle in order to serve a modern political agenda. In contemporary Arabic literature, Dhū Qār is used to once again unite Arabs against a common enemy.

**Keywords:** Arabic poetry; Pre-Islamic; Dhū Qār; Collective memory; Cultural memory

## Introduction

In this project, I discuss the representation of the pre-Islamic battle of Dhū Qār in modern (i.e., spanning from the twentieth to the twenty-first century) Arabic literature. The battle reportedly occurred in Iraq and was fought between the Sasanian army and the tribe of Bakr ibn Wā'il. Among the various clans in this tribe, the Banū Shaybān clan played a major role in the battle. The battle was later recorded in various historical and literary works during the Abbasid era. Early accounts of this battle presented it as an Arab tribe's unique victory over the Persian army. However, this victory has been propagandized and reconstructed, especially in modern Arabic literature, to create a collective memory that serves the modern Arab community in its ongoing rivalry with the Persians. By specifically applying Maurice Halbwachs' distinction between history and collective memory, I trace the transformation of the battle of Dhū Qār from its origin as a tribal victory to its adaptation as a national Arab triumph.

To examine the development of the battle from a historical record to a collective memory, I trace how it has been retrieved from classical history books and literary compendia and used to serve both modern Arabic literature and the present Arab community. By studying several Arabic literary works, specifically modern texts, I investigate literary attempts to use Dhū Qār to emphasize Arab identity in the service of a specific political agenda. Since the Abbasid period, Dhū Qār has been discussed whenever a rivalry arises between the Arabs and the Iranians. I trace these commemorations of the battle, focusing on two modern periods in which it appeared notably often: the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) and the Saudi–Houthi War (2015–present). The narratives and poetry concerning the battle of Dhū Qār help us understand how Arabs perceive themselves and understand their past, particularly in terms of

what is remembered, who remembers it, who is included, who is excluded, and, most importantly, what purposes the commemoration of Dhū Qār serves in Arab culture.

No precise definition exists of collective memory; however, in a broad sense, it is described as “a form of memory that transcends individuals and is shared by the group” (Boyer and Wertsch 139). Halbwachs explores how collective memory differs from history and factual evidence in several ways. Collective memory “retains from the past only what still lives or [is] capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive. By definition, it does not exceed the boundaries of this group” (Olick et al. 142–43). In contrast, general history is written by professional historians aiming for objectivity and impartiality, even when they write about their own countries (145). However, as Edward Said points out, memory and its representations can also reflect a group’s identity, power, and authority. According to Said, in both textbooks and scholarship, historians make a considerable effort to sustain and use memory in order to provide “a desirable loyalty and understanding of one’s country, tradition, and faith” (176).

Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka enrich this conversation by stating that cultural memory “comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose cultivation serves to stabilize and convey that society self-image” (132). For Assmann and Czaplicka, cultural memory contributes to the concretion of identity, serving as a storehouse of knowledge from which a certain group retrieves “awareness and peculiarity” (130). Through the concretion of identity, one can identify how a certain group creates their determination in cultural memory “in a positive (we are this) or in a negative (that is our opposite) sense” (130). Another key characteristic of

cultural memory is that it does not, strictly speaking, preserve the past. Instead, it maintains what “society in each era can reconstruct within its contemporary frame of reference” (130). In other words, cultural memory relates the past to a real and existing situation, and every new society retrieves the past differently (130). In this sense, I also use E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger’s *invention of tradition* concept to discuss how modern literature revisits Dhū Qār. According to Hobsbawm and Ranger, the invented tradition is “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition” (1).

### **Dhū Qār: From History to Memory in the Abbasid Era**

Several classical history books and literary compendia narrate the story of Dhū Qār. The basic story recounts an alliance between the Sasanian Empire and the Arab Lakhmid kingdom. The region of the Lakhmid’s protected the Sasanian Empire from raids by Arab tribes. Khosrow II, the Sasanian emperor, had chosen al-Nu‘mān to be the next Lakhmid king after the death of al-Nu‘mān’s father. Later, when Khosrow began looking for a wife of extraordinary beauty and ability, Zayd ibn ‘Adī, an Arab who worked at Khosrow’s palace and whose father had been killed by al-Nu‘mān, advised Khosrow that a member of the al-Nu‘mān family (al-Nu‘mān’s daughter) would meet his standards. However, when Khosrow sent a messenger to al-Nu‘mān to ask for a wife, al-Nu‘mān refused Khosrow’s order, indicating that it would be dishonorable for an Arab girl to marry a Persian man. By refusing Khosrow’s order, al-Nu‘mān knew that the king would call for his death and take his property, so he left his family and property under the care of an old friend, al-Hānī’ ibn Mas‘ūd al-Shaybānī, who was from the tribe of Bakr ibn Wā’il. Khosrow killed al-Nu‘mān (or, according to another

narrative, imprisoned him until his death) with the help of some other Arabs. Khosrow then appointed a new king, Iyās ibn Qubayṣah al-Ṭā'ī, to take al-Nu'mān's position. Khosrow asked Iyās to bring the daughter of al-Nu'mān and all of al-Nu'mān's property to him. However, al-Hāni' refused the order, preferring to face Khosrow's army at the battle of Dhū Qār. The tribe of Banū Bakr and their allies, especially the Banū Shaybān, stood fast at the battle and ultimately triumphed over the Sasanian army (al-Ṭabarī 2: 193–212; al-Iṣbahānī 24: 54–76; Ibn al-Athīr 1: 482–83).

This account shows that the battle of Dhū Qār was a tribal victory. It was deemed appropriate for use in later periods because it was the first Arab triumph against the Sasanian Empire. Almost all of the early records of the battle include one of the Prophet Muhammad's *Hadīths*. After learning that the Banū Shaybān had won the battle, the Prophet said, “this is the first time that the Arabs have taken revenge on the Persians and they won because of me” (al-Ṭabarī 2: 193; Ibn al-Athīr 1: 482–83). In Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī's (897–967 AD) book, *al-Aghānī*, he wrote that the Prophet, while in Madīnah, prayed for the Banū Shaybān to win the battle (24: 72). Some scholars have classified this *Hadīth* as “weak” (al-Albānī 2: 47–49), meaning there is only a slight chance that it can be attributed to the Prophet. Regardless of whether the Prophet made this statement, the fact that it is recorded in a number of classical books shows that the battle of Dhū Qār bears three cultural dimensions: tribal, ethnic, and religious. As the battle of Dhū Qār grew in prominence, it began to represent more than just a tribal victory: The collective memory of the Arabs assigned a greater significance to it.

The pre-Islamic poetry surrounding the battle of Dhū Qār portrays it as merely a tribal victory for Bakr, its clans, and its allied tribes. The notion

that this victory was a victory for Arabs as a whole did not prominently appear until later periods. Abū Tammām al-Ṭā'ī (d. 845 AD), a poet in the Abbasid period, was the first poet to attribute the victory to all Arabs. In his book, *Mu'jam al-Buldān*, Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 1225 AD) narrated the story in a manner similar to other Abbasid historians, with some variations. Most notably, he included some of Abū Tammām poems, which mention the battle of Dhū Qār. Al-Ḥamawī recorded that Abū Tammām once said, while praising Khālid ibn Yazīd al-Shaybānī of the tribe of Bakr, that: (al-Ṭawīl meter)

لهم يومٌ ذي قارٍ مضى وهو مفردٌ  
وحيثُ من الأشباه ليس له صَحْبُ  
به علمت صُهبُ الأعاجم أنه  
به أعربت عن ذاتِ أنفسِها

They [Banū Shaybān] have won the battle of Dhū Qār and, indeed, it is a unique day.

It stands alone, with nothing similar to it.

In it, the ginger-haired Persians knew that

The Arabs have expressed themselves (al-Ḥamawī 4: 293–94).

It is clear from these lines that Abū Tammām viewed the battle of Dhū Qār as unique, because it was a victory for the Arabs against their main rivals. His strong opinion on the superiority of the Arabs and the inferiority of the Persians also exhibits the rivalry present between the two nations. This rivalry was overtly expressed in the literary sphere during the Abbasid period, despite the Islamic notion that all Muslims are equal. More importantly, it shows that Dhū Qār was a victory, not only for the tribe of Bakr or the clan of Banū Shaybān, but for the entire Arab nation. According to Halbwachs, remembering the past is an attempt at

social construction that is formed by the interests of the present (25). In the same manner, Abū Tammām used the past to strengthen Arab opposition to the Persian Shu‘ūbīyah movement, a sect that “does not prefer, or exalt, the Arab above the Ajam [or the foreigners or Persians]” (Lane *Sh-‘-b*).

*Ḥarb Banī Shaybān ma‘a Kisrā Ānūshirwān* was written during the Abbasid period and recounts the battle of Dhū Qār in the form of a *sīrah*, or epic. The Iraqi scholar, Muḥammad Jāsim al-Mashhadānī, later edited the book for contemporary readers and republished it in Baghdad in 1988. The book is set during the historical Arab-Persian conflict in Iraq. This conflict began due to the pro-Arab reaction against the movement of Shu‘ūbīyah in the Abbasid period. The movement continued throughout the siege of al-Baṣrah under the Zang dynasty’s (1750–1794 AD) Persian rule and the Iran–Iraq War (Alajmi 197–200). The story of the battle of Dhū Qār in *Ḥarb Banī Shaybān ma‘a Kisrā Ānūshirwān* is narrated by al-Asadī and diverges from the narrative that is found in the majority of older sources. This confirms that the story of Dhū Qār could be invented, or at least adapted, and retold to relate to more recent historical contexts. At the beginning of the book, Al-Asadī states that his version of the story is the only true and correct account. He emphasizes that all other versions are forgeries. He states that his version of the story had been taken from three trustworthy narrators: Akḥṭab ibn Yūshá, Sa‘d ibn Rabī‘ah, and ‘Abd al-Wāḥid ibn Iyās al-Tamīmī (al-Asadī 3). However, no traces of al-Asadī or the narrators exist in other classical and modern books, which suggests that if al-Asadī ever existed, he knew about the conventional version of the story and was quite insecure about his own version. Regardless of whether al-Asadī invented this story or heard it from the



narrators who adapted the classical version, they all contributed to propagating a collective memory to serve their contemporary situations.

### **Dhū Qār in Modern Arabic Literature**

In modern Arabic literature, the theme of Dhū Qār has been used several times. In 1931, the Syrian poet ‘Umar Abū Rīshah (1910–1990 AD) published his play, *Rāyāt Dhī Qār* (Banners of Dhū Qār). Abū Rīshah wrote this play when he was in his twenties, driven by the Pan-Arabism that spread worldwide in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Assous 9–10). According to Hobsbawm, the act of “inventing traditions” includes transforming traditional folk songs by supplementing them with “new songs in the same idiom, often composed by school masters, transferred to choral repertoire whose content was patriotic-progressive” (6). After Abū Rīshah similarly transformed the legendary victory of the Arabs, his play was celebrated and presented by students in schools throughout Syria (Dindī 131).

While Abū Rīshah’s motivation was nationalistic, the story of Dhū Qār was also published in a more neutral tone in Morocco in 2006: *Hāni’ ibn Mas’ūd; Baṭal Dhī Qār* (Hāni’ ibn Mas’ūd: The Hero of Dhū Qār). This book is part of a series entitled *Rijāl wa Ma’ārik* (Men and Battles), and features a simplified plot, few characters, and modern language. It was written for the younger generation in order to promote certain ethical manners, such as nobility and chivalry. This book does not contain the anti-Persian tone that exists in most modern Arabic literature related to Dhū Qār (Ḥarakāt and Funayd). Morocco’s location, in North Africa, is geographically distant from Iran, and Morocco and Iran have a neutral political relationship. Both Abū Rīshah’s play and *al-Hāni’ ibn Mas’ūd: The Hero of Dhū Qār* use the version of the Dhū Qār story found in most

classical history books by authors such Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (838–923 AD) and ‘Izz al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr (1160–1233 AD).

Such adaptations, especially Abū Rīshah’s work, aim to invent an epic narrative that claims continuity of the past. Abū-Rīshah is considered one of the pioneering poets of the Pan-Arabic movement. Thus, he was able to recognize Arab identity and embark upon a regeneration of Dhū Qār as an Arab epic to match those of rival civilizations. In the modern era, a considerable effort has been put forth by national elites to invent new ceremonies, rituals, and events that claim a link with the past (Connerton 51–52). Notably, during the Iran–Iraq War, several poets and writers used the victory at the battle of Dhū Qār as a way of reflecting on the conflict between Iraq and Iran. In collective memory, each individual within a specific milieu responds to a past event differently, according to their position and relationship with other milieus (Olick et al. 142).

In 1981, shortly after the beginning of the Iran–Iraq War, Iraqi writer, Mundhir al-Jubūrī, published *Hāni’ ibn Mas‘ūd al-Shaybānī* in a series of books called *Abṭālunā yataḥaddathūn* (Our Heroes Speak). The book tells the story of Dhū Qār in a unique way, by having Hāni’ ibn Mas‘ūd, who was, according to history, the main leader of the Dhū Qār battle, speak in first person to the reader, narrating what he encountered and sharing his thoughts and advice with modern readers. The book glorifies Arab chivalry and courage and degrades the Arabs who allied with Khosrow; when the author refers to said Arabs, he does not mention their specific names; instead, he calls them one of the *‘ulūj* (donkeys) or Bedouin brigands. In contrast to this, classical history books name many of the Arabs who supported Khosrow. In this difference, the disparities between Dhū Qār as a historical record and Dhū Qār as a collective memory are clear. In al-Jubūrī’s book, Dhū Qār is used to serve the

conflict between Iran and Iraq. Unlike the historical record of Dhū Qār, al-Jubūrī alters the historical perspective in an effort to motivate future Arab victories. He does so by having Hāni' ibn Mas'ūd describe the battle of Dhū Qār as the beginning of a series of Arab victories over the Persians. This beginning acts as the starting point for an Arab union against their Persian enemies (72–73).

Following the emergence of Dhū Qār as a poetic theme during the Iran–Iraq War, it became a national and ethnic victory for the entire Arab nation. The battle of Dhū Qār evolved to be remembered, by some poets, as a projection onto the present. In a concordance of myth, the victory that the Arabs sought in most modern literature was a continuation of the Arab victory at Dhū Qār. The Ḥizb al-Ba'th, the political party that dominated Iraq and Syria in the 1960s, also helped inspire patriotic attitudes among Arabs, especially in Iraq. The Ba'thi ideology focuses on the Arab past and believes that history must be re-evaluated and revived in order to serve the present (Aflaq 3: 64–68). To this end, the party renamed many Iraqi governorates in order to develop collective memory: The Governorate of al-Nāṣiriyyah was changed in the late 1960s to the Governorate of Dhī Qār, which shows the importance of the name “Dhū Qār” and its historical roots. This change helped develop a particular collective memory of Dhū Qār that served the Ba'th party's version.

With the beginning of the Iran–Iraq War in 1980, Dhū Qār began to appear regularly in literature, especially in modern Iraqi poetry. However, its appearance was usually in conjunction with an early Islamic battle: the battle of al-Qādisiyyah (636 AD). The appearance of Dhū Qār alongside al-Qādisiyyah was deliberate, as Saddam Hussein, the then-president of Iraq, called the war with Iran the second Qādisiyyah. The battle of al-Qādisiyyah was the Arab's second victory against the Persians and occurred at the same time and in the same place as the battle of Dhū Qār.

In addition, some classical history books connected al-Qādisiyyah with Dhū Qār. For example, al-Ṭabarī shows al-Muthanná al-Shaybānī led the men of Bakr, along with a few thousand additional men from other tribes to battles, until he was mortally wounded in the battle of al-Jesr, which preceded the battle of al-Qādisiyyah. Before he died, Al-Muthanná insisted that the Arabs expel the Persians from the land of the Arabs. Al-Ṭabarī recorded it being said that no one was more eager to fight the Persians than the tribe of Rabī'ah, including the tribe of Bakr, al-Muthanná's tribe that fought at the battle of Dhū Qār (al-Ṭabarī 3: 486–90).

### **The Commemoration of Dhū Qār during the Iran–Iraq War**

From a reading of the Iraqi poetry composed and published during the Iran–Iraq War, one can easily notice the associations between the battles of al-Qādisiyyah and Dhū Qār. In this paper, I will focus on two Iraqi poets: Kamāl al-Ḥadīthī and 'Abd al-Rāziq 'Abd al-Wāḥid. Of chief concern for this paper is the poetry that recounts the battle of Dhū Qār; the poetry concerning the battle of al-Qādisiyyah will be explored in a later paper. Al-Ḥadīthī mentions Dhū Qār multiple times in his poetry. In his collection of poetry entitled *Ri'ah 'alá al-Qādisiyyah* (A Lung on al-Qādisiyyah), which was published in 1980, he makes repeated reference to Dhū Qār while reflecting on the conflict between Iran and Iraq, promoting political propaganda by stating that the conflict was a war fought between the Arabs and Persians. Al-Ḥadīthī attributed the victory at Dhū Qār to the tribe of Bakr and the clan of Shaybān. However, since neither group existed in that form, he deploys the motif of their victory at Dhū Qār to, metaphorically, refer to the strife of the Iraqi people. In order to understand al-Ḥadīthī's references to Dhū Qār and the names of the

tribes associated with it, we must understand that the clan of Shaybān descends from the tribe of Bakr, while Bakr descends from the tribe of Wā'il, and Wā'il descends from the larger tribe of Rabī'ah. Al-Ḥadīthī uses the terms “Shaybān,” “Bakr,” and “Wā'il” interchangeably. What is important here is that even though the pre-Islamic era and its people had vanished, in the collective memory, Dhū Qār remains important, at least to al-Ḥadīthī and 'Abd al-Wāḥid. In his poem, al-Ḥadīthī addresses the enemies (the Persians) in Iran: (al-Ṭawīl meter)

ملأنا لكم أرضَ الفراتين فتيةً	تسامتُ بها أحسابُها والشمائلُ
ترودُ المنايا كالحاتٍ وجوهها	فترتدُ عنها وهي نُكسٌ كلائلُ
سواءٌ لديها بريقُ النصرِ خافقاً	أو الموتُ تحدوه الظبا والنوابلُ
نضتُ سيفَ ذي قارٍ وعزمةَ خالد	وبأسَ المثنى فالحتوفُ زلازلُ

We have filled the land of Mesopotamia with young men

Raised by its ancestral claims and qualities.

They hasten to grime-faced death,

And they return while death is overturned and beaten.

Whether the flag of victory is flapping,

Or death is sealed by the sharp edges and slender swords.

They drew the sword of Dhū Qār and showed the  
determination of Sa'd,

and the might of al-Muthanná, hence the Earth quaked with  
death (al-Ḥadīthī 27).

Al-Ḥadīthī boasts here of the power of the Iraqi army and draws on the memories of Dhū Qār and al-Qādisiyyah. The theme of Dhū Qār in the

first hemistich of the last line acts as a myth concordance in which the poet tries to connect the victories of the past with those of the present and future. He mentions Dhū Qār, but when it comes to al-Qādisiyyah, he highlights two of the leaders: Sa‘d ibn Abī Waqqāṣ and al-Muthanná. Elsewhere in this poem, Al-Ḥadīthī glorifies the clan of Banū Shaybān and the tribe of Wā’il, but he still returns to talk about the battle of Dhū Qār, as though the modern Iraqi army had won the pre-Islamic victory.

According to Jan Assmann, “what the art of memory is to learning, memory culture is to plans and hopes that is, to the formation of an identity, including the social construction of meaning and time” (17). In his poetry, Al-Ḥadīthī does not consider the Iranian enemy to be Muslim: Instead, he alters their identity and identifies them as Magi. Paradoxically, it is well-known that the pre-Islamic Arabs who triumphed over the Persians were not Muslims. However, al-Ḥadīthī attributes the victory of Dhū Qār to the modern Muslim Iraqis in order to advance his national motives. Thus, Iranian Muslims are described as Magi (Zoroastrians), Persians, or Sasanians. In contrast, Iraqis are described as the victorious Arabs of Dhū Qār, or the victorious Muslims of al-Qādisiyyah. In the following lines, the attribution of Zoroastrianism to modern Iranian Muslims when commemorating the battle of Dhū Qār is clear: (al-Khafīf meter)

وسأها مُغْتَرُّها والجَهْوُ	سدرت زمرَةُ المَجُوسِ غُلُوءاً
قَصَّرتُه حيناً وحيناً فضولُ	أبستُ في رسالةِ اللهِ تَوْباً
وهي فيه بُغْضٌ لنا وشُكُوءُ	نحنُ في الدينِ أُلْبَةُ وبنُوءه
قار قُروحاً فيكْتويها الذَّلِيلُ	كُلَّ يَوْمٍ تَحْتَهَا نارُ ذي

The gang of the Magi spreads immensely,

Led by its arrogant and ignorant leader.  
 They dressed in the robe of the message of God,  
 Short sometimes and long at other times.  
 We are the descendants and the core of the religion,  
 And they use religion to hate and trouble us.  
 The fire of Dhū Qār urges them everyday,  
 Making sores that burn the servile (al-Ḥadīthī 75).

As can be seen in this passage, Al-Ḥadīthī attempts to denigrate the Iranians by describing them as a gang of Magi (Zoroastrians) who hold grudges against the Arabs. He does not want to recognize the Iranians as Muslims. He alleges that though they claim to carry the message of God, they never rightfully practice Islam. Instead, they use Islam as a weapon against the Iraqis. He alludes to the Sunnī–Shī‘ī rivalry, but he soon returns to the Arab–Persian rivalry by referring to the battle of Dhū Qār, which he describes as having burned and wounded the Persians.

The consideration of modern Iranians to be Sasanians and Arabs to have inherited the battle of Dhū Qār is prevalent in al-Ḥadīthī’s poetry. At one point, he writes: (al-Ṭawīl meter)

صَحَا حَقْدُ سَاسَانٍ فَمِنْ كُلِّ مَكْمَنِ	تَسِيْبُ الْأَفَاعِي قَاتِلَاتٍ بِسِمَائِهَا
عَلَى مَا رَأَتْ شِيْبَانَ يَكْبُرُ عِزَّهَا	وَيَشْمَخُ فِي كُلِّ الصُّدُورِ وَسِمَائِهَا

The grudge of the Sasanians has been awakened. Thus, from every terror,

Creep the deadly poisonous snakes.

For they saw the glory of Banū Shaybān rising,

And its insignia is mounting in every heart (132).

Using the theme of Dhū Qār, al-Ḥadīthī attempts to identify the contemporary Iraqi people with the pre-Islamic people of the Shaybān clan. He shows that the enmity between the two nations (i.e., the Arabs and Persians) has existed since the victory of the Arabs at Dhū Qār.

‘Abd al-Rāziq ‘Abd al-Wāḥid also alludes to the battle at Dhū Qār in some of his poems, which were published in the Iraqi newspaper *Al-Thawrah* during the Iran–Iraq War. The battle of al-Qādisiyyah dominates ‘Abd al-Wāḥid’s poetry. However, his commemoration of Dhū Qār is prominent. Similar to al-Ḥadīthī, he uses Dhū Qār as an inspirational victory for the Arabs: (al-Ṭawīl meter)

وَلَكِنَّ زَهْوَ الْخَيْلِ يَبْقَى ضِرَارُهَا	تَصُولُ بِنَا شَيْبَانَ لِلْمَجْدِ كُلِّهَا
كِنَايَتُهَا قَحَطَانُهَا أَوْ نِزَارُهَا	وَنَذَكُرُ كُلَّ الْعَرَبِ زَهْوًا وَإِنَّمَا

The clan of Shaybān leads us to attack toward victory,

But the pride of the horses is still Ḍirār.

We should mention proudly all Arabs,

But we use Qaḥṭān or Nizār as a metonymy (75).

Here, ‘Abd al-Wāḥid uses the pre-Islamic warriors of Banū Shaybān as a metaphor for the modern Iraqi army. He also mentions Ḍirār ibn al-Khaṭṭāb ibn Mirdās, an Arab chieftain who gained fame after fighting the Persians at al-Qādisiyyah. ‘Abd al-Wāḥid boasts about the strength of the Arab nation in the second line, and by mentioning a specific tribe in his



poetry, (the Qaḥṭān) he once again highlights the strength of the Arab nation as a whole.

Thus, it is clear that the pre-Islamic battle of Dhū Qār was retrieved from Iraqi collective memory during the Iran–Iraq War. Historical accounts of the battle were accessible to the public, not only through classical texts but also through the Iraqi and Saudi Arabian school systems. I would argue that the school systems have contributed significantly to the construction of the battle of Dhū Qār as a collective memory. In Iraqi schools during the reign of Saddam Hussein, the seventh-grade history textbook *al-Tārīkh al-Qadīm lil-Waṭan Al-‘Arabī* (History of the Ancient Arab Region) included an entire chapter on “Dhū Qār.” The story, as explained in the textbooks, illustrates the feud between King al-Nu‘mān and Emperor Khosrow. However, the textbook’s focus on the victory of the Arabs is striking: “This shows that the Persians are hostile to their Arab hostages ... therefore, the Arabs gathered around the clan of Shaybān to defeat the Persians” (F. ‘Abd al-Wāḥid et al. 104).

It is worth noting that the school curricula in Iraq were changed shortly after the US invasion in 2003, and the subject of Dhū Qār has since been removed from the textbook. When under Sunnī rule (anti-Iranian leadership), the Iraqi government attempted to keep the battle of Dhū Qār present in the collective memory of the Iraqis. By contrast, the pro-Iranian Shī‘ī government, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, attempted to erase Dhū Qār from the Iraqi collective memory: In a textbook entitled *Literature and Texts*, Iraqi students in the tenth grade studied a poem by the pre-Islamic poet, al-A‘shá (d. 625 AD), from the tribe of Bakr, before the fall of Saddam Hussein. The poem boasted about the battle of Dhū Qār (al-Sāmarrā’ī et al. 30–33). After the fall of Hussein and his party in

2003, the new government substituted that poem with another, by al-A‘shá, that is unrelated to Dhū Qār (al-Khalīl et al. 37–40). What is notable about the pre-2003 poem is not only the boasts regarding the victory of Banū Shaybān and the entire tribe of Bakr, but also how it is presented in the textbook, as it is followed by text that glorifies Arabs and degrades Persians. The textbook also uses the battle of Dhū Qār to reflect on modern Iran–Iraq relations: It states that al-A‘shá boasted about the Arabs who halted the Persians’ attacks and that Dhū Qār was a memorable day because the Arabs succeeded in chasing the Persians from the Arabian Peninsula (al-Sāmarrā’ī et al. 30–33).

We understand now that educated poets, such as al-Ḥadīthī and ‘Abd al-Wāḥid, may have had considerable access to classical texts, both literary and historical. This access allowed them to study the victory at Dhū Qār and use it to reflect upon modern political disagreements. We can also infer that discussing the battle of Dhū Qār during the Iran–Iraq War was both a prevalent and vibrant topic, as Iraqi poetry that was composed in the colloquial Arabic dialect (*Nabati*) does exist. Indeed, classical history books served as a major source of information that fueled the Arab commemoration of Dhū Qār. The Iraqi school system represented a more systematic way in which to keep the idea of Dhū Qār alive in terms of its tribal, ethnic, and religious dimensions. Iraqi textbooks claim that the history of Dhū Qār is as real as it is presented. However, as Henry L. Roediger, Franklin M. Zaromb, and Andrew C. Butler indicate, the historical information provided to students in schools is “often portrayed in ways that conform to present cultural values or political objectives rather than providing an objective account of the past” (Boyer and Wertsch 142). The information in textbooks is chosen selectively to create an invented tradition, which is used, as Said has

highlighted, to “connect a large number of people to each other. The invention of tradition is [done] selectively by manipulating certain bits of the national past” (179). Thus, the information concerning the battle of Dhū Qār is disseminated to preserve and nourish the collective memory of a national victory and to forge connections with the modern conflict between Iraq and Iran.

### **The Commemoration of Dhū Qār during the Saudi–Houthi War**

The battle of Dhū Qār is also present in the poetry written and recited since 2015, when the Saudi–Houthi War began. Before we analyze this poetry, however, certain historical details must be clarified. In January 2015, the Houthis toppled the Yemeni president, ‘Abd Rabbuh Maṣṣūr Hādī, who was backed by Saudi Arabia. In March of that year, Saudi Arabia led a coalition of ten states in an attack against the Houthis in Yemen. The Houthis are Zaidis, a branch of the Shī‘ī Yemeni (Taylor). To understand the conflict between the Saudis and Houthis, one must understand the Sunnī-Shī‘ī conflict in the Middle East. When Saudi Arabia launched a series of airstrikes against the Houthis in March 2015, they termed these attacks *‘Āṣifat al-Ḥazm* (The Decisive Storm). The Saudi leaders [stated](#) that their objective was to restrain the Houthis and restore Hādī as the president of Yemen. Saudi Arabia insisted that the Houthis were an Iranian proxy. Thus, the Saudi Arabian war on the Houthis was fought to reduce Iranian influence in the region (Juneau).

The political conflict between the Saudi coalition and the Houthis allowed Dhū Qār to make a major reappearance as an Arab–Persian conflict for the first time since the Iran–Iraq War. Due to the widespread increase of internet and social-media use, poetry that supported the Saudi

attacks on the Houthis was disseminated through media sources that had not existed during the Iran–Iraq War. Most of the materials that retrieved the collective memory of Dhū Qār were digitally published, mainly as YouTube videos.

The Arab media paved the way for Saudi poets' improved access to information regarding the battle of Dhū Qār. This is exemplified in the adaptation of the story of Dhū Qār for a thirty-episode TV series. The episodes aired in 2001 on Jordanian, Qatari, and Abu Dhabi TV channels. Thus, information on Dhū Qār became widely available to the public. Moreover, various Saudi media outlets (including the TV channel al-Arabia, the newspaper *al-Riyadh*, and the newspaper *al-Jazirah*) have, on several occasions, referred to the war, named Operation Decisive Storm, as the Second Dhū Qār. This association was created by the media because both the ancient battle and the modern war involved the Arabs and Persians. Since Saddam Hussein had already called his 1980 war with Iran the “Second Qādisiyyah,” it was necessary that the Saudi media find another battle between the Arabs and Persians. This search led to the use of the battle of Dhū Qār as a representation of the Saudi–Houthi War, which became known as “the Second Dhū Qār.”

The first poem to be discussed was written by the Saudi prince, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Musā‘id Āl Sa‘ūd. In this poem, he attempts to allude to the Sunnī-Shī‘ī and the Arab–Persian political and religious quarrels. Ibn Musā‘id integrates various cultural and historical themes, including the battle of Dhū Qār, (al-Ṭawīl meter)

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| ١- على قَدْرِ هَوْلِ الحَزْمِ تَهْذِي العِمَائِمُ | وَتَأْتِي عَلَى قَدْرِ الذَّهْوْلِ الشَّتَائِمُ |
| ٢- يُعِيدُ لَهُمْ سَلْمَانُ ذِي قَارٍ مُهْلِكاً   | وَيُفْنِي ذِيوَلِ الفِرْسِ مِنَا الضَّرَاعِمُ   |
| ٣- أَدِيمُوا حَدِيثَ الإِفْكِ فَالحَقُّ أبلِجُ    | وَهَلْ لَطْرِيْقِ الحَقِّ تُهْدِي البِهَائِمُ   |

٤- فنحن حماة الدين سادات عَصِرْنَا      وَذَلِكَ مَالْمُ يَسْتَسْبِغُهُ الْأَعْجَامُ

1- The turbans mumble as [the turbans see] the amount of horror of [Saudi] decisiveness

And the curses come [from the enemy] as much as [they feel] the shock.

2- Salman brings Dhū Qār again to destroy them, and our lions abolish the tails of the Persians.

3- Continue the slander, for the truth is obvious.

But can the animals know the way of the truth?

4- We are the protectors of the religion, the leaders of our time.

And that is what the Persians hate (Hayl al-Kalām, “*Haūl Al-Ḥazm Lil-Amīr ‘Abd Al-Raḥmān Ibn Musā‘id Āl-Sa‘ūd*”).

Ibn Musā‘id begins by describing the “turbans” mumbling, alluding to the Shī‘ī leaders who (he claims) were defeated in the Saudi war against the Houthis in Yemen. In the second line, he mentions Salman, the Saudi king who resumed the battle of Dhū Qār to destroy the “tails” of the Persians. Ibn Musā‘id, among other poets, tends to call the Houthis the “tails” of the Persians or Iranians: While the Houthis are neither Persians nor Iranian, they receive support from Iran, since both the Houthis and the government of Iran are Shī‘ī Muslims. It is interesting that Dhū Qār, as a pre-Islamic war, is commemorated as part of the Sunnī Muslims’ triumph against the Shī‘ī Muslims: Technically, the combatants did not belong to either sect, since the battle occurred before the founding of Islam.

In line 3, ibn Musā‘id alludes to a historical incident during the Prophet Muhammad’s life in which his wife, ‘Ā’ishah, was accused of adultery. The slander spread in the Muslim community, but the Prophet received a Qur’anic revelation, which exonerated his wife. Today,

‘Ā’ishah, the Prophet’s wife, is honored by Sunnī Muslims, but she is defamed by the majority of Shī’ī Muslims. They believe she was politically against ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, who the Shī’ī Muslims believe should have been the Prophet’s successor in leading the Muslim nation. Thus, by alluding to this scandal, ibn Musā‘id references the historical feud between Sunnī and Shī’ī Muslims.

In line 4, ibn Musā‘id combines religious and national enmity in terms of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Because the Sunnī–Saudi government offers protection to Islam, Iran has cause to hate Saudi Arabia. However, he does not directly mention Iran. Instead, he refers to “‘Aājam,” which is the plural of “‘A‘jamī” and means “all those who do not speak Arabic.” However, it is easily inferred that he is referring to Iran here: ‘A‘jamī is often used to describe the Persians, as historically, they were the major non-Arabic speaking community within the Islamic nation. Thus, in Ibn Musā‘id’s poem, Dhū Qār is integrated within the Arab–Persian and Sunnī–Shī’ī clashes.

‘Abd al-Wāḥid al-Anṣārī is a Saudi poet who also commemorates the Battle of Dhū Qār, but in a slightly different manner. He compares the Saudi attack of the Houthis to the Banū Shaybān’s attack of the Persians in the battle of Dhū Qār. Al-Anṣārī writes: (al-Basīṭ meter)

كفعلِ شيبانَ فجرًا يومَ ذي قارِ	شَفَى غليليَ سلمانُ بضربتهِ
في ظهرِ حوثيةِ صالوا على الجارِ	فيا أبكرٍ وشُهْبُ الجوّ صاعقةٌ

Salman has quenched my resentment by his attack

Just like the deed of Banū Shaybān at dawn in the battle of Dhū Qār.

You are a wonder, Banū Bakr, when the falling stars strike,

The backs of the Houthis who attacked their neighbor (Qanāt al-Shā'ir, "*Qaṣīdah bi-*

*'unwan 'Āṣifat al-Ḥazm lil-al-Shā'ir 'Abd al-Wāḥid al-Anṣārī*").

In the first line, the poet equates the Saudi war against the Houthis with the pre-Islamic war that the clan of Banū Shaybān led to defeat the Sassanid army. In the second line, al-Anṣārī identifies the Saudi coalition forces as the Banū Bakr of the pre-Islamic battle of Dhū Qār. The battle of Dhū Qār is easily adopted here as a collective memory because both battles were between Arabs and Persians. As Assmann stated, "we only remember what we communicate and what we can locate in the frame of the collective memory" (23). Al-Anṣārī directly discusses the conflict between the Arabs and Persians later in the poem:

فشرِدِ الفُرسَ حَتَّى لَا يَنْجِيَهُمْ      من سوطِ بطشِكَ إِلَّا مَخْبَأَ الدَّارِ

Chase away the Persians until they cannot survive

The lash of your might except in entering their den (Qanāt al-Shā'ir, "*Qaṣīdah bi-'unwan*

*'Āṣifat al-Ḥazm lil-al-Shā'ir 'Abd al-Wāḥid al-Anṣārī*").

It is significant that al-Anṣārī presents the Houthis as Persians, even though they are known to be Arabs. In the poem, this is a method of denigrating the Houthis, since they are Shī'ī and allied with Iran.

Many other Saudi poets also refer to the battle of Dhū Qār in their poetry and use it to reflect on the war between Saudi Arabia and the

Houthis in Yemen. One must wonder, however, where these poets sourced their information about Dhū Qār. While information about the battle has been recorded in various classical resources, other sources have also focused on the battle, such as the previously mentioned *Dhū Qār* TV series, produced in Jordan in 2001. This production is likely to have nourished the Arab collective memory of Dhū Qār. Saudi poets may also have learned about it from their high-school textbooks, as these books retell the battle of Dhū Qār differently from classical material. In the textbooks, the story is shortened and modified into a battle between the Arabs and the Persians, who “betrayed King al-Nu‘mān, killed him, and tried to take over his property that he left with Hāni’ ibn Mas‘ūd al-Shaybānī” (*Al-Adab al-‘Arabī lil-Ṣaff al-Awwal al-Thānawī* 43). However, since Banū Shaybān refused to hand over al-Nu‘mān’s property, the Persian emperor, Khosrow, “prepared an army to teach the Arabs a lesson and take what he wanted, so the Arabs prepared themselves to preserve their dignity and to avenge al-Nu‘mān” (44). At the story’s conclusion, the Arabs defeated the Persians and “Dhū Qār became [an] event the pre-Islamic Arab took pride in” (44). In other words, in the history and literature of the Abbasid era, the pre-Islamic battle of Dhū Qār was viewed as the first victory of the Arabs over the Persians, as well as an immense victory for an Arab tribe (i.e., the Banū Shaybān) over the Persian army.

Tracing these commemorations shows how Dhū Qār functions as a collective memory. It also demonstrates how Arabs perceive themselves and retrieve their past through narratives and poetry that addresses the battle. The rewriting of *Ḥarb Banī Shaybān ma‘a Kisrá Ānūshirwān* shows that the rivalry between Arabs and Persians was openly expressed in the literary sphere during the Abbasid era. The book was reissued in



1988 to inspire the Arabs, especially the Iraqis, to achieve the same type of victory over their Persian/Iranian rivals. Literary texts, especially in modern times, attempt to use Dhū Qār as a means of emphasizing Arab identity vis-à-vis their rivals. In addition, historians writing modern textbooks, especially those used in Saudi Arabia and Iraq, use the historical account of Dhū Qār to reconstruct a collective memory of the event in order to serve a modern political agenda.

As a poetic theme during the Iran–Iraq War, Dhū Qār became a national victory for the entire Arab nation. The battle of Dhū Qār evolved to become, for some writers, a way to reflect on present political upheavals. In the modern poetry that commemorates Dhū Qār, identities are altered and victory is attributed to the modern Iraqi and Saudi Muslims. In contrast, the Iranian Muslims are described as Magi (Zoroastrians), Persians, or Sassanid. Other modern poets use the pre-Islamic warriors of Banū Shaybān as a metaphor for more recent Arab armies as a means of boasting about the strengths of the entire Arab nation. It is clear that the pre-Islamic battle of the Dhū Qār, retrieved from collective memory during the Iran–Iraq War and the Saudi–Houthi War, was used as political propaganda.

Modern poets commemorate Dhū Qār because both it and the modern wars are, fundamentally, conflicts between the Arabs and Persians. Additionally, the collective memory of Dhū Qār, in some modern Iraqi and Saudi poems, portrays the pre-Islamic Arabs as a united nation that triumphed over its rival, the Persians. In modern times, and in modern warfare, it is being used to unite Arabs, once again, against a common enemy.

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## معركة ذي قار من التاريخ إلى الذاكرة الجمعية

حمد عبيد العجمي

ندرس في هذا البحث استنكار العرب في عصور متأخرة لمعركة ذي قار التي انتصرت فيها بعض القبائل

العربية على جيش كسرى قبيل الإسلام. وسنستعين بمفهوم (الذاكرة الجمعية) عند موريس هالبواخ ومفهوم (الذاكرة الثقافية) عند يان أسمان. وردت معركة ذي قار في كتب التاريخ كتاريخ الطبري وتاريخ ابن الأثير مختصرة، ولكنها وردت مطولة وبشكل تفصيلي وبقصائد وأراجيز لم ترد عند الطبري ولا ابن الأثير في كتاب "حرب بني شيبان مع كسرى أنوشروان". ونحسب هذا الكتاب دون في عصر متأخر استنادا على أقدم النسخ التي توصلنا إليها لهذا الكتاب وهي من القرن السابع عشر والثامن عشر للميلاد في سنوات تصادف أيام صراع عسكري أو صراع فكري بين العرب والفرس.

ونلاحظ عودة موضوع ذي قار عند بعض شعراء العراق أثناء الحرب العراقية الإيرانية (١٩٨٠-١٩٨٨) وكذلك وردت في بعض الكتب التي تعيد صناعة المعركة بحبكة ولغة تحرض العرب على معاداة الفرس وتستهضمهم للتأزر والتكاتف ضد المنافس. كما نلاحظ عودة موضوع ذي قار مرة أخرى في الشعر المعاصر بكثافة غير مسبوقة خلال الحرب السعودية الحوثية التي بدأت عام ٢٠١٥. فعملنا في هذا البحث هو محاولة للتحقيق في كيفية استدعاء معركة ذي قار في عصور متأخرة، كيف تحولت من نصر قبلي لبني شيبان إلى نصر أممي؟ ما أهمية استدعائها؟ والأهم من ذلك كله ما الأبعاد والأهداف التي يحققها استدعاء تلك المعركة؟