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Errata

p. 128, note 11 should read: “Reading with British Library MS Add. 25750 and Berlin MS Petermann I 194 rather than with the printed editions, which have *min*.”

p. 128, note 12 should read: “Reading with British Library MS Add. 25750 and Berlin MS Wetzstein II 240 rather than with Berlin MS Petermann I 194 and the printed editions, which have *al-usūd*.”

p. 133, line 2: “biographical dictionary” should read “topographical dictionary”.

p. 135, line 28: “*an sarrahu*” should read “*man sarrahu*”

Topoi and Topography in the Histories of al-Ḥīra

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ARABIC HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE ʿABBĀSĪD PERIOD IS A HEADY MIX of lore, legend, eyewitness accounts, inherited historical memory, archival material, native testimony, and—it should be said—a certain amount of logical interpolation. In the case of al-Ḥīra—a city in southern Iraq, near the Euphrates and the Islamic-era city of Kufa—it is clear that the historical reimagining of the city was strongly influenced by the ancient buildings still visible at the site. In the arena of ʿAbbāsīd-era historiography, the archaeology of the material site fought for precedence against historical memory and the interests of a contemporary political teleology, as well as a highly developed and self-conscious ethos inherited from Ḥīran culture itself. Many scholars have contributed to the study of this paramount methodological quandary in the Arabo-Islamic historiographical tradition, focusing primarily on the interaction between historical memory and contemporary ideological needs, but this essay will show that the case of al-Ḥīra demonstrates the important role played by surviving material conditions and the legacy of pre-existing, consciously manufactured systems of cultural image-making in the construction of a historiographical paradigm.¹

‘A manufactured system of image-making’ is an admittedly sceptical definition of the process of identity formation. The essays that make up this volume treat this most modern of concerns—identity—and simultaneously

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1. I have benefited greatly from the challenging work of Julie Scott Meisami and three other scholars, Meir J. Kister, Michael Zwettler, and Thomas Sizgorich, whose excellent legacies are testaments to their memory.

undermine the caricature of reified identity we find in contemporary government censuses. Historians of pre-modern societies, and above all those with imperial orientations, have often discussed identity on an ethnic or sectarian plane—preserving the essentialism of race while avoiding charges of racism—and, in most contemporary domestic contexts, identity is treated in the same way. Even with the emergence of cosmopolitan identities arrayed along spectra of political sympathy, sexuality, gender, disability, diet, lifestyle, etc., the tendency to essentialise personal characteristics continues. These essays do not attempt to catalogue permutations of personal identity, rather they attempt to freeze moments of collective identity formation and interaction, and detail the ways in which individuals and communities formed their identities in relation to historical circumstances. In the contributions of Tillier and Omar, we get a snapshot of the way in which identity is constructed synchronically among different groups in the course of a rapid and exhilarating imperial expansion. In the essays by King and Munt, we are treated to an examination of diachronic identity, and the key role played by the historical other in the development of a community’s mythical history.

In this chapter, I explore the confrontation of Arabo-Islamic literary culture (specifically as represented in fourth-sixth/tenth-twelfth-century texts) with the cultural legacy of a faded pre-Islamic urban centre. I will demonstrate that the ostensibly retrospective ethos of faded glory, which the Arabo-Islamic literary imagination attached to the city of al-Ḥīra, predates the fall of the Lakhmid capital and can be found in the extant traces of Ḥīran culture itself. Despite this antecedence, it is clear that the Ḥīran mood is also an exemplary illustration of the Islamic ‘Abbāsīd Empire’s conception of itself as a state and society. Al-Ḥīra’s idiosyncratic and plural identities reflect a rare pre-Islamic cosmopolitanism, but they are, at the same time, undeniably the product of a vital and conscious process of hybrid identity formation within the ‘Abbāsīd Empire.

Al-Ḥīra, the capital of the Lakhmid kingdom (c. fourth-seventh centuries AD) and the unparalleled Arab metropolis of the pre-Islamic era, holds an indisputably important place in the history of the Late Antique Near East,² but

2. It was also a see of the Church of the East, technically not a metropolitanate, from as early as the 5th century. See J. S. Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic times* (London and Beirut, 1979), 188–202. For an overview of the city’s history, see G. Rothstein, *Die Dynastie der Laḥmīden in al-Ḥīra: Ein Versuch zur arabisch-persischen Geschichte zur Zeit der Sasaniden* (Berlin, 1899). Much of this history is derived from the account in al-Ṭabarī, the first scholarly Western examination of which was T. Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden* (Leiden, 1879) and which is available in an annotated translation as part of the complete history of al-Ṭabarī in English: *The History of al-Ṭabarī*. Vol. 5, *The Sāsānīds, the*

we know little about the city's society and its culture. The history of al-Ḥīra that has come down to us is the product of Islamic sources written in the early 'Abbāsid period (second-fifth AH/eighth-eleventh centuries AD) and while they may incorporate much from earlier histories or from a shared body of communal knowledge with deep historical roots, this material is clearly a reworked and partially legendary representation of the lost city.

Accounts of al-Ḥīra can give us valuable insights into 'Abbāsid historiography and the paramount role played by archaeology in the construction of historical memory. Here I examine the figure of al-Ḥīra in 'Abbāsid-era Arabic literary culture and attempt to reconcile reports surrounding the Monastery of Hind (Dayr Hind) with the particular ethos of al-Ḥīra. Based on this exposition, I propose a counterintuitive paradigm for contextualising this project of historical reimagining and attempt to restore some of al-Ḥīra's long lost agency as the co-author—and not merely the subject—of its own legend.

Modern scholarship has generally agreed with the Arabo-Islamic historical sources that pre-Islamic Ḥīra differed somehow from coeval cities in the Arabian Peninsula. The famous monasteries in the Ḥīran hinterland and in other parts of the Near East, for example, appeared to combine different cultural and religious features and seem to have been—or at least in later sources are certainly said to have been—silos that represented different cultural values, sprinkled across the landscape. Al-Ḥīra, like these legendary monasteries, was host to a culture and religion different from that of other pre-Islamic Arab cities and was, in many respects, the greatest, in size and legacy, of these monastic silos of difference.

Al-Ḥīra was the capital of the Lakhmid kingdom, Arab vassals of the Sasanian empire. At certain points, this dynasty seemed to have had a great affinity for, and eventually converted to, Christianity.³ Socially and culturally, the city

Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen, trans. C. E. Bosworth (Albany NY, 1999). 'Ā. 'Abd al-Ghanī, *Ta'rikh al-Ḥīra fī al-jāhiliyya wa-l-Islām* (Damascus, 1993) summarises an impressively wide range of Arabic sources on the city. Isabel Toral-Niehoff has studied al-Ḥīra in great depth, and her article 'The 'Ibād of al-Ḥīra: An Arab Christian Community', in A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai, and M. Marx (eds.), *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu* (Leiden, 2010), 323–48, is an excellent description of al-Ḥīra's unique social and cultural identity and how it related to the wider regional nexus of culture, commerce, and religion in Late Antiquity. Forthcoming publications that will be of great interest to students of al-Ḥīra include: I. Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra. Eine arabische Kulturmetropole im spätantiken Kontext* (Leiden, 2012) and articles included in the collection edited by K. Dimitriev and I. Toral-Niehoff, *Religious Cultures of Late Antique Arabia* (Leiden, 2012). I regret not having been able to consult these for the present article.

3. The question of the ruling family's religious affiliation and conversion history has attracted some attention; see E. Hunter, 'The Christian Matrix of al-Hira', in *Controverses des Chrétiens dans l'Iran Sassanide*, ed. C. Jullien (Paris, 2008), 41–56, esp. 43.

was Christian, and the Arabo-Islamic literary tradition later represented the city as Christian.⁴ Yet Christianity, and al-Ḥīra's religious identity as it appears in the later Islamic tradition's literary recasting of the city, appear to fulfil a role that was more ludic or evocative than realistic. Alongside the city's Christian cultural background, it was at the court of the Lakhmid kings that many of the most renowned pre-Islamic poets performed and where, we are told, a distinct musical tradition was forged.⁵ This twinned difference—religious and cultural, Christian and urbane—forms the core of the Ḥīran ethos as presented in later Arabo-Islamic sources, though it may, of course, indeed reflect historical reality. This essay will not attempt to excavate traces of Ḥīran culture from beneath layers of later Arabo-Islamic representation, but rather to evaluate the figure of al-Ḥīra and examine one mythical episode set at a famous Ḥīran monastery after the Arab conquest.⁶

Foremost for the historical setting of the Ḥīran legend is the political background of the Lakhmid kingdom and its capital. The Lakhmids hold a significant position in pre-Islamic Arab political history for two reasons, their political organisation and their status as vassals of the Sasanian emperor. They are often paired with their rivals, the Ghassanids, vassals of the Byzantines, whose culture, society, and politics have not been nearly as well preserved, or reinvented, for us in later Arabo-Islamic sources. The dynastic city-state the Lakhmids ruled over in southern Iraq served as the link between the Sasanian empire, whose capital of Ctesiphon lay to the north, and the greater Arab lands stretching toward Syria and south through the Peninsula. Al-Ḥīra was also a political capital and perhaps the most urban Arab environment in the pre-Islamic period: it boasted a permanent urban settlement, with tribal encampments on its periphery. These two key features of social organisation distinguished al-Ḥīra from other pre-Islamic Arab cities. There is little historical evidence of how this relationship operated, but a close Lakhmid-Sasanian relationship is characteristic of later Arabo-Islamic accounts of the mythical history of al-Ḥīra and is of a significantly different nature from that of the Ghassanids and Byzantines.⁷

4. See J. M. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne. Contribution à l'étude de l'histoire et de la géographie ecclésiastiques et monastiques du nord de l'Iraq* (Beirut, 1968), which remains the most comprehensive study of al-Ḥīra's place in Mesopotamian Christianity (3:203–30), as well as articles by E. Hunter (listed in the bibliography).

5. Note K. Dmitriev, *The Poetical School of al-Hira. A Study on the Early Arabic Literary Tradition in its Late Antique Milieu* (forthcoming), which I have not seen.

6. For an account of the Islamic conquest of al-Ḥīra, an apparently peaceful surrender on terms, see al-Balādhuri, *Futūḥ al-buldān*, trans. P. K. Hitti, *The Origins of the Islamic State* (New York, 1916), 1:387 ff.

7. Understandably, the neo-Iranian identity formation project of Firdawsī's *Shāh-nāmāh* does not pay similar attention to the close relationship between the Iranian empire and its Arab vassals.

The historiographical background to this bifurcation can be easily explained from the vantage point of an ‘Abbāsīd historical context whose affinities for Persia and animosities toward Byzantium need no elaboration, but one should not assume that the story is simply a reflection of ‘Abbāsīd realpolitik. It may be the result of better historical preservation, or more scholarly interest in Iranian history, but it is also the great advantage of the Ḥīran narrative that it is one act in the saga of the end of an empire. Al-Ḥīra in our sources is not simply a Sasanian vassal, but a Sasanian satellite, albeit one with an Arab lineage and culture, one which provides another perspective on the same parable of the empire laid low.

THE LOOK OF THE PLACE

Al-Ḥīra made its greatest impact on early Islamic litterateurs and historians through its architectural heritage. This architectural legacy was the face of the city’s fabled wealth and glory, and much Ḥīran mythical history takes architectural features present at the site as a starting point. Thus stories were constructed to reflect an archaeological and architectural reality in southern Iraq—a reality that, I would argue, came to dominate what historical memory may have survived. Consider, for example, the fascination of Arabo-Islamic literary culture with the Ḥīran landscape in the following poem by al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 406/1016). The poem is an elegy for the line of al-Nu‘mān ibn Mā’ al-Samā’ that the poet is said to have recited at al-Ḥīra in Ṣafar 394/November–December 1003.⁸ Confronting the ruined city, the poet asks after its famed rulers, echoing the conventional opening motif of classical Arabic poems.

1. Where are those who built you, O Ḥīra the White?
And those who made your lands their home?
2. Those who cleaved green fields from fertile soil
and caused rivers to flow through you;
3. Those who hailed guests when the north-wind blew;
and those who kept the fires stoked.

8. This date is given in the heading of the poem (in the *khafīf* metre) in two manuscripts consulted (British Library MS Add. 25750, f. 115b, and Berlin MS Wetzstein II 240, ff. 119b–120a). The third manuscript consulted for the preparation of the Arabic text and translation (Berlin MS Petermann I 194, f. 83a) does not record any heading information. The poem is also found in the 1890–2 edition of the *Dīwān* (Beirut, al-Azharī ed.), 1:393 and the 1995 edition (Beirut, Farahāt ed. based on the 1890–2 edition), 1:467. It is also found in Zakī Mubārak’s *‘Abqariyyat al-Sharīf al-Raḍī* (Cairo, 1358/1939), 2:255–256. See the brief discussion of this and one other poem on al-Ḥīra in ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Muḥammad al-Ḥulw, *al-Sharīf al-Raḍī: Hayātuḥu wa-dirāsāt shi’riḥ* (Cairo, 1406/1986), 2:110–1. Al-Ḥulw’s edition of the *Dīwān* (Baghdad, 1977) seems never to have been completed; the one volume that was printed does not include this poem. This is also true of Muḥammad Muḥī al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥamid’s commentary on the *Dīwān* (n.p., 1949).

ضَاءٌ وَالْمُوطِنُونَ ⁹ مِنْكَ أَلْدَبَارَا	ابن بانوك ايها الجيرة البيرة	[1]
سَبَّ وَأَجْرُوا خِلَالَكَ أَلَأْتَهَارَا	وَأَلْدُولَى شَقَّقُوا ثَرَاكَ مِنَ الْعُشِّ	[2]
سَبَّ شَمَالاً وَالْمُوقِدُونَ أَلنَّارَا	المهيمون بالصيوف إذا هي	[3]
بِالْقَيْبِيَّاتِ مَثَلِيّاً وَغَارَا	كلما باع ضوؤها أقتصمها	[4]
لَكَ مِنْ مَرْكَزِ أَلْعَوَالِي عِدَارَا	رَبَطُوا حَوْلَكَ أَلْجِيَادَ وَخَطُّوا	[5]
لَقَّبُوا أَرْضَهَا حُدُودَ أَلْعِدَارَا	وَخَمَّوْا أَرْضَكَ أَلْخَوَافِرَ حَتَّى	[6]
عَبْرًا لِلْعُيُونِ وَأَشْتَعْبَارَا	نَمَ يَدْعُ مِنْكَ حَادِثُ أَلذُّهْرِ إِلاَّ	[7]
خَبَّرْتَنَا عَنْ أَهْلِهَا أَلأَثْبَارَا	وَبَقَايَا مِنْ دَارِسَاتِ طُلُولِ	[8]
لَطَمِييْنَ يَنْقُضُونَ أَلْعَطَارَا	عَيْقَاتِ أَلنَّرى كَأَنَّ عَلَيَّهَا	[9]
سَبَّهَا لِمُسْتَرْزِيْدِ أَلظَّلَامِ مَنَارَا ¹⁰	وَقِيَابِ كَأَنَّمَا رَفَعُوا مِنْهُ	[10]
أُفْقِي فِي ¹¹ سَالِفِ أَلْبِيَالِي جَوَارَا	عَقَدُوا بَيْنَهَا وَبَيْنَ نُجُومِ أَلسَّمَاءِ	[11]
سَبَّ وَأَتَقَيْنَ عِنْدَكَ أَلأَثْبَارَا	ابن عَيْقَاتِكَ أَلْخَوَاطِفَ خَلَقَ	[12]
سَبَّكَ تَدَاعَوْا قَوَائِمًا وَشِفَارَا	وَرِجَالٌ مِثْلُ أَلسُّيُوفِ ¹² مَشَوْا فِيهِ	[13]
يَوْمَ بَانُوا وَحَبَّذَا أَلدَّارُ دَارَا	حَبَّذَا أَهْلِكَ أَلْمُجِلُّونَ أَهْلًا	[14]
بُرْهَةً فِي مُنَاجِيهِ ثُمَّ سَارَا	لَمْ يَكُونُوا إِلاَّ كَرُؤْبٍ تَأْتَى	[15]

4. Every time its flame faltered, they fed it [with fragrant wood of] Mandal¹³ and of bay trees down at Qubaybāt.¹⁴
5. Their swift steeds they tied up around you and dragging their spears to where they planted them in the ground, traced a wispy beard o'er you.
6. They protected your lands against [enemies on] hoofs and thus your lands were called 'The Virgins' Cheeks'.¹⁵

The poem continues with a rumination on how cruel time has been to the city. This reflection is based almost entirely on architectural imagery and the figure of the ruined city.

7. The passing of time has left nothing in you but lessons for the eyes to be learned.
8. The traces of now abandoned campsites tell us of those who were here before.

9. Reading *al-mūṭi ʿūna* with British Library MS Add. 25750, Berlin MS Wetzstein II 240, and Berlin MS Petermann I 194, rather than with the printed editions.

10. In Berlin MS Wetzstein II 240, we find 'nahārā' rather than 'manārā'.

11. Reading *min* with British Library MS Add. 25750 and Berlin MS Petermann I 194 rather than with the printed editions.

12. Reading *al-usūd* with British Library MS Add. 25750 and Berlin MS Wetzstein II 240, rather than with Berlin MS Petermann I 194 and the printed editions.

13. Mandal, which is said to be in India, was renowned for its fragrant wood; See Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, 5:209 and J.-Cl. Chabrier, "Ūd", *Et2*.

14. This reference is unclear to me, but there is the possibility that it is indeed a toponym as given in the note to the 1890–2 edition of the *Diwān*. In Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī's *Muʿjam al-buldān*, we find a few places bearing the name *qubaybāt*, of which 'a watering hole in the lands of Banī Tamīm' is the most plausible, if tenuous, explanation (4:308). Another reading suggests that *qubaybāt* refers to the wood—perhaps, for example, its shape—but I have found no attestations for this.

15. Epithet of al-Kufa: *khadd al-ʾadhraʾ* (Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, 4:490).

9. The fertile land retains its scent as if
perfumers had spread perfume upon it.
10. The domes that were raised up as if to be
beacons for those trying to find their way in the dark.
11. They sealed—between [you] and the stars
in the sky—a pact of protection on nights gone by.
12. Where have your snatching eagles gone? Flown
away and left you with [nothing more than] nests.
13. And those men, [tall and upright] like swords, who once walked in you,
joining [in arms] with sword hilts and blades.¹⁶
14. Oh how lovely were your people who once dwelt here
on the day they left! Oh how lovely the abodes that once were!
15. They were much like a rider, dallying a moment
at the camel's resting place, and then just carrying on.

Al-Sharīf al-Raḍī was certainly one of the most educated men of his day, and this poem—as well as two others he wrote in a similar vein on al-Ḥīra and al-Madā'in (Ctesiphon) respectively—demonstrate not only the importance of poetry in Arabo-Islamic historiography, but also the reimagining and repurposing of a cautionary pre-Islamic historical legend in the elite culture of a mature empire at the turn of the fourth/tenth century.

Another important aspect of the Ḥīran ethos is the city's long association with Christianity in the pre-Islamic (to Muslims, pagan) period.¹⁷ Al-Ḥīra's Christian ethos is implicitly reflected in its connection to the catholically broad *ubi sunt* motif in pre-Islamic and Arabo-Islamic literature, and it is explicitly highlighted in the life and work of al-Ḥīra's most famous poet, 'Adī ibn Zayd, a Christian Arab (*'ibādī*). Isabel Toral-Niehoff and others have drawn attention to the Christian themes in 'Adī's poetry, and his versified account of the fall from Edenic grace is remarkable.¹⁸ Yet we should not overlook the place of

16. The printed editions of the *Dīwān* have 'leonine men', which is a nice corollary to the eagles of the previous line, but as this line continues with the imagery of weaponry, I have preferred the reading of the manuscript. The verb *tadā'aw* in this line is peculiar, as it is usually used to mean a crumbling (of, e.g., a building). When paired with the preposition *'alā* it can mean 'to unite against'—see J. G. Hava, *Al-Faraid: Arabic-English Dictionary*, 5th ed. (Beirut, 1982)—or, without the preposition, 'to draw near an enemy'; based on the context, this seems the most appropriate reading.

17. See E. Hunter, 'The Christian Matrix of al-Hira'.

18. See K. Dimitriev, 'An Early Christian Arabic Account of the Creation of the World', in A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai, and M. Marx (eds), *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu* (Brill, 2009). See also I. Toral-Niehoff, 'Eine Arabische Poetische Gestaltung des Sündenfalls', in Hartwig et al. (eds.), *Im Vollen Licht der Geschichte. Die Wissenschaft des Judentums und der Beginn einer historisch-kritischen Koranforschung* (Würzburg, 2008), 235–56; and J. Horowitz, 'Adī Ibn Zayd, The Poet of Hira', *Islamic Culture* 4 (1930), 31–69; F. Gabrieli, 'Adī Ibn Zaid: Il poeta di al-Ḥīrah', *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, ser. 8, vol. 3 (1948), 81–96; al-'Aẓma, 'Adī ibn Zayd al-'Abādī [sic] (Beirut, 1960), esp. 19–24; al-Hāshimī, *Adī ibn Zayd al-'Tbādī*; al-Shaṭṭī, *Shu'arā' imārat al-ḥīra fī al-'aṣr al-jāhilī*, 89–149; L. Cheikho, *Kitāb Shu'arā' al-naṣrāniyya* (Beirut, 1890), 2:439–74.

Christianity in ‘Adī’s mythical biography, especially because it is at the heart of al-Ḥīra’s legendary history. I will discuss al-Ḥīra’s monasteries and their importance in the topographical imaginary of the city in my treatment of the story of Hind’s monastery, but we can examine one facet of the history of al-Ḥīra as it relates to the city’s Christian background, in the story of the Lakhmid king turned ascetic related in the biography of ‘Adī ibn Zayd contained in the great fourth/tenth-century *Book of Songs* (*Kitāb al-Aghānī*).¹⁹

The story, which is traced back to Ibn al-Kalbī, an authority on pre-Islamic Arab history and the author of a lost monograph on the monasteries of al-Ḥīra, touches on the twin strands of cultural background that underpin the history of al-Ḥīra—decadence and Christian asceticism.²⁰ The king al-Nu‘mān ibn al-Mundhir and the poet-cum-confidante ‘Adī ibn Zayd are out hunting one day, mimicking an important ritual of Sasanian kingship, when the Christian poet decides to use features of the landscape to alert the king to the fate of those who seek luxury and turn their backs on God.²¹ In one version of the story, when the king and the poet pass by a tree, the poet turns to the king and says, ‘My lord, do you know what this tree is saying?’ When the king acknowledges that he does not, ‘Adī relates the tree’s versified wisdom:

*Rubba rakbin qad anākhū ‘indanā
yashrabūna l-khamra bi-l-mā’i l-zulālī
‘aṣafa l-dahru bi-him fa-nqaraḍū
wa-kadhāka l-dahru ḥālan ba‘da ḥālī.*²²

So many riders who once halted their camels beside us,
And drank wine mixed with water pure,
Fate has turned against them and withdrawn its favour.
That’s fate for you, though; it’s changing all the time.

They carry on past the tree and come to a graveyard whereupon ‘Adī asks the king the same question: ‘My lord, do you know what this graveyard is saying?’ Once more the king says no and ‘Adī relates the graveyard’s message:

*Ayyuha l-rakbu l-mukhibbū
-na ‘alā l-arḍi l-mujiddūn
fa-kamā antumu kunnā
wa-kamā naḥnu takūnūn.*²³

19. On which, see H. Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs: Compilation and the Author’s Craft in Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī’s Kitāb al-Aghānī* (London, 2003).

20. On Ibn al-Kalbī, see Atallah, ‘al-Kalbī. II. Hishām ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Sā’ib al-Kalbī’, *ELz*.

21. This story is found in Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī [al-Iṣfahānī], *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (ed. I. al-Abyārī, Cairo, 1969–79), 2:514, 551–8.

22. Metre: *al-ramal*.

23. Metre: *al-ramal*.

Hey, you! Trotting over land,
Kicking up the dust;
We were once like you,
And you'll end up like us.

No slouch himself, the king soon confronts 'Adī about the game he has been playing and tells him to come out with it: 'The tree and the graveyard can't talk. I know you're trying to warn me, so what's the path whereby one can find salvation (*al-najāh*)?' The answer 'Adī gives is simple and thoroughly expected; it is a Christian version of the message the Muslim community would have been familiar with:

'Leave off the worship of idols, worship God, and follow the religion of Jesus, son of Mary'.

'Will this guarantee salvation (*a-wafā hādihā al-najāh*)?' the king asks.

'Yes', replied 'Adī, and the king became a Christian that very day.

This is not the only version of a Lakhmid king's conversion associated with 'Adī b. Zayd. It is not even the only version we find in his biography in *The Book of Songs* (*Kitāb al-Aghānī*). Moreover, it is in the permutations of this story that we can begin to uncover salient aspects of the nature of historiography about al-Ḥīra and its narrative motivation. In another version of the story of the king's conversion, the king and 'Adī ibn Zayd are again out admiring the sights, when they pass a graveyard whose message of foreboding keeps the king up at night. When he next goes out, they pass by the same graveyard, and 'Adī asks him whether he knows what the graveyard is saying. He says, 'No', of course, and 'Adī gives voice to the graveyard's warning verse:

*Man raʿānā fa-li-yuḥaddith nafsahū
annahū mūfin ʿalā qarni zawālī
wa-ṣurūfu l-dahri lā yabqā lahā
wa-li-mā taʿtī bihī ṣummu l-jabālī
rubba rakbin qad anākhū ʿindanā
yashrabūna l-khamra bi-l-māʾi l-zulālī
wa-l-abārīqu ʿalayhā fudumun
wa-jiyādu l-khayli tardī fī l-jilālī
ʿamirū dahran bi-ʿayshin ḥasanin
āminī dahrihimū ghayra ʿijālī
thumma ʿaḍḥaw ʿaṣafa l-dahru bihim
wa-kadhāka l-dahru yūdī bi-l-rijālī
wa-kadhāka l-dahru yarmī bi-l-fatā
fī ṭilābi l-ʿayshi ḥālan baʿda ḥālī.²⁴*

24. Metre: *al-ramal*.

He who sees us should remind himself
 He's on the verge of fading away.
 Not even unyielding mountains can endure
 The vicissitudes of time and all that's their trade.
 So many riders who once halted their camels beside us,
 And drank wine mixed with pure water, they'd
 Had cloths on their wine-jugs for straining,
 and prize horses dressed in brocade.
 They spent a while living the good life,
 trusting their fate, patient, blasé,
 But then fate turned cruel to them;
 that's simply how with men it does away.
 And how fate throws one thing then another
 at men trying to get on in this vile parade.²⁵

These poems are all examples of a well-established genre of *ubi sunt* and *wa'z* (exhortatory) poetry in Arabic, but they also reflect an essential theme of the Hīran legend—transience—of which we will see other examples.²⁶ As the story progresses, we can see how the conversion narrative not only reflects the Christian ethos of the mythical capital but is tied directly to its visible archaeological reality, a reality that came to dominate surviving historical memory and became the prime focus of the city's reconstructed mythical history. The king converts after this episode, after seeing the light, as it were, and becomes a wandering ascetic. His descendants, too, convert to Christianity and, the story explains, 'They built churches (*biya'*) and monastic cells (*ṣawāmi'*) and Hind [daughter of] al-Nu'mān ibn al-Mundhir built the monastery on the outskirts of al-Kufa known as Hind's Monastery (Dayr Hind); when the Sasanian emperor (*kisrā*) imprisoned her father al-Nu'mān al-Aṣghar [i.e., the Younger] [who] subsequently died, Hind devoted her life to God (*tarahhabat*), dressed in haircloth, and entered the monastery where she cloistered herself (*wa-aqāmat fī dayrihā mutarahhiba^{tan}*) until her death, and it is there that she was buried'. I will return to the specific nexus of history, architecture, and culture associated with Hind's Monastery, but we can already begin to see how the mythical history of the city takes its inspiration from an archaeological and architectural reality in southern Iraq and how it combines strands of transmitted historical memory, poetry and literary artefacts, invention, and interpretation.

25. This poem has also been translated in F. Gabrieli, 'Adī Ibn Zaid, il poeta di al-Ḥīrah', and R. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: from the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London and New York, 2001).

26. 'Adī ibn Zayd was the exemplar of this genre in all of pre-Islamic poetry, but other Hīran poets were associated with it as well. See al-Ḍuhayyān, *al-Bī'ā al-adabiyya* (Riyadh, [2004–5]), 367–77.

A general account of al-Ḥīra is given in Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī's (d. 626/1229) *Muḥjam al-buldān*, a biographical dictionary. The aspect of this entry most interesting for our analysis is his discussion of al-Ḥīra's extant architectural features. Al-Ḥamawī explains that al-Ḥīra's epithet, 'the White', refers to 'the quality of its buildings (*ḥusn al-īmāra*).²⁷ Even discussions of the etymology of the city's name refer to its settled nature: in the pre-modern Arabo-Islamic sources it is said that the city was originally an enclosure (*ḥayr*),²⁸ and more recently, A. F. L. Beeston showed that the name 'is comparable with Syriac *ḥirtā* "encampment", and [that] the locality was no doubt so named from having originally been a camp'.²⁹ The discussion of the city's divided society—consisting of Arab tribes in the city's vicinity who 'lived in tents' and the Christian Arabs (*ibādiyyūn*) who 'lived in the city and built it up'—can be read as the reflection of an urban-pastoral divide in southern Iraq.³⁰ Archaeological evidence from the few staccato expeditions in the area is incomplete but can perhaps give a vague impression of what the city was like. The preliminary archaeological investigations verify the historical accounts and literary evidence and testify to al-Ḥīra's urban character.³¹ Art historians have debated al-Ḥīra's influence on later 'Abbāsīd architectural styles, and, although the issue is far from settled, it is clear that Ḥīran architecture was developed enough to have been at least a plausible candidate for a model.³² Archaeological evidence has also emphasised al-Ḥīra's Christian heritage, by locating at least two churches with surviving frescoes and plaster crosses, in addition to Syriac inscriptions.³³

In addition to history and archaeology, poetry and literary culture are important ingredients in the mythical history of the city, as can be seen from the important role poetry played in constructing the architecturally informed

27. Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muḥjam al-buldān*, 2:328.

28. *Ibid.*, 2:329.

29. A. F. L. Beeston, rev. I. Shahīd, 'al-Ḥīra', *EL2*; see also C. E. Bosworth, 'Ḥīra', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

30. Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muḥjam al-buldān* (Beirut, 1956), 2:330–1. On the 'Ibād, see I. Toral-Niehoff, 'The 'Ibād of al-Ḥīra: An Arab Christian Community in Late Antique Iraq' and her forthcoming monograph.

31. See D. Talbot Rice, 'Hira', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 19 (1932), 254–68; D. Talbot Rice, 'The Oxford Excavations at Hira, 1931', *Antiquity* 6 (1932), 276–91; D. Talbot Rice, 'The Oxford Excavations at Ḥīra', *Ars Islamica* 1 (1934), 51–73; M. D. Roaf and J. N. Postgate, 'Excavations in Iraq, 1979–80', *Iraq* 43 (1981), 167–98, esp. 180. Erica Hunter has used these brief archaeological reports to sketch the Christian character of the city in the period of the Muslim conquest; see her 'The Christian Matrix of al-Hira'. See also 'Abd al-'Azīz Ḥamid's 'Āthār madīnat al-Ḥīra al-'Arabiyya', *Bayn al-nahrayn* 67 (1989), 3–13.

32. For an overview of this long-running debate, see T. Leisten, 'Mshatta, Samarra, and al-Hira: Ernst Herzfeld's theories concerning the development of the Hira-Style revisited', in A. C. Gunter and S. R. Hauser (eds.), *Ernst Herzfeld and the Development of Near Eastern Studies, 1900–1950* (Leiden, 2005), 371–84.

33. Talbot Rice, 'Hira', 265; on Syriac inscriptions from the vicinity of al-Ḥīra, see E. Hunter, 'Syriac Inscriptions from al Hira', *Oriens Christianus* 80 (1996), 66–81.

narrative of the city.³⁴ It is true that poetry and literary culture are prominent throughout pre-modern Islamic history, but the historical Ḥīra was, like its better-known legendary counterpart, a centre of vibrant literary production that differed notably from that of other Arab cultural centres in the pre-Islamic period.³⁵ It is also true that Ḥīran literary culture was more relatable to that of ‘Abbāsid urban centres in which the mythical history of the city was drafted, and it is this important aesthetic bond that perhaps explains the prominence afforded to Ḥīran literary culture in the mythical history of the city as devised by ‘Abbāsid-era writers.³⁶ We can, for example, see this important feature of the Ḥīran ambiance reflected in the report about the musician Ḥunayn ibn Balū‘ al-Ḥīrī in the *Book of Songs (Kitāb al-Aghānī)*.³⁷ Ḥunayn lived in the Umayyad period and was, as his name suggests, linked to the cultural milieu of al-Ḥīra. A Christian like ‘Adī ibn Zayd, the figure of Ḥunayn the musician reflects the twin strands of cultural sophistication and luxury that are fundamental to the mythological history of the city. He is said to have been introduced to music when he was adopted by the notable families of al-Ḥīra to whom he used to deliver fruit and sweet basil.³⁸ That he was a Christian, a purveyor of luxury goods, and good-looking, as well as good company are attributes of Ḥunayn’s character that reflect the conventional image of the city in later sources. Let us examine one section of the report about Ḥunayn from the *Book of Songs* that foregrounds this very issue.³⁹

It is said that some of the governors of al-Kufa used to deride al-Ḥīra in the Umayyad period, so one of its citizens—a clever (*‘āqil*), witty (*ẓarīf*) man—said to them ‘Would you find fault with a town that was the stuff of proverbs (*bihā yuḍrab al-mathal*) in both the age of ignorance and the age of Islam?’

34. Two books treat the subject of Ḥīran literary culture: Ibrāhīm ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḍuḥayyān, *al-Bī‘a al-adabiyya fī al-Ḥīra fī zilāl dawlat al-manādhira* (Riyadh, [2004/05]) and ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Shaṭṭī, *Shu‘arā’ imārat al-Ḥīra fī al-‘aṣr al-jāhili* (Cairo, 1998).

35. The only empirical evidence we have that suggests the existence of different schools in pre-Islamic poetry is found in D. Frolov, *Classical Arabic Verse: History and Theory of ‘arūd* (Leiden, 2000). Frolov’s study has not settled the question; see B. Paoli’s dissenting review in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 28 (2003), 400–12. Since the work of von Grunebaum (see the next note), the more arduous challenge of elucidating this difference by analysing literary style has only had one recent taker, James Montgomery, ‘The Deserted Encampment in Ancient Arabic Poetry: A Nexus of Topical Comparisons’, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 40 (1995), 283–316.

36. The classic study of the emergence of an urban style in ‘Abbāsid poetry is G. von Grunebaum, ‘Aspects of Arabic Urban Literature Mostly in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries’, *Al-Andalus* 20 (1955), 259–81.

37. Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 2:759–76.

38. *Ibid.*, 2:763.

39. *Ibid.*, 2:769–770.

When asked what the city should be praised for, the man lists its advantages:

‘For its good air and sweet water, the pleasant hinterland suitable for the padded feet of camels and ostriches and cloven-hoofed animals, the plain and the mountain, the desert and meadow (*bustān*), the land and sea, the home of kings and their picnic spot, where they lived and are buried. You went there—May God preserve you!—without much and came away with a great deal, [you] entered it lacking, and it made you rich’.

Tempted by this description, they ask him how they can experience these benefits for themselves, so the man invites them to a feast of delights, all of exclusively Ḥīran provenance, from the food and drink to the servants and entertainment—where Ḥunayn turns up—and they come to understand just what a paradise al-Ḥīra once was.

It followed logically that the city, a capital of luxury, must have been home to an equally rich culture, so the legend of al-Ḥīra depended on these indivisible strands of wealth, culture, and Christianity that allowed the city to realise its complete mythical form as a lost paradise. In the Arabic poetic tradition, Christian monasteries were sites of recreation associated chiefly with the Islamically illicit, but literarily commonplace, figure of wine—and sex—as in the following poem by ‘Adī ibn Zayd, which exemplifies this motif and its mythopoetic potential for Ḥīran history:⁴⁰

*Nādamtu fī l-dayri banī ‘Alqamā
 ‘āṭaytuhum mashmūlatan ‘andamā
 ka-’anna riḥa l-miski min ka’sihā
 idhā mazajnāhā bi-mā’i l-samā.
 ‘Alqama mā bāluka lam ta’tinā
 amā-shtahayta l-yawma ‘an tan’amā
 an sarrahu l-‘ayshu wa-ladhdhātuhū
 fa-l-yaj’ala l-rāḥa lahū sullamā.*

At the monastery, I drank with Banī ‘Alqama,
 Presenting them with the reddest wine—
 As if musk-scent rose up from the cup
 When we mixed it with water from on high.
 ‘Alqama, what keeps you from visiting?
 Don’t you long to live well while there’s time?
 Let him who’s enjoyed life and all its delights
 Build a stairway for himself out of wine.

40. Quoted in Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muḥjam al-buldān*, 2:524. The metre is *al-sarī’*.

HIND AND HER MONASTERY

This overview of al-Ḥīra's mythical history and its representation in fourth-sixth/tenth-twelfth-century sources brings us to an important episode in that history that seems to run counter to the general structure and tenor of Ḥīran stories. This story is set at the monastery of Hind bint al-Nu'mān ibn al-Mundhir, a Lakhmid princess. According to one story, Hind cloistered herself in the monastery after her beloved husband 'Adī ibn Zayd was executed by her father. The story of their love affair as recounted in the *Book of Songs* is an informative example of how later Arabo-Islamic literary sources imagined Ḥīran society and culture.⁴¹

They meet on a Christian festival day during the reign of al-Mundhir, Hind's grandfather, when they go to receive holy communion. Hind is eleven years old, and 'Adī has come bearing a gift for the king from the Sasanian emperor (*kisrā*). 'Adī spies Hind as they simultaneously enter the church, but her attention is diverted. Hind's female servants had seen 'Adī approaching, but they say nothing to Hind for the sake, it is explained, of one of Hind's handmaids called Māriya. She was in love with 'Adī but unsure of how to approach him. Hind sees 'Adī looking at her and gets angry with her servants, even striking a few of them. 'Adī, for his part, had already been smitten. A year passes, and all the while 'Adī keeps his love a secret. After a year, the handmaid Māriya, thinking that Hind had got over her anger, tells Hind about a monastery and tells her to ask her mother for permission to go visit it. Her mother consents, and Māriya goes to tell 'Adī the news. Handsome 'Adī dresses in Persian finery and goes down to the monastery with a group of young men from al-Ḥīra. It is then that Hind, in turn, falls in love with him. Later, Māriya takes advantage of her role as go-between and asks 'Adī to sleep with her. This he does in a tavern, another feature of the urban landscape common to the poetic-landscapes of pre-Islamic Ḥīra and 'Abbāsīd Baghdad. Hind and 'Adī eventually marry, but the monastery does not figure in the story until after al-Nu'mān has his son-in-law 'Adī killed.

After 'Adī's death, Hind cloisters herself in Dayr Hind (Hind's Monastery) where she lives on into the Islamic period.⁴² The story of Hind's confrontation with the new Islamic political system is one of the most interesting, and discordant, episodes in the history of al-Ḥīra. The entry on this monastery in al-Shābushtī's (d. 388/988) *Book of Monasteries* (*Kitāb al-Diyārāt*) includes

41. Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 2:546–9. A version of this story also appears in *The Thousand and One Nights*; cf. U. Marzolph and R. van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara CA, 2004).

42. The classical Arabo-Islamic accounts of this monastery are collected in 'Abd al-Ghanī, *Ta'rikh al-Ḥīra*, 64–9.

three different versions of this story; a translation of this entry is appended below. The stories all share the same basic plot: a Muslim commander confronts Hind, who has survived to an old age within the confines of her monastery. In one version of the story, it is the caliph Mu'āwiyā's (r. 41–60/661–80) governor in al-Kufa, al-Mughīra ibn Shu'ba (d. 48–51/668–71), who comes to Hind's monastery and asks to marry her. The version of this story in the *Book of Songs* displays all the sorts of details one would expect the 'Abbāsīd mind to ascribe to such a mythical scene in which two representatives of the pre-Islamic and Islamic, Persianate and peninsular Arab, Christian and Muslim ruling classes come face to face.⁴³ When al-Mughīra comes to Hind's monastery he asks permission to see her: an implicit acknowledgment of her continued high standing. Agreeing to see him, Hind spreads out a thick haircloth (*mis'h*) for al-Mughīra to sit on. This hair carpet could be read as a subtle joke at the expense of al-Mughīra the Bedouin, coming, as it does, from the princess of an urban capital, but it is more likely a reflection of Hind's humbled position.⁴⁴ The contrast between its modesty and the proverbial luxury of al-Ḥīra is made all the more poignant by the presence of the Muslim conqueror seated upon it. Sitting upon this emblem of al-Ḥīra's degradation, al-Mughīra's admission that he has come to ask for Hind's hand in marriage only adds to the contrast between the kingdom's former glory and its presently vulnerable state.

Although it does reinforce the theme of al-Ḥīra's great fall from glory, Hind's reply demonstrates the extent to which the legend of the proud and powerful Ḥīran kingdom is kept alive, though separate from the new Arabo-Islamic political reality. 'By the Cross, if I thought there was the slightest beauty or youth left in me to make you want me, I'd have answered you', she says. 'But you just want to be able to [go to the] pilgrimage [or the pre-Islamic festivals] (*mawāsīm*)⁴⁵ and say that you've won the kingdom of al-Nu'mān ibn al-Mundhir and married his daughter! By the one you worship (*bi-ḥaqq ma'būdika*), is that what you're after?' 'Yes, by God', he answers, but her reply is final: 'Well, tough luck! (*fa-lā sabīla ilayhi*)'. After his rejection, a dejected al-Mughīra leaves Hind's side, and the story concludes with some verses on Hind, supposedly composed by al-Mughīra:⁴⁶

43. Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 2:549–50.

44. This haircloth carpet can also be understood as an emblem of monasticism (see Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s. r. *m-s-h*). That it also shares its root (*m-s-h*) with the epithet of Christ, al-Masīḥ (Messiah), is surely a narratological lucky stroke. Cf. also—despite the anachronism—the modern Egyptian proverb: *khud il-aṣīla wa-law kānat 'al-ḥaṣīra* ('Marry a well-born woman no matter how poor she may be [lit., even if she's on a reed mat]', M. Hinds and El-Said Badawi (eds), *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic* (Beirut, 1986) 25, s. v. *aṣīl*).

45. See A. J. Wensinck, rev. C. E. Bosworth, 'Mawṣim', *EL*2.

46. Metre: *al-kāmil*.

*Adrakti mā mannaytu naḥsiya khāliyy⁴⁷
 li-llāhi darruki yā-bnata l-Nu'mānī
 fa-la-qad radadti 'alā l-Mughīrati dhihnaḥū⁴⁷
 inna l-mulūka naqīyyatu l-adh'hānī⁴⁸
 yā Hindu ḥasbuki qad ṣadaqti fa-'amsikī
 fa-l-ṣidqu khayru maqālati l-insānī.*

You realised what my soul hopes for when I'm alone;
 God smile on you, O Daughter of Nu'mān.
 You got al-Mughīra thinking straight again;
 The minds of kings are much purer than man's.
 Hind, I feel you've told the truth, so carry on;
 To be honest and truthful is to be the best that we can.

In another story about Hind's monastery, from Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī's *Muḥjam al-buldān*, many of the details are different, but the important components of the story—the looming subtext of al-Ḥīra's lost glory, Christian culture, and a defiant Lakhmid princess—are all there.⁴⁹ In this version of the story, Hind builds her monastery to fulfil a vow she had made to God when her father was taken prisoner by the Sasanian emperor (*kisrā*) that she would build a monastery if God were to return her father. She built her monastery and took up residence there, and that is where she receives the Muslim conqueror Khālid ibn al-Walīd (d. 21/642), who comes to tell her that, if she converts to Islam, he will marry her to a noble Muslim (*rajuḥ sharīf Muslim*).⁵⁰ Her feisty reply to the offer this time incorporates a new level of disdain for the suggestion that she abandon her faith:

As for religion, the only one I want is the religion of my forefathers (*amā al-dīn fa-lā raghbata lī fīhi ghayra dīn ābā'ī*). And as for marriage, even if there were some youth left in me, I still wouldn't want it (*wa-amā al-tazwīj fa-law kānat fiyya baqīyya la-mā raghibtu fīhi*), let alone now that I'm an old woman waiting for death to turn up any day.

47. This is the reading of the printed edition, but I prefer *dahyahū* ('his wits').

48. A variant of the second hemistich is given in the text: '*inna l-mulūka baṭīyyatu l-idh'hānī*'.

49. Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muḥjam al-buldān*, 2:541–2.

50. Khālid ibn Walīd conquered the city in 633. Thomas Sizgorich has explained that the recurring trope of early Muslims exhorting their Roman and Persian opponents to convert 'is significant because it was through the use of these hermeneutic guideposts that the conquest period became comprehensible not simply as a time of military conquest, but more importantly as a period during which the changes wrought in the souls of Muḥammad's followers brought about a momentous transformation of the present world'; T. Sizgorich, "'Do Prophets Come With a Sword?': Conquest, Empire, and Historical Narrative in the Early Islamic World', *The American Historical Review* 112 (2007), 993–1015, at 1006. In the same article, Sizgorich discusses a story from 'Adī ibn Zayd's political career (1012–4).

This reply makes no direct reference to the Muslim attempt to attain the respectability and glory of the Lakhmid kingdom by marrying Hind, but that motif is brought to the fore as their exchange progresses. After she rejects his proposal, Khālid tells her to ask him to grant her what she needs. Hind, sticking to her prideful noblesse oblige, plays the part of the good Christian. Her request is selflessly simple: ‘Take care of those Christians who are under your rule (*fī dhimmatikum*)’. Khālid replies that this has already been required of them (*farḍ*) by the prophet Muḥammad.⁵¹ That being the case, Hind says she has no need of anything else: she lives in the monastery she herself had built, tending her family’s worn-out bones until she goes to join them. These bones are more than simply the bodily remains of the Lakhmid royal family buried in the monastery, they are also the ruins of the kingdom that surround it. Khālid tries to arrange for her to be given assistance, money, and clothing, but she says she does not need it. She explains that she has a sufficient, if modest, living. He then asks her to share some of her wisdom with him: ‘Tell me something that has happened to you (*akhbirīnī bi-shay’ adrakti*)’, and her reply conjures up the lost glory of the once great kingdom:

She replied, ‘The sun had only just risen over [the palaces of] al-Khawarnaq and al-Sadīr when we were in power, but by evening, we’d become servants to others’. And then she recited a poem:

*Fa-baynā nasūsu l-nāsa wa-l-amru amrunā
idhā naḥnu fihim sūqatun natanaṣṣafū.
fa-tabban li-dunyā lā yadūmu na’imuhā
taqallaba tārātin bi-nā wa-taṣarrafū.*⁵²

We used to rule men, and power was ours,
Now we’re the subjects asking for pity.
To hell with a world whose blessing expires,
Undoes us at times, and does away with us.

51. Milka Levy-Rubin adduces an interesting wrinkle in the historical sectarian composition of al-Ḥīra, pointing to its status in legal debates of the post-conquest period. She notes that, in his commentary on al-Shaybānī’s *Kitāb al-Siyar*, al-Sarakhsī grants—following al-Shaybānī—cities like al-Ḥīra ‘where the majority of the population are *dhimmīs*’ an exemption from the legal prerogatives of Muslim-majority cities. ‘These latter definitions’, Levy-Rubin claims, ‘have nothing to do with the history of the conquest; rather, they refer to the reality of the time’. We cannot know whether the ‘time’ of this historical situation extends to that of al-Sarakhsī (fifth/eleventh century) or if it is limited to al-Shaybānī’s lifetime (d. 187/803); M. Levy-Rubin, ‘*Shurūṭ ‘Umar and Its Alternatives: The Legal Debate on the Status of the Dhimmīs*’, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 30 (2005), 170–206, at 179. Thanks to Fred Astren for pointing me to this reference.

52. Metre: *al-ṭawīl*.

And then she went on to say, 'Let me tell you the greetings our kings used to use: May you be praised by a hand once wealthy, now impoverished, though you were never possessed by a hand that had attained wealth after being poor'.⁵³

After the Muslim commander leaves, the Christians [of the town] come to her and ask what happened, and she answers them in verse:

*Ṣāna lī dhimmatī wa-ʾakrama wajhī
innamā yukrimu l-karīma l-karīmū.*⁵⁴

He affirmed our agreement and honoured me dear
As an honourable person should honour a peer.

This entire episode reflects the multiple tensions surrounding the image of al-Ḥīra in later Arabo-Islamic sources, and the conflict between memory, archaeological reality, and contemporary political discourse, which each play their part in the attempt to write the city's history. Hind's monastery is a feature of the Ḥīran landscape, only a short distance from al-Kufa, a populous and politically powerful city in early Islamic Iraq. Just as this archaeological artefact has its place in the topography of the city, the memory of its inhabitants and the glory of their rulers exercises its own influence on the historical narrative. We can see that it is possible that the historical tradition of al-Ḥīra's peaceful surrender to Khālīd ibn al-Walīd and the agreement he made with its inhabitants may have influenced the tenor of this story. Yet the meeting of Hind, a Lakhmid princess—who fulfils the role of al-Ḥīra's 'Last Emperor' and a Muslim commander, who symbolises the important political transformations experienced in Iraq after the Islamic conquest and the 'Abbāsīd revolution—is equally a symbol of Arabo-Islamic historical and literary culture coming to al-Ḥīra and attempting to reconstruct its lost history. This project was necessitated by al-Ḥīra's historically verifiable political importance and its unique position as the most urban Arab capital of the pre-Islamic period. The culture of this city, its residue in the heritage of pre-Islamic literary culture that was the primary focus of much of the industrious scholarly energy expended in the Umayyad and early 'Abbāsīd periods, and the presence of a large Arab Christian community in the city and its environs required an explanation and demanded to be placed within the narrative of the city as it was written for an Arabo-Islamic audience. Yāqūt mentions another Monastery of Hind in his *Muḥjam al-buldān*, distinguishing between the monastery I have been discussing—Dayr Hind al-Ṣuḡhrā (the Monastery

53. This same sentiment is echoed in a proverb associated with al-Ḥīra and, occasionally, with Hind herself: 'May you be fed by a starving hand that once was sated, not one that is sated but once was starving'. See 'Abd al-Ghanī, *Ta'rikh al-Ḥīra*, 542.

54. Metre: *al-khafif*.

of Hind the Younger)—and the Monastery of Hind the Elder.⁵⁵ The story he tells about this second monastery (Dayr Hind al-Kubrā) is yet another reflection of the character of the Ḥīran image in these later Arabo-Islamic histories. This monastery is said to have been built by Hind, the mother of ‘Amr ibn Hind, and Yāqūt includes the text of an inscription said to have been written on the monastery that includes the name of its founder, her relation to the Lakhmid lineage, her fealty to the Sasanian emperor, and a prayer to God. The story that is told about this monastery is set during the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 170–93/786–809), when the caliph heads to al-Ḥīra ‘for some relaxation and to see the ruins of al-Mundhir (i.e., the Lakhmid kingdom)’. The caliph’s party went into the Monastery of Hind the Younger and saw the remains of al-Nu‘mān’s grave. Next they entered the Monastery of Hind the Elder, where they see an inscription on one of the walls. The caliph orders a ladder to be brought and the inscription read out. Yāqūt gives the text of the eight-line poem (in *al-sarī*‘ metre) that was supposed to have been written there. It is yet another example of the motif of the Lakhmids’ lost glory that I have been tracing through its various iterations.

*Inna banī l-mundhiri āma-nqaḍū
bi-ḥaythu shāda l-bi‘ata l-rāhibū
tanfaḥu bi-l-miski dhafārihumū
wa-‘anbarin yaqṭibuhu l-qātibū
wa-l-qazzu wa-l-kattānu ‘athwābuhum
lam yajubi l-ṣūfa lahum jā‘ibū
wa-l-‘izzu wa-l-mulku lahum rāhinun
wa-qahwatun nājūduhā sākibū
aḍḥaw wa-mā yarjūhumū ṭālibun
khayran wa-lā yarhabahum rāhibū
ka-‘annahum kānū bi-hā luḅatan
sāra ‘ilā ayna bi-hā l-rākibū
fa-‘aṣbaḥū fī ṭabaqāti l-tharā
Ba‘da na‘imin lahumū rātibū
sharru l-baqāyā man baqī ba‘dahum
qullun wa-dhullun jadduhū khā‘ibū.*

The line of al-Mundhir has come to nought
Where once the monks raised churches.
Perfumed behind the ears with musk
And amber one would mix with wine,
Silk and linen were their robes;

55. Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muḥjam al-buldān*, 2:542–543. Other accounts of this monastery are collected in ‘Abd al-Ghanī, *Ta’rikh al-Ḥīra*, 69–70.

No one could make them wear wool.
 Glory and kingship were their due,
 And wine strained through cloth.
 Lo, but they've faded and no one asks them
 For charity anymore; the timid no longer dread.
 It's as if they were only a toy—
 Where has the rider taken them to?
 They've become—after once being blessed—
 like all other ordinary men.
 The one who outlives them has it worst of all,
 He's helpless and put upon; his fortune run out.

This poem resonates with the emperor-caliph, who cries so much that tears wet his beard and says, 'Yes, this is the way of the world and those who inhabit it'.

THE HISTORY OF AN ETHOS

These examples, centred as they are around Ḥīran locales, tell the story of a notable collection of memories in the Iraqi landscape, a story that reflects how later Arabo-Islamic interpreters imagined the history of that landscape and the elite who previously ruled over it. Yet in asserting that al-Ḥīra's mythical history is an Arabo-Islamic invention, conceived largely in response to architectural material in situ—the buildings on the ground, the people inhabiting the area, memories of historical figures and events—we must not deny the disconcerting possibility that the mythical history of al-Ḥīra cannot be dated. We cannot show, for good reason, that this figure was invented by Arab Muslims after the conquest of Iraq, and it is not simply a lack of historical sources that impedes this effort. Rather, al-Ḥīra as it exists in the historical record is a timeless and legendary place. Elements of its ethos seem to accord perfectly with an 'Abbāsid projection of history, but other features, such as the character of Hind the Lakhmid princess cloistered in her monastery and defiantly confronting a victorious Muslim commander, may echo an earlier, native reaction to a dramatic political upheaval.⁵⁶ Even setting aside descriptions of the conquest, in much of the poetry said to be of pre-Islamic Ḥīran origin, we find this same

56. Much has been written about historical attitudes evinced in 'Abbāsid poetry: see, for example, S. P. Stetkevych, 'The 'Abbasid Poet Interprets History: Three Qaṣīdahs by Abū Tammām', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 10 (1979), 49–64; R. A. Serrano, 'Al-Buḥturi's Poetics of Persian Abodes', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 28 (1997), 68–87; S. M. Ali, 'Reinterpreting al-Buḥturi's Īwān Kisrā Ode: Tears of Affection for the Cycles of History', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 37 (2006), 46–67; Julie Scott Meisami, 'Places in the Past: The Poetics/Politics of Nostalgia', *Edebiyat*, n.s., vol. 8 (1998), 63–106; Michael Zwettler, 'The Poetics of Allusion in Abu l-'Atāhiya's Ode in Praise of al-Hādī', *Edebiyat*, n.s., vol. 3 (1989), 1–29 and passim.

theme of fleeting glory epitomised by the later legend of al-Ḥīra. If we are unwilling to question the historical authenticity of this poetry—and that is not to say that we should be—then we must confront the fact that al-Ḥīra seems to represent itself as a kingdom built on sand. It may be the case that al-Ḥīra, in projecting this image of itself and its rulers flying too near the sun, wrote its own obituary for later sources to borrow and adapt.⁵⁷

This essay has focused exclusively on historical accounts of the city written by later writers with their own political concerns, but it seems to me that there is much to be said of al-Ḥīra's own representation of itself as preserved in these later sources. One could easily dismiss this concern by saying that the poetry of 'Adī ibn Zayd is inauthentic, but the fabrication of 'Adī's poetry strikes me as more unlikely than the fact that it may simply preserve a society's identity-narrative as constructed and performed by that society's culture. Much talk of myth implies that myths can exist only as backward projections, but we must not discount the possibility that al-Ḥīra participated in the creation of a mythic tradition upon which later sources could elaborate.⁵⁸ It is obvious that later Arabo-Islamic sources built narratives around preserved Ḥīran poetry, but it is also likely that these stories began as part of al-Ḥīra's own myths about itself.

There is no suggestion that elements of al-Ḥīra's history, as we have them, were authored directly by the authors of Ḥīran culture, excepting poetry of course, but we are often too quick to think that only we could have thought up Ozymandias. Our culture delights in deconstructing myths and snickering at long-faded antiquities when they tell us to 'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!' This tendency is firmly rooted in a teleological, progressivist view of modern Western culture, which, as we have seen, has its parallel in pre-modern Arabo-Islamic discourse in which the ruined glories of pagan kingdoms are contrasted with the ascendancy of the empire of true believers. Yet there is neither purpose nor sense in discounting another culture's awareness of the passage of time; even those very cultures that build great monuments understand full well their mortal vulnerability. We are fooling ourselves if all we see in the dilapidated and monstrous monuments of antiquity is hubris and folly. Can we not, for example, interpret the vaulted brick design of some Ḥīran graves as a reflection of the religious architectural style prevalent in the city? And if so, can we consider this architectural

57. One should not make too much of etymological coincidence, but the most common name given to Lakhmid kings, Mundhir (the dynasty is even known collectively as al-Manādhira, pl. of Mundhir), is related to the verb *'andhara*, with its connotations of warning, admonition, etc.

58. Michael Cooperson's articles 'Baghdad in Rhetoric and Narrative', *Muqarnas* 13 (1996), 99–113, and 'Al-Ma'mūn, the Pyramids, and the Hieroglyphs' (forthcoming, in *Occasional Papers of the School of Abbasid Studies*) demonstrate the ways in which literary discourse has exercised its influence on Arabo-Islamic memory and the construction of history.

homage a self-conscious manifestation of that most common Ḥīran literary theme: material impermanence?⁵⁹ The all-powerful and merciless character of fate features prominently in the Ḥīran poetic tradition, as well as in later ‘Abbāsīd interpretations of its past glory. Ḥīran culture may simply have been too keenly aware of this habit of time, the implacable enemy of permanence and luxury that featured so prominently in their literary imagination. The unmistakable emphasis on cyclical fate in later historical accounts and its prevalence as a touchstone for the *ubi sunt* motif in Ḥīran poetry may in fact have been developed as a prophylactic measure, a literary catharsis, in al-Ḥīra by Ḥīrans long before their descent from political power. Perhaps it was by conjuring a faded and ruined capital littered with once unsurpassable testaments to power and wealth and by telling tales of mendicant kings and ascetic princesses that al-Ḥīra gave vent to its anxieties. That these anxieties were also likely to have resonated with ‘Abbāsīd Iraqis, who witnessed the construction and pageantry of new imperial capitals at Baghdad and Samarra, is more likely than not. Therefore, while scavenging Late Antique history for cultural continuity and finding little on the ground, we must not overlook the persistence of myths, even when those myths seem to be written from outside, looking backward in time. We are all aware that our own contemporary cultures produce somewhat banal apocalyptic myths set centuries and millennia in the future, when we are all dead and our once mighty works laid low, and everyone understands that these works allow us to explore nightmare scenarios and even—perhaps this is most obvious in the current fad for environmental apocalypses—to wish away our feared and apparently inexorable fate. Why, then, are we so comfortable dismissing the role of societies like al-Ḥīra in writing their own obituaries, in influencing the mood of later historical interpretations, which are all that survive? A comparison between the themes of Ḥīran poetry and historically and geographically matched Syriac sources may help us understand whether the poetry of someone like ‘Adī ibn Zayd reflected a Ḥīran zeitgeist rooted in what Erica Hunter has called ‘the intense Christian activity in Hira during the sixth and seventh centuries AD’, or whether Ḥīran fatalism is itself a later invention.⁶⁰ Moving forward, perhaps we should recognise—just as we acknowledge the primacy of ‘Abbāsīd chroniclers in creating al-Ḥīra as we know it—the likelihood that our fascination with al-Ḥīra, like the earlier fascination of ‘Abbāsīd historians and littérateurs, could be the result of a cultural project of manufactured image-making that began in the city where our romance is set. ‘Round the decay / Of th[e] colossal wreck’ that was al-Ḥīra a mythical history has grown up, but

59. For Ḥīran tombs, see ‘Excavations in Iraq, 1979–80’, 180; for church architecture, see Talbot Rice, ‘The Oxford Excavations at Hira, 1931’, 279.

60. Hunter, ‘Syriac Inscriptions from al Hira’.

it would be unfair—and, ultimately, inaccurate—to stipulate that Ḥīrans could not have been the ones to set the tone.

APPENDIX: DAYR HIND FROM AL-SHĀBUSHTĪ'S BOOK OF
MONASTERIES

Abū al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad al-Ma'rūf bi-l-Shābushtī, *Kitāb al-diyārāt*, ed. Kūrīs [Gūrgīs] 'Awwād, 2nd ed. (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Muthannā, 1966, repr. Damascus: Dār al-Madā, 2008), 278–80.

THE MONASTERY OF HIND BINT AL-NU'MĀN IBN
AL-MUNDHIR

Hind built this monastery in al-Ḥīra, joined it as a nun (*tarahhabat fihi*), and lived in it for a very long time; then she went blind. It is one of the greatest and most populous monasteries in al-Ḥīra. It is [located] between al-Khandaq⁶¹ and Ḥaṣrāh Bakr.⁶²

When al-Ḥajjāj came to al-Kufa in the year 74 [693/4],⁶³ he was told that there was a monastery belonging to Hind the daughter of al-Nu'mān between al-Ḥīra and al-Kufa and that she lived there and that she was in command of her senses. 'Look to her for she is a relic' (*fa-nẓur ilayhā fa-ḥinnahā baqiyya*). So he rode off, and the people accompanied him. When he got there, someone said to [Hind], 'The commander al-Ḥajjāj is at the door'. When she looked out from the corner of the monastery, he said to her, 'O Hind, what's the strangest thing you've ever seen?'

'Someone like me coming out to see someone like you! Don't be deceived by this world, Ḥajjāj. We were once, as al-Nābigha [al-Dhubyānī] said of us,

I saw you were someone safe and secure in his compact
with the people, his flock pastured freely and was safe when
it went to water.⁶⁴

61. *Khandaq* means 'moat', but this particular site must be the same as the site Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī calls *Khandaq Sābūr*, located in the desert near al-Kufa (*Muḥjam al-buldān*, 2:392). In his entry on this monastery, Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī locates the monastery 'at al-Ḥīra near the lands (*khiṭat*) of the tribe of (Bani) 'Abd Allah ibn Dārim in al-Kufa in [the area beyond] al-Khandaq (i.e., the moat) in a pleasant setting' (*Muḥjam al-buldān*, 2:541).

62. This is the reading of 'Awwād's edition, but I cannot identify the toponym. The 'Bakr' referred to here is, presumably, the tribal confederacy of Bakr ibn Wā'il (W. Caskel, 'Bakr b. Wā'il', *EL2*). Geert Jan van Gelder suggests that *ḥaṣrāh Bakr* may be a corruption of *ḥādirat Bakr* ('the settlement of Bakr').

63. al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf (d. 95/714) the famous Umayyad governor who—pace al-Shābushtī—was sent to Iraq in the year 75/694 (A. Dietrich, 'al-Ḥadjdjād b. Yūsuf b. al-Ḥakam b. 'Aqīl al-Thakafī, Abū Muḥammad', *EL2*).

64. al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī (fl. late 6th century) was one of the most outstanding pre-Islamic poets.

And now we've become the lowest of people. Very few vessels can be filled without tipping over (*qalla inā' imtala' illā-nkafa'*).

And so al-Ḥajjāj stormed off and sent someone to remove her from the monastery and get her to pay the tax (*kharāj*). When she and three of her family's female servants came out, one of them said:

Women led out from Hind's monastery,
 who've submitted to baseness and rudeness.
 Tell me, is this the beginning of Resurrection Day?
 Or has time erased the pride of men?

One of the young men of al-Kufa ran to his horse, rescued them from al-Ḥajjāj's guards, and ran off. When news of this verse and what the young man had done reached al-Ḥajjāj, he said, 'If he comes to us, he'll be safe, but if we catch him, we'll kill him'. So the young man went to him and he asked him, 'What's your excuse for what you've done?' 'Pride (*al-ghayra*)', said the young man and [al-Ḥajjāj] set him free.

When Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqāṣ conquered Iraq, he went to see Hind at her monastery.⁶⁵ She went out to see him, and he paid his respects and asked if he could be of service to her. She said to him, 'I will greet you with a greeting our kings used to use: "May you be touched by a hand that has been struck by poverty after being wealthy, and not a hand that has been struck by wealth after being poor. May God never give you need of someone vile, nor ever take his blessing from a noble one without causing you to be the occasion for its restitution."' Then al-Mughīra went to see her when Mu'āwiya put him in charge of al-Kūfa.⁶⁶ He asked permission to see her, and she was told, 'The commander of the city is at the door'.

'Say to him', she said, 'Are you a descendant of Jabala ibn al-Ayham?'⁶⁷
 'No', he answered.
 'A descendant of al-Mundhir ibn Mā' al-Samā' then?'⁶⁸
 'No', he answered.
 'Well then, who are you?'
 'Al-Mughīra ibn Shu'ba al-Thaqafī'.
 'What do you want?'
 'I've come to ask you to marry me'.

65. Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqāṣ (d. between 50–8/670–8) was 'commander of the Arab armies during the conquest of Iraq'. (G. Hawting, 'Sa'd b. Abi Waqqāṣ', *EL2*). This episode is presumably set at some point during the conquest of Iraq: 14–19/635–640 (G. Hawting, 'Sa'd b. Abi Waqqāṣ', in *EL2*).

66. al-Mughīra ibn Shu'ba (d. 48–51/668–671) was appointed governor of al-Kufa for a second time in 41/661 by the Umayyad caliph Mu'āwiya (d. 60/680) (H. Lammens, 'al-Mughīra b. Shu'ba', *EL2*).

67. Jabala ibn al-Ayham, the last Ghassanid ruler, fought with his compatriots in Heraclius's army at the battle of Yarmūk in 536 (I. Shahīd, 'Ghassān', *EL2*).

68. The most famous Lakhmid king (r. c. 503–54) (A. F. L. Beeston, rev. I. Shahīd, 'al-Ḥīra', *EL2*; I. Shahīd, 'Lakhmids', *EL2*).

‘If you’d come to me for [my] beauty or station, I’d have answered you. But you want to use me to show off in the caravans of the Arabs. Just so you can say “I married the daughter of Nu‘mān ibn al-Mundhir”. Otherwise, is there anything good in the union of a one-eyed man and a blind woman?’ He wrote to her (*fa-ba’atha ilayhā*), asking, ‘What was your rule like?’

‘I’ll give you the short answer’, she said. ‘At one point there was no Arab on earth that didn’t humble himself before us and our magnificence; nowadays there’s no one we don’t humble ourselves before and fear.’

‘What did your father used to say about Thaqīf?’ he asked.

‘Two of their men asked him to settle a dispute over something or other; one of them was from [the tribe of] Iyād and the other from [the tribe of] Bakr ibn Hawāzin. He decided in favour of the Iyādī, saying,

Thaqīf isn’t part of the ‘rear of Hawāzin’
nor are they kin with ‘Āmir and Māzin.⁶⁹

‘But we’re from Bakr ibn Hawāzin so you’re father can say what he likes’.
al-Mughīra said.

69. This verse refers to a tribal confederation known as Hawāzin, which included the tribes of Thaqīf, ‘Āmir ibn Ṣa’ṣa’a, Māzin ibn Ṣa’ṣa’a ibn Mu’āwiya ibn Bakr ibn Hawāzin, and many others. The ‘rear of Hawāzin’, as Montgomery Watt explains, ‘[comprised] Ḍjusham b. Mu’āwiya b. Bakr, Naṣr b. Mu’āwiya b. Bakr, and Sa’id b. Bakr’. The joke in the poem seems to revolve around the fact that this branch of Hawāzin, the ‘rear of Hawāzin’, was less prestigious than its confederates. See M. Watt, ‘Hawāzin’, *EL2*, C. E. Bosworth, ‘Ḍja’da (‘Āmir)’, *EL2*, G. L. Della Vida, ‘Māzin’, *EL2*, and M. Lecker, ‘Thaqīf’, *EL2*.