ABŪ ISḤĀQ AL-ĪLBĪRĪ:
A LITERARY REVISITATION

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Abstract
This paper gives an overview of the poetry and poetics of Abū Ishāq al-Ilbīrī (10th-11th c.). While modern critics have focussed mainly on al-Ilbīrī’s invective against the Jews of Granada, I here offer a more composite picture of his oeuvre. I discuss selected ascetic poems, two invectives/praises and one elegy to a fallen city. I draw attention to the persona that the poet constructs in his ascetic poems, and the interactions between this persona and the poet’s own engagement in the local politics of Elvira and Granada.

Keywords

Resumen
Este estudio propone una nueva valoración del verso y la poética de Abū Ishāq de Elvira (ss. x-xi). Mientras la crítica contemporánea se ha esforzado sobre todo en interpretar la famosa invectiva del poeta contra los Judíos de Granada con finalidades historiográficas, he tratado aquí de proporcionar una imagen más exhaustiva de su obra poética desde el punto de vista literario. Analizando una selección de sus poemas ascéticos, dos invectivas/elogios y una elegía a una ciudad abandonada, pretendo llamar la atención del lector sobre la persona literaria que Abū Ishāq va construyendo en sus poemas ascéticos, y sobre la interacción entre dicha persona y la participación del poeta en la vida política de Elvira y Granada.

Palabras clave
Abū Ishāq al-Ilbīrī, Elvira, Granada, Elegía, Poesía Hispano-Árabe, Zuhd, al-Andalus.
The fame of Abū Ishāq al-Ilbīrī among Western scholars rests largely on his notorious invective against the Jews of Granada. In this poem Abū Ishāq issues a warning (tahdhrī) to the king of Granada, the Berber Bādis ibn Ḥabūs. Appallingly for the poet, Bādis has appointed a Jew, Yūsuf b. Naghrila, as his prime minister. Through Yūsuf, the poem continues, the Jews have grown arrogant; they live in luxury, while the Muslims are in rags. According to the poet such an arrangement is an abomination: Bādis should dispatch Yūsuf, kill off the Jews, seize their property, and restore ‘order’.

We do not know the exact time when Abū Ishāq completed his invective, yet the poem is related to a tense situation which came to a head towards the end of the poet’s life. In 1066, just one year before his death, a riot broke out in Granada. Frenzied mobs of Andalusian Muslims and Ṣanḥāja Berbers fell on the Jewish quarters. Yūsuf b. Naghrila was captured and lynched, and as many as four thousands Jews, according to Arabic sources, were murdered (Sanjuán, 2004, pp. 202-204).

As is to be expected, Abū Ishāq’s invective against the Jews has been often read as the spark behind this riot —referred to as a ‘pogrom’ by some scholars (Monroe, 1974, p. 27; García Gómez, 1944, p. 38; Sanjuán, 2004, pp. 167-205). The first to associate the poem with the 1066 massacre was Ibn al-Khatib in his Ihāta (Dozy, 1932, pp. 71-72). Yet Ibn al-Khatib, a minister to the Nasrid emirs of Granada, was writing three centuries after al-Ilbīrī. No previous historiographical source mentions Abū Ishāq’s poem in conjunction with the 1066 riot. This fact led Bernard Lewis and other contemporary scholars to put in perspective the repercussions of al-Ilbīrī’s invective (Lewis, 1992, p. 172; Sanjuán, 2004, pp. 182-205). The poem was originally translated by Dozy (Dozy, 1881, pp. 282-294) into French and, more recently, into English by James Monroe (Monroe, 1974, pp. 206-213).

Dozy proffered the following remarks on the character of al-Ilbīrī:

“Je ne sais si je me trompe, mais je crois que l’auteur du poème contre les juifs était plutôt un ambitieux désappointé qu’un fanatique sincère” (Dozy, 1881, p. 293).

1 In this paper I will refer to the poet as “Abū Ishāq” and “al-Ilbīrī” interchangeably.

Through a literal reading of Abū Ishāq’s verses, Dozy concluded that the poet, in spite of his many verses in scorn of luxury and wealth, did in fact enjoy and benefit from the refinement of Andalusian society. Abū Ishāq did not even make it a point to disguise his thirst for wealth and power in his poems. Only when exiled and ostracised from Granada did the poet “devote himself to asceticism” (Dozy, 1881, p. 293).

A literal reading of Abū Ishāq’s poems yields easily to such an interpretation, but we must resist, of course, reading a poet through his poetic persona. Other interpretations of al-Ilbīrī’s character have been put forward by later critics. Henry Perés focussed mainly on Abū Ishāq’s invective when he described the poet as a publicist for the Grenadine religious hierarchies (Perés, 1983, p. 277). Perés also presented another three poems in order to provide some social and historical information about Granada in the 11th century.

The entire diwān of Abū Ishāq al-Ilbīrī was published in 1944 by Emilio García Gómez (al-Ilbīrī, 1944). His edition was based on the only known manuscript of the diwān (El Escorial, Real Biblioteca, MS 404). Drawing largely on biographical dictionaries, García Gómez assembled a biography and discussed the oeuvre of al-Ilbīrī (al-Ilbīrī, 1944, pp. 110-111). He also re-created some intriguing vignettes of the poet’s life, based on literal readings of his verses. Little can be added to García Gómez’s insights on the life of al-Ilbīrī, and the present article is largely indebted, in this sense, to his pioneering work. Nonetheless, García Gómez’s judgement of Abū Ishāq’s poetry seems heavily marred by the poet’s infamous invective: “This diwān, of which a MS has been preserved in the Escorial (no. 404), has been published by the author of this article, with an introduction. It is very characteristic of the limited poetical faculties of an Andalusian faqīḥ of medium culture, who rises to eloquence only when expressing his intolerant fanaticism” (Encyclopaedia of Islam, I, 130).

In his 1946 Hispano-Arabic Poetry, Nykl criticised the description of al-Ilbīrī given by García Gómez and Dozy. Addressing the latter’s, he wrote: “it shows a great lack of understanding of the Western Muslim psychology” (Nykl, 1946, p. 197). Nykl was, however, only able to support his attack against on Dozy with the fantastical definition of Abū Ishāq as an Arab mystic poet (ibid.).

In his commentary on Abū Ishāq’s invective, James Monroe sketched a description of the poet as a member and defender of the Andalusian malikī fighaḥa’. Monroe poignantly resumed the situation at Granada in al-Ilbīrī’s times, as follows:

Abu Ishāq had the misfortune, for an Arab, of living under the Zirid dynasty of Granada who were Berbers. The latter had found it impossible to rule the Arabs without the su-
pport of a neutral element of society, and so they had raised the Jewish Banû Naghrîla family to a position of power over the hostile Arab population. The king Badîs ibn Hâbbûs was ignorant, old, and an alcoholic to boot. Insensitive to the feelings of his Muslim subjects he allowed matters to get out of control. The fuqahâ‘ who were orthodox and narrow-minded were forced to lead a marginal life in a kingdom ruled by a religiously indifferent monarchy. (Monroe, 1974, p. 27)

Monroe explained how the fuqahâ‘ had enjoyed influence and prestige under the Amirids, former rulers of al-Andalus; “now relegated to obscurity, they expressed their dissatisfaction and discontent” (ibid.). While it is perhaps an exaggeration to state that the fuqahâ‘ were “relegated to obscurity” (they still enjoyed important administrative positions such as that of chief qâdi in Granada), their tense relationship with both Zirid power and the Muslim citizenry is evident in some of Abû Ishâq’s poems that will be discussed in this paper.

In modern scholarship, Abû Ishâq has been repeatedly quoted for his invective, whose vehemence has largely overshadowed the rest of his production: ascetic poems, elegies, praises. Teresa Garulo, in her wide-ranging study of Andalusian Arabic literature, only briefly addressed the poet’s ascetic poems, without foregrounding Abû Ishâq’s overall poetics (Garulo, 1998, p. 214). Yet another study by Alejandro García Sanjuán inscribed the infamous invective within the political context of Zirid Granada (Sanjuán, 2004, pp. 167-206), without however addressing the rest of the poet’s oeuvre.

Notwithstanding his grim reputation in modern scholarship, al-Ilbîrî is better known among Arab readers as the master of Andalusian zuhd, or ascetic poetry. A second edition of the diwân was published in 1991 by al-Dâya (al-Ilbîrî, 1991). It includes previously unpublished poems drawn from different sources. Al-Dâya offers a reconstruction of al-Ilbîrî’s biography which differs slightly from García Gómez’s; he also provides an overview of Andalusian intellectual life in the 10th and 11th centuries. Al-Dâya disapproved of Dozy’s and García Gómez’s negative judgements on al-Ilbîrî. He fashioned the poet as a critic of the luxury, ostentation, and decadence which, according to him, prevailed in al-Andalus in the 11th century. Regrettably, however, al-Dâya did not proffer a literary analysis of any of al-Ilbîrî’s poems.

More recently, Raimond Scheindlin explored original traits of al-Ilbîrî’s verse in his study of old age in Jewish and Arabic zuhd poetry (Scheindlin, 2002, pp. 85-104). Scheindlin called attention on the use of poetic dialogue and on al-Ilbîrî’s personal reworking of ascetic themes and imagery. He also used al-Ilbîrî’s

zuhdīya to formulate general statements on zuhd in the Arabic tradition and on the poetry of Moses ibn Ezra. I believe, with Scheindlin, that al-Illīrī’s poetry needs to be re-evaluated from a literary standpoint. In this article, I am interested in looking at how Abū Ishāq constructs his poetic persona: that of an old man whose religious concerns clash, at the end of his life, with other imminent and material concerns. Abū Ishāq’s poetics is informed by unease, struggle, angst and, I will argue, by the poet’s own untimeliness.

THE HISTORICAL CHARACTER

Much of the biography of Abū Ishāq ʿIbrāhīm ibn Masʿūd ibn Saʿīd al-Illīrī al-Tujībī is based on conjectures drawn from literal readings of his poems. He was probably born in Elvira towards the end of the 10th century. His early education is likely to have been based on Koranic sciences and an extensive curriculum of Arabic language and grammar: the prerequisites of the professional scribe which he would later become.

Al-Illīrī lived in turbulent times. As a youth, during the Berber fitna, or civil war (c. 1009-1031), he witnessed his hometown being repeatedly sacked by the Ṣanhāja Berbers. At this time, two parties, the ‘Andalusian’ and the ‘Berber’, were competing to install their own representative as a puppet-caliph in Cordoba. This fitna was to result in the collapse of the Andalusian Caliphate. The Berber armies prevailed over the Andalusians and tribal leaders seized portions of al-Andalus as personal fiefdoms.

Elvira was occupied in 1010 by Zāwī b. Zīrī, a Ṣanhāja Berber warlord who, not long before, had sacked the city with his army. Zāwī, moved by logistic and defensive purposes, decided to relocate the population of Elvira to the more secure and strategically located town of Granada, at the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Elvira was thereby abandoned and a new political regime was established. The Zirids ruled over Granada de facto as kings, appointing ministers and tax collectors loyal primarily to themselves. Suspicious of the Andalusians, and diffident in the face of the māliki fuqahāʾ, the Zirids recruited their administrators from amongst the more neutral Jewish population (Monroe, 1974, p.27). King Habbūs (r. 1019-1038), successor of Zāwī, appointed as his vizier a Jewish Mala-

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4 On the Arabic biographies of al-Illīrī see: García Gómez, 1944, pp. 102-104.
gan shopkeeper, Samuel b. Naghrila, who rose to be a prominent political and intellectual figure in al-Andalus, and is also known by his Jewish epithet Samuel ha-Nagid. Notwithstanding these political changes, the old religious hierarchies retained much of their traditional power: the qāḍī al-qāḍā (chief judge) was chosen among the city’s malākī fiqāḥā. This situation gave rise to an uncertain balance of powers in the newly founded Granada. As Monroe and others have repeatedly stated, the poems of al-Ilbūrī resonate as the voice of propaganda of those malākī fiqāḥā, whose authority was being questioned and challenged in these transitional and chaotic times.

**THE POETIC PERSONA: ZUHD AND OLD AGE**

Abū Ishāq’s poetic persona surfaces best in his ascetic poems, or zuhdīyat, which made him famous in his times (Sanjuán, 2004, p. 184). The zuhdīya branched out from the Arabic qasīda as an independent sub-genre in the Abbasid period, the poet Abū al-ʿAtāhiya (748-828 CE) being its father and consecrator. Poems defined as zuhdīyat are centred on reflections upon decay, old age and preoccupations with the afterlife. A customary beginning of the zuhdīya has the poet reflecting on the rapid passing of earthly glory, typically symbolised by the ruins of once majestic palaces and cities. Very often the poet confronts the signs of ageing on himself, white hair in particular, and reflects upon the approaching of death. He bemoans his deceiving desires, and ponders the unworthiness of honour and wealth and the vanity of sensual pleasures. Worldly gratifications, often acquired at the expense of spiritual integrity, appear now as but allurements and deceptions. The zuhdīya is often formulated as a pious admonition: the poet addresses an audience, warns them against the temptations of the material world (Dunyā) and incites them to abandon once and for all their worldly desires and to concentrate on piety and religion. Abū Ishāq relished this kind of poetry. He adopted and reproduced the many canonical themes, motifs and imagery of the genre. But his ascetic poems are not devoid of an original poetic persona.

The most striking feature of Abū Ishāq’s poetics of asceticism is, paradoxically, its focus on carnality. The poet denounces, almost obsessively, his pathetic attempts to obtain sexual gratification as an old man. In a long zuhdīyā, for example, Abū

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6 On Zuḥdiyya see Hamori, 1990, pp. 265-74
7 For a discussion of Zuḥd see Kinberg, 1981, pp. 25-44.
Ishāq, an old man of sixty, preaches to a youth about the advantages of abstinence. The youth, in turns, scolds the poet over the latter’s own shameful urges (see Scheindlin, 2002, pp. 89-90). In other poems, Abū Ishāq crafts his discourse on a strident dialectic between the linguistic lore and imagery of the naṣīb, the Classical amatory preface of the Arabic ode, and vivid incursions into the theme of al-ṣayb wa al-ṣabāb, the depiction of old age in Arabic poetics. Let us see one example:

no. 9 [metre: khaṭṭīf]

1. You have reached your sixties, beware! Know that what is to come is but borrowed time
2. and if your life is not over yet, the judge has proclaimed a final verdict
3. You are like the scroll, which is briefly unfurled and then rolled back and sealed

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1 This poem has been partially translated by Scheindlin, 2002, p. 94-95
4. How can a wise man enjoy life, while Death points arrows at him?
5. He does not know when its infallible archer will suddenly hit him with a fatal shot
6. What happened to my branch, now withered, once in full bloom?! what of my back, now curved, and once straight?!
7. What of my blade, now dull, and once sharp?! my army surrenders, it once was almighty!
8. Time! it exchanged the prime of my youth for grey hair, despised by young maidens,
9. Now I am neglected by them, once I was yearned for
10. If the side of Mount Thahlān was hit by the horn of Time, it would be cracked and demolished
11. We reside in the abode of annihilation; it is also a door and a staircase to eternal life
12. The mill of Death constantly revolving over us, forever grinding and crushing all,
13. And though I am aware of this, I act as if I did not know!
14. And so I travel calmly towards death, and on its verge, I repent!
15. But to whom will I now turn my face, that he may see my misery and be merciful?
16. My intercessors to Him: my good thoughts, my trust in Him, and my being a Muslim.
17. May he be praised as much as the constant thin rain falls, and as long as the doves coo
18. To him I submit in supplication: may He spare my grey hair from Hellfire!

These lines exhibit the main themes of al-Ilbīrī’s ascetic poems: old age, sin and damnation, wisdom (hikma) and the closing supplication to God (du‘ā’).

The poem’s thematic arrangement is as follows: an introductory segment on old age [1-9], a second section on wisdom (hikma) [10-13], fear of damnation [14-16] and the final supplication to God [17-18]. I call attention to the poem’s central section, where Abū Ishāq looks down on his ageing body [ll. 6-9]. This section is particularly effective in depicting the poet’s sexual impotence and physical decrepitness, through the images of a limp branch and a dull sword. Strength has

Mountain in the Najd (modern-day Saudi Arabia), commonly quoted in Arabic poetry as the epitome of permanence.
vanished: the poet’s army surrenders before the fight. The anti-climax in this description reaches its lowest in line nine, where the poet concludes that young girls, who once favoured him, now shun him on account of his old age.

The whole section tampers subtly with the archetype of the poet-hero. The section parodies both the nasīb (amatory preface) and the fakhr (boast) sections of the qaṣīda, enhancing the metatextual density of the poem. Such allusion, as clarified by Gruendler (2003, chapter 1), is meant to enhance the overall quality of the ode. The allusion to fakhr, through the use of martial lexicon, is instrumental in increasing the satirical effect of the poet’s self-portrait as an old man. A similar use occurs in yet another zubdiya by al-Ilbiri, which opens with an unlikely contextualisation of the nasīb.

no. 2 [metre: wāfar]

6. White hair, my friend, has vanquished my youth; once I was loved, now I am loathed
6. I was nimble, now I am slow, I was healthy, now I am withered and pale
7. like the sun going yellow, when it declines and sets
Abū Ishāq laments his physical decay: beauty has vanished, vigour declines, he has become an unwelcome lover. The paleness of his countenance resembles the weak light of a fading sunset, harbinger of the night. Subsequently, the poet re-deploys martial analogies in a succession of maxims:

8. تجاربنا جوهرًا لا نجارى
9. هي الأفكار والأيام تأتي
10. وما أعراضاها غير القلب
11. فلنَّ بغزاة من جند

8. Troops with no equal wage war on us; not even the champions of war can overpower them
9. They are Fate and Death approaching, who fall upon both patient and doctor
10. Arrows are aimed from an invisible bow, their target is but the heart
11. How to be on guard from such a might army, reinforced by divine powers?

The poet then apostrophises himself over his heedlessness of the warning of old age:

12. وما آسى على الدنيا ولكن
13. فيها لهفني على طول العزاء
14. إذا أنا لم آتي نفسًا وأبي
15. فمن هذا الذي بعدي سيبكي

12. I grieve not the world, but the sins I rode on
13. Woe unto me! How long my delusion! Woe unto me on reckoning day!
14. If I will not lament myself and my sins, as copious as raindrops in the storm
15. Who will, after me, cry over them, whether near or far?

The thematic arrangement of the lines above is very similar to that of the poem previously analysed: old age, Time and mortality (hikma), sin and fear of damnation. The poem’s imagery closely adheres to the sub-genre’s conventions. But al-Ilbīrī does not fail to endow these lines with personality and vigour. The metre, waṣīf, is a fast paced one, which enhances immediacy; the initial reversed nasīb in which the poet is both courted and scolded by Death opens the poem to an intertextual layering which enriches its meaning. We surmise that an educated
audience would have appreciated the unexpected borrowing from love poetry, which in al-Andalus found such illustrious heralds such as Ibn Zaydūn and Ibn Ḥazm. Then, the martial lexicon of lines 8-11 resuscitates the glories of the Arabic war poem (ḥarbiyya) in a surprising inversion of roles. The old poet is here the hunted; invisible weapons wait to deal their blows, no respite is granted. The poem’s closing line, perhaps the nearest to modern audiences’ sensibility, condenses in itself humankind’s shared apprehension over oblivion after death.

As it emerges from the lines above, the theme of old age fares prominently in Abū Ishāq’s poetry. The theme, referred to in Arabic as al-šayb wa al-šabāb (white hair and youth) had been developed into an independent sub-genre in the Abbasid era, particularly by Abū Tammām and al-Buḥturī, after appearing occasionally in pre-Islamic poetry. As it flourished in a mainly urban society, one of the most appreciated features of this type of poetry was that it abandoned the conventions of desert poetry in favour of more universal human experiences. The sub-genre lent itself to creating a more intimate bond between poet and audience. It was also a prominent motif in ascetic poems (zuhdiyya), as in the case of Abū Ishāq. Here is another example from the diwan:

no. 8 [metre: kāmil]

1. White hair warns the sensible ones, and they obey; it is forbidding for the ignorant one, he does not awake and he does not refrain
2. Indeed, my soul increased its cravings, they come in crowds! It seeks pleasure, while it is about to be swallowed
3. Until when will I amuse myself and rejoice in my desires? How ugly is an old man given to pleasures!

10 Literally: “it’s between the uvula [and the throat]”. 

References:
There is nothing more laudable than fearing God, and not being seen casting covetous glances at young girls!

How will he fight with a blunted sword, and a stumbling horse that pants and moans when he rises?

Time has shrunken his crescent, there remains nothing of it but a fading star.

In the first verse, the *dramatis persona* of white hair appears in its traditional role of admonisher and censor. Line two introduces the voice of the poet through the use of the first person possessive suffix pronoun attached to *nafs*. From this line on, the focus is on the poet. It is a quite mortifying self-description. His persona, described in lines three to six, is more appropriately that of a dirty old man. While his hair has gone white, he still casts lewd glances at young girls, and once again, the poet insists on his sexual impotence. Consider, for example, the phallic symbolism of the crescent now shrunken and barely visible in line six, or the vignette of the old poet gawping, or perhaps looking furtively, at beautiful women in line five.

The rhythm of the poem flows through a liberal use of alliteration and paronomasia (*tajnis*). In line one, for example, the root *nabh* is pervasive, as well as the letters *ḥā*, *wāw* and *yā*.' These are the three last letters of the Arabic alphabet and they recur in the majority of the poem’s lines. The poem’s rhyme is in *ḥā*, the antepenultimate letter of the Arabic alphabet. Consider the alliteration in the following lines:

7. Fugu'da ḥasira wa nishtehi 'an yishtehī.  And he has grown tired of craving to crave, and how often does the toiling of a headstrong man result as he had wished?

8. In 'an 'uwal wa 'ajjhas fi ikhka da'awīa, al-ṭalām wa waqfihā.  If he laments and weeps for his sins, darkness laughs and guffaws.

9. Lisa' ṯiḥimā 'alauth wa 'īmāla.  Why does he constantly ascend and descend?

10. Fudā al-dāzād wa rādī gāya ba'dum.  Where does his blood run and flow?

11. Yā wājihā ma ba'lla la yishtehī.  He has grown tired of craving to crave, and how often does the toiling of a headstrong man result as he had wished?

If he laments and weeps for his sins, darkness laughs and guffaws.

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4. There is nothing more laudable than fearing God, and not being seen casting covetous glances at young girls!

5. How will he fight with a blunted sword, and a stumbling horse that pants and moans when he rises?

6. Time has shrunken his crescent, there remains nothing of it but a fading star.

7. Fudūqā ḥasira, yishtehī 'an yishtehī.  He has grown tired of craving to crave, and how often does the toiling of a headstrong man result as he had wished?

8. In 'an 'uwal wa 'ajjhas fi ikhka da'awīa, al-ṭalām wa waqfihā.  If he laments and weeps for his sins, darkness laughs and guffaws.

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11. Yā wājihā ma ba'lla la yishtehī.  He has grown tired of craving to crave, and how often does the toiling of a headstrong man result as he had wished?

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11 Literally: young cows and wild oxen.

12 For a treatment of white hair in the motif of *al-ḥayb wa al-shabāb* see Beatrice Gruendler, 2003, ‘White Hair’.
9. Sermons do not restrain him, while it is time for the like of him, at his age, to restrain!
10. His peers in age are less and less, he multiplies his transgressions after them. Will he not be vigilant after them, and be aware?!
11. Woe unto him, what is it with him that he will not stop his transgressions, while his time is running out?

Line seven is built around the verb *ittahā*, to desire, which recurs three times. The subsequent line complements this one by depicting the result of men’s stubborn desires: wailing and lamentations (both containing the letter há’). To these, the darkness of the tomb responds with chilling laughter (*qahqahā*). Line 9 is centred on yet another quadrilateral verb *nahnaha*, to restrain, also dominated by há’. Line 11 is played out on the verb *intahā*, to end, and half the total words of this line contain há’. Through the alliteration in há’, and *tajnīs* of the alphabet’s final letters, the sense of impending death and termination is conveyed both in form and meaning.

The poem’s message, like many other *zuhdiyyāt* by al-Ilbīrī, is surprising. As Scheindlin has has it:

> no more women for me – not only it is disgusting for an old man to lust after them, but they are revolted by him; so I take comfort in religion (Scheindlin, 2002, p. 95).

If *zuhd* defines “a voluntary abstention from the world”, then we are at odds with al-Ilbīrī’s persona of a zāhid, an ascetic individual. His *zuhdiyya* constructs a persona that does not withdraw, a situation that does not resolve, attachment that will not subside. Carnality is not replaced by contemplation. It is recreated in the many evocations of the beloved’s physical attributes. This beloved is elusive but corporeal: not the mystic’s beloved of *tasawwuf*, but the sensorially charged subject of the *nasīb*. Repentance is wished for but not achieved, solace in death is overshadowed by apprehension.

We have also seen how Abū Ishāq’s *zuhdiyya* is enlivened by self-irony and satire. The use of an elegiac and martial lexicon (the sword and horse of line 5, the crescent and the fading star of line 6) to describe pedestrian subjects such as an impotent penis results in the comical effect which, as unto today’s reader, would not be lost unto al-Ilbīrī’s audience. Al-Ilbīrī’s poetic of asceticism, while surprisingly accessible and direct in lexicon, is subtly built on the revisitation of ancient models; first and foremost, the pre-Islamic *nasīb*. It is a singular revisitation, that of al-Ilbīrī, in that the sub-genre is subverted and parodied. Al-Ilbīrī’s borrowing from genres antithetical to the *zuhdiyya*, such as the *nasīb* and the
Karbiyya enriches his poetry by allowing for the important interplay between the audience’s expectation and the delivered message, as explained by Heinrichs and Gruendler (Gruendler, 2003, chapter 1).

As a further example of Abū Ishāq’s own reworking of the zuhdīya, I should like to quote yet another short poem. At times, al-Ilbīri’s misanthropic rants are compensated by an inclination to empathise with animals. In a short poem, (qī‘a), al-Ilbīri describes the wolves that roam around his monastery. These are, in his words, “meeker than the fāqīh” the latter word being a possible allusion not only to professional rivals, as Henry Perès has it (1983, 445), but also to the poet himself. In this other poem, al-Ilbīri evokes the totemic figure of the dove:

no. 3 [metre: kāmil]

1.  أحمامة البضاء أطلت بكاك،
فحسين صوتك ما الذي أيك؟

2.  إن كان حقاً ما ظنت فإن بيك,
فوق الذي بلك من شديد جواك.

3.  إنى أطلتك قد ذهبت بفرقة,
من مؤنس لك فتألمت لذاك.

4.  لكني ما أشكوك من قرط الجوي,
بخلاف ما تجدين من شكاوك.

5.  أنا إما أبيك الكلب وأسرها,
وهل أى الشكوك مالك فكاك.

6.  وإذا بكناي سائبٌ رحمته,
وتجاوراً فكاكٌ غير بكاك.

1. Oh dove of the deserts, long is your weeping; what is it you cry with your beautiful verse?
2. Yet, If I am right, what ails me is more painful than your sorrow
3. For I think you have been struck by the loss of a friend and are tormented by grief.
4. The overflowing grief I lament is far different from what ails thee!
5. For I cry over my sins and their fetters, and my wish, as I cry, is to obtain deliverance,
6. as I weep, I ask my Lord to have mercy and forgive... my crying is not your crying.

The poetic persona that Abū Ishāq crafts in his ascetic poems gives us an interesting perspective on the subgenre of the zuhdīya. The latter, at least for al-Ilbīri, is

13 For examples of the dove in Andalusian poetry, see al-Dāyā, 1991, p. 38.
built upon the dialectic opposition of the inherently human —evident in explicit representations of carnality and conceptualizations of desire— and the unattained transcendent, which is hoped and yearned for, but is reserved for God’s mercy in the afterlife. The poet’s choice of lexicon and register is quite natural: Al-Ilbīrī aims to deliver an immediate message. He succeeds by adopting swift metrical choices and relatively straightforward wording. Some verses are pervaded by tenderness and transmit, it seems to me, the private regret of this medieval man who seeks an intimate communion with his audience through his verse.

Al-Ilbīrī’s zuhdīyyāt articulate a personal poetics which encompasses stylistic norms, shared existential concerns, and the crafting of an exaggerated, almost caricaturesque poetic persona. Reading this persona literally as a representation of the historical poet, as Dozy or Nykl have done, is dangerous. It is important instead to contextualize Abū Ishāq’s ascetic poems within the poetic subgenre to which they belong: a subgenre which foregrounds ageing amongst its many motifs. Only then we can appreciate the distinctive traits of al-Ilbīrī’s zuhd. These traits, which are vehemently depicted, are unforgiving towards the poet’s own persona, his poetic avatar, his literary self. The word ‘self’, in Arabic nafs, is the natural opposite to zuhd. Hence its debasement, first and foremost, in the very persona that is satirised time after time in al-Ilbīrī’s zuhdīyyāt.

I conclude my study of Abū Ishāq’s zuhdīyya by quoting the very last poem which, according to the compiler of the diwan, al-Ilbīrī ever proffered (al-Ilbīrī, 1991, pp. 69-70). In this poem, the old faqīh comes back as a kind of preacher. From his deathbed, he rebukes a member of the Grenadine khaṣṣa (loosely translatable as aristocracy). Having learned that Abū Ishāq was gravely ill in bed, Ibn Abī Rajā’, a minister whom the poet had previously criticised for his ostentatious clothing, went to visit him. When Ibn Abī Rajā’ made a remark about the poet’s modest dwelling, al-Ilbīrī rebuked him once again, improvising the following verses:

no. 13 [metre: ba‘īṣ]

1. قالوا ألا تُستجمّب بيتاً
2. لولا نشأء وفتح فقده
3. لولا نشأء وفتح فقده
4. وَدَسَّةَ بِيَنْ بِنْ عَكْبُوْتُ
5. لَيْسَ لَأَرَابِيْ لِيَوْتُ
6. مَأْوَعَةُ النَّاطِقِ الصَّمْوُ
1. They told me: would you not renovate a house, so that other houses may admire its beauty?
2. I replied: don’t you think a small hut is very appropriate for one who is dying?
3. If it weren’t for the winter, for the scorching heat of summer, for the fear of thieves, for preserving my sustenance and for preserving the honour of women, I would build a house like the spider’s web.
4. What is the meaning of a beautiful abode, when its masters are bound to pass away?
5. No speech is more eloquent than the grave, if only we accepted the sermon of a silent preacher!

The poem reiterates the message of zuhđ poetry in a dialogue form: worldly pursuits are worthless, death impends and the afterlife awaits, mankind should be contented with little. On the other hand, another facet of al-Ilbīrī’s character surfaces from this poem: his passion for invectives and rebukes. This is the second prominent feature of al-Ilbīrī’s poetics, and is discussed in what follows.

**THE POLITICAL POET**

Al-Ilbīrī built his career as a professional scribe and a faqīḥ by remaining close to prominent religious figures, whom he eulogised in his verses, and whose favour and protection he enjoyed both in Elvira, his birthplace, and in Granada, the city in which he flourished professionally. Moreover, al-Ilbīrī could capitalise, for his professional ascension, on the fame that his poems earned him in Elvira. This is readily explained by the following point made by Benaboud:

los ‘ulamā’ disfrutaron de una privilegiada posición social conseguida sobre todo gracias a su conducta y su saber, así como sus actividades y a su producción literaria (1984, p. 26).

Abū Ishāq’s closeness to influential political figures in Granada is testified by one of his early poems, dedicated to his teacher and qādī of Elvira, Ibn Abī Zamanīn. The qādī himself wrote poetry, primarily ascetic in content. It is clear

14 For a thorough study of Ibn Abī Zamanīn, see the work of María Arcas Campoy, such as her 1992 essay, pp. 14-16.
how this figure exerted a strong influence on al-Illbīrī, who, like his patron, combined his profession of faqīḥ with writing poetry, mainly ascetic in tone. The occasion for this praise/invective was an uprising of the people of Elvira against Ibn Abī Zamanī. In the poem, al-Illbīrī passionately defends the qāḍī, casting invectives against his rebellious fellow-citizens.

no. 29 [metre: tawīl]

1. You rose up against your qāḍī, and you’ve been put down; you attempted to dishonour him, and you were dishonoured
2. By my life! You prospered from his good fortune for a long time! were he to have suffered, you too would have suffered!
3. He was but your protection, if you only had intellect! But you have been guided astray!
4. So Lo and behold! He is the judge in spite of you! Now die with your wrath and plot what you will!
5. Scrape your arses on the ground! You will not reach a tenth of his height, no matter how much shit you amass!

Al-Illbīrī’s attack is reinforced by the use of pedestrian vocabulary and puns (mutābaqa) at the level of the single line: in line 1, first hemistich, rafāʾa, “to raise” but also “to rebel” is opposed to khifāda (l. 5), to lower but also to be subdued. Paronomasia dominates line 2, where the poet associates the success of the qāḍī (ṣaʿāl) with the happiness of the citizenry (ṣaʿada) and his potential harm (ṣaqā) with theirs. Line 3 creates a binary between the figure of the qāḍī and two qualities which, the poet denounces, the rebellious citizens lack: sound intellect (ʿaql) and divine guidance (ruʾād). The use of derogatory language in lines 4 and 5 sharpens the message of utter spite towards the target of the invective. It also enhances the metaphorical distance between the lowly citizenry and a lofty elite of religious scholars. Al-Illbīrī’s vitriol against the rebels is also a declaration of
allegiance to guard, the *maliki fiqahā* of Elvira. In the lines above we can sense the anger of the poet against the betrayal he saw in those he felt were shifting their loyalties, and his commitment to the preservation of the status quo. Al-Ilbīrī’s rebuke to his fellow-citizens at a moment when their insurrection was tamed indicates that this poem was not only an invective, but also a praise to Ibn Abī Zamanīn on his triumph, much in the tradition of the classical Arabic panegyric. Given what we know about the co-dependence of the poet and the patron, we can also understand how al-Ilbīrī was positioning himself as public defender of Ibn Abī Zamanīn, his cause, and his supporters. The complex relationship of give-and-take inherent in courtly praise is here replicated in the context of Granada’s religious hierarchies: in praising Ibn Abī Zamanīn in this place and at this time al-Ilbīrī not only demonstrated his reverence towards his teacher, but also renewed his allegiance to the triumphant religious establishment of al-Andalus’s *maliki fiqahā*. It is natural to assume that poems of this kind could only help the young al-Ilbīrī in his ascension to religious posts in the new city.

I would here like to take a brief detour from the main theme of this essay. The invective discussed above, in fact, opens up to a broader understanding of the political situation at this time and in this place. As al-Ilbīrī was writing this poem, any residue of the Umayyad caliphate had dissipated and a period of anarchy had ensued. As it emerges from this poem, large segments of the urban population were now quick to confront the traditional ruling classes. In Elvira, they revolted against the *maliki fiqahā* who were the traditional supporters of the political institutions under the Umayyads. It is worth noting how Andalusian cities would be the natural arena for such a clash. The importance of the *maliki fiqahā* as a mainly urban class has been underlined in detail Benaboud (1984, 29) and by Fierro (2011, 145-153). I call attention to the essay by Fierro, which documents the delicate balance of power between Andalusian rulers, citizens and *fiqahā* in 11th century al-Andalus. Building on previous scholarship, Fierro reframes the question of political legitimacy in al-Andalus and its intertwinement with the decline of the taifa of Granada (2011, 153-167). Fierro also provides some valuable insights as to the possible reasons behind popular discontent against the *fiqahā*:

“el radicalismo de los ulemas podía, pues, despertar la animadversión de la población y enajenarles su apoyo. Había otros motivos que podían también llevar a lo mismo. Entre las críticas más frecuentes a los ulemas se contaba la acusación de codicia y la de hipocresía, críticas dirigidas especialmente contra los alfaquíes.” (2011, p. 152)
The insurrection against Ibn Abī Zamanin was also symptomatic of the radical demographic changes Muslim Iberia began to undergo in the 10th and 11th centuries, which Fierro poignantly illustrates in her essay (2011, 153-167). This essay also reinforces our understanding of the co-dependence of the ruler and the fuqahā' (Fierro, 2011, 143-145) and of the role of public censorship which the fuqahā' had carved for themselves. Such a role is nicely illustrated by Mones:

"Muslim Spain was marked out by a rigid religious consciousness that did not leave the observance of sacred law up to the individual, and insisted on setting in place what could be almost called a religious censorship of all decisions made by the state or his citizens... It is not strange, due to this, that Muslim Spain was the only Islamic land where the fuqahā' participated openly in the tasks of government and stood beside the monarchs to make sure that they were legitimate and that they governed according to divine law." (Mones, 1998, p. 289)

It is a similar censorship that Abū Ishāq was carrying out when he wrote his political invectives. Let us look at a further example. After moving to Granada, the poet remained close to the religious elite, attaining the post of personal scribe to the chief judge Ibn Tawba, to whom he dedicated a lengthy panegyric. Ibn Tawba was an influential figure in the new city. In 1055 he had the minbar of the Friday mosque of Granada erected and he had the bridge over the Darro river built (parts of this bridge can be seen today; its name still makes reference to him, as Puente del Cadi’). In addition to a proper panegyric, al-Ilbīrī composed another poem which also makes reference to Ibn Tawba. In it, al-Ilbīrī applauds the punishment of a Granadine poet, Abū Bakr ibn al-Ḥājj, who had satirised Ibn Tawba along with other fuqahā’i. Displaying little patience with the poet, the qādī ordered him to be arrested and punished. Al-Ilbīrī described the chastisement in his verses, praising Ibn Tawba for his decree and mocking the author of the satire. Moreover, al-Ilbīrī directly warned the poet, and with him, all his potential audience, against defying the religious elites, whom he describes in highly laudatory terms.

The whip is more eloquent than words, and [more eloquent] than the lies of a shameless man!

2. Its taste is bitter and its coldest part burns like fire, it brings to his senses —in what a way!— the one who receives it.

3. It knows more medicine than Hippocrates when curing a dim-witted man.

4. Although it is thin-bodied, even horses fear its strength, and it is more ferocious and terrifying than a caiman from the Nile

5. It makes a man dance without music, even if he were heavier or more thick-skinned than an elephant.

6. A silly man will find knowledge and experience in it, as under it it spills [blood drops as thick as] beans

7. From it, he sipped a spicy broth, he has had bad burps from bad food!

8. Pain lampooned him with a painful inventive, equal to no poem in metre or imagery.

The poem stands out for its inventive use of the sub-genre of wasf (description) and for its vividly graphic account of the satirist’s ordeal. I draw attention to the opening line which borrows from the famous panegyric by Abū Tammām to the caliph al-Mu'tasim (Dīwān, I, 47-79, Cairo 1951–7):

“Abū Bakr ibn al-Hājj had satirised the qāṭi Abū al-Hasan ibn Tawba and a group of fuqaha that was with him. He had him beaten up, flogged and then paraded in the city markets. Ibn Mas'ūd [i.e. Abū Ishāq] wrote about this [event]”:

1. The whip is more eloquent than words, and [more eloquent] than the lies of a shameless man!

2. Its taste is bitter and its coldest part burns like fire, it brings to his senses —in what a way!— the one who receives it.

3. It knows more medicine than Hippocrates when curing a dim-witted man.

4. Although it is thin-bodied, even horses fear its strength, and it is more ferocious and terrifying than a caiman from the Nile

5. It makes a man dance without music, even if he were heavier or more thick-skinned than an elephant.

6. A silly man will find knowledge and experience in it, as under it it spills [blood drops as thick as] beans

7. From it, he sipped a spicy broth, he has had bad burps from bad food!

8. Pain lampooned him with a painful inventive, equal to no poem in metre or imagery.
The sword is more truthful than books, on its edge is the limit between what's serious and what's idle.

The reference to Abū Tammām’s line in the panegyric underscores al-Ilbīrī’s goal to dignify his patron Ibn Tawba by associating him with the figure of the Caliph (as well as to associate himself with Abū Tammām.) Such intertextuality would not be lost on Ibn Tawba, a learned scholar himself, nor to an highly literate public well-versed in poetry.

In the next section (ll. 9 to 11) al-Ilbīrī not only describes the public chastisement, but also sends out a warning against defying the ruling religious elites. In this section the poet addresses his audience directly. The audience witnesses the scene of the man paraded half-naked in the city market while the populace unleashes its rage upon him. If we read this section in conjunction with the following lines of praise of the fuqaha’ of Granada [ll. 12 to 14] a section reminiscent of the pre-Islamic tribal boast (fakhr), we infer that al-Ilbīrī, with his invective, is addressing not only the guilty satirist, but all those who would dare defy the power of the religious hierarchies to whom he swears allegiance:

9. Tell him, if ever a satire crosses his mind, remember when you stood with your pants lowered
10. Remember walking through the market, shamed, naked, head bowed, scorned like a leper
11. Remember your punishment for having foolishly insulted the lord judges and great leaders
12. Men on whom the Merciful has bestowed the greatest stature, granting them a reverence with which they are honoured
13. Verily, they are of the finest grain of humankind, and the rest, in truth, are
but the bran left in the sieve
14. Among them, Ibn Tawba is the flag of command, raised high, and their
crown, magnificent!
15. He ordered punishment for those who did not care for their right, and has
fortified this order with his seal
16. The man’s back is his paper, the whip is yearning for it, a miserable book
for a permanent contract.

I draw attention to line 9, in which the poet not only admonishes the sharp-
tongued critical satirist but all those who would dare speak out against al-Ilbīrī’s
and Ibn Tawba’s position. It appears from this poem that al-Ilbīrī, as a member
of the religious Andalusian establishment, felt it his duty to censor and reform
the citizenry, providing guidance in moral but also in political matters. As stated
above, this was not unusual in al-Andalus: al-Ilbīrī was exerting a function that
had been a privilege of the Iberian fuqāḥā for two centuries—a function that
was under threat from the Zirid administration.

Elaborating on Wasserstein’s and Fierro’s argumentations, we can imagine that
the subordinate classes in Granada, once delivered of the yoke of the old rule
represented by the Umayyad authority, coupled with the religious hierarchies of
the mālikī fuqāḥā, felt safe to confront these directly. The case of Ibn al-
Ḥājj is one example of such confrontation. The lines quoted above reinforce the historical
evidence that such a conflict was simmering on the ground, in the streets and sub-
urbs of Granada. We see the fuqāḥā exerting efforts to maintain their control over
the population, rallying the Arab-Andalusians around them in the new city where
Jews constituted a significant percentage of the population and who were now
holding high positions in the administration. Based on these and the previously
analysed lines, we can picture the situation in Granada after the dismantling of
Elvira as a moment of political adjustment which naturally brought about power
struggles for the control of the high posts in administration. This moment in en-
capsulated in yet another ode by Abū Ishāq, his “Elegy to the Ruins of Elvira”.

After Zāwī b. Zīrī took possession of Elvira, Abū Ishāq was forced, along
with his fellow citizens, to abandon the city and relocate to Granada. It is prob-
ably around this time that he wrote his famous “Elegy to the Ruins of Elvira”, in
which he re-imagined, in highly laudatory terms, an idealised version of the city.
Borrowing imagery from the pre-Islamic ode and loyal to the Andalusian tradi-
tion of rithāʾ al-mudūn, al-Ilbīrī’s fashioned Elvira as a haven for scholars and
poets. Subtly, he also hinted at the Umayyad Caliphate as the ultimate and lost
symbol of the glory of Islam in Iberia. The ode, consisting of twenty-three lines, opens with an accusation against the citizens of Elvira for too readily forsaking their hometown.

no. 207 [metre: *tawil*]

1. يَصْلَبُ مَفْرَوضٌ وَيَعْقُبُ وَاجْبُ وَأَلْبِيَ اللَّهُ الْأَمَانَ لْعَانِبُ
2. أَكَابَتُ أَطْلاَقَ الْبَلَادِ وَلَا يُرْى، إِلَيْهِ مَنْهُمْ عَلَى الأَمْرِ نَادِبُ
3. عَلَى إِنَّها شَمْسُ الْبَلَادِ وَلَا ظُهُرُهاَّ، وَكُلُّ سَوَاهَا حَضْنَةُ وَغَيْبَةُ

1. A [religious] obligation has been breached and a [moral] duty has been neglected, and I stand pointing an accusing finger at those who live in my time
2. Will the ruins of the country be mourned, while not a single man among them is seen mourning Elvira?
3. But she was the sun of the land and its comfort, while all other [places] are desolation and darkness!

It is compelling to read Abū Ishāq’s “Elegy to Elvira” in juxtaposition with another, famous elegy to an Andalusian city, namely Ibn Shuhayd’s “Elegy to Cordoba”. A thorough parallel between the two poems would deserve a more in-depth study than space allows in this context. A preliminary comparison, however, reinforces our reading of al-Ilbīrī’s poetic persona as one of isolation, opposition and unrest. A distinctive feature of the elegy is, of course, its focus on the deceased or—in this case— on the fallen city. Alexander Elinson poignantly underscored how, in the elegy to Cordoba, Ibn Shuhayd uses the first person almost “reluctantly” and “cautiously”. Prominence is, as expected, accorded to Cordoba, and to the communal mourning of its demise. In the words of Elinson:

The focus of the *rirāḥā* is of course the destroyed Cordoba. Therefore it is natural for the poet to cede attention to the city. Nonetheless, the poet’s importance as a spokesperson and elegist is undeniable. Without the poet, there is no poem, and without the poem, Cordoba ceases to exist. So it is from this verse on that Ibn Shuhayd cautiously shares a little space with Cordoba. I say cautiously because the verbal agency of the poet fades as quickly as it came... (Elinson, 2008, el. vers., loc. 2480)

7 I am indebted to William Granara for his advice on the English rendering of this poem.
Ibn Shuhayd adopts the first person in order to metaphorically step into the poem only at the very end of his elegy. The architecture of the poem starts with the city and closes in on the lone voice of the poet, which fades as quickly as it came.

Al-Ilbīrī’s poem radically reverses this architecture. In the poem’s opening, the poet calls attention on himself. The particle *inna* coupled with the first person pronoun emphasises the protagonism of Abū Ishāq in mourning an otherwise forgotten and forsaken Elvira.

Loyal to his persona, the poet posits himself as the censor (*ātib*) of his contemporaries (*Ahl al-Zamān*) who fail to keep alive the memory of Elvira. He also posits himself as the lone mourner for the fallen city. The poem opens with a striking juxtaposition of an Islamic religious lexicon with pre-Islamic lore. Line one evokes an unequivocally Islamic milieu, associating memory with a religious obligation (*fārāfi*) now violated. The next line reiterates this message, this time by tapping into the pre-Islamic *atāl* motif. The poet is metaphorically standing alone over the ruins of his hometown. He addresses these with the highly evocative term *atāl,* the vestiges of an abandoned encampment whose contemplation customarily opens the Arabian ode. However, the communal character of the *atāl* motif, expressed in the *qasida* by the poet’s invocation to his travelling companions —as in the paradigmatic line by Imru al-Qays— is replaced in this line by solitary contemplation. The effect is enhanced through the lack of subjectivization which the passive verbs of line two (*yura*na, *tundab*) convey. On the other hand, the poet’s emotional isolation, which prevades the pre-Islamic *atāl* and *nasīb*’s segments, is reinforced in this line and throughout the ode by the poet’s direct confrontation with his audience of Andalusian Muslims. Other cities are mourned, and yet no-one among the poets of al-Andalus is seen commemorating Elvira. We find in these two lines a double-edged invective against the *Ahl al-Zamān,* the poet’s contemporaries, who chose to forget and failed to commemorate Elvira. By deploying an Islamic lexicon on the one hand and pre-Islamic tropes on the other, Abū Ishāq attacks his fellow-countrymen by aiming at their core values: Arabness and Islam. Forgetting Elvira is at once a breach in the shared values of Islam and of tribal coherence, a symptom of the decadence which al-Ilbīrī associates with the new times of the Taifās. The word *al-balad* (line two), is particularly telling in this sense. It implies a meaning larger than Elvira itself: namely, Muslim Spain in its entirety. Al-Andalus is effaced, poets left weeping over its vestiges. This line conveys al-Ilbīrī’s outrage in witnessing the downfall of a cohesive, united, highly accomplished world at the onslaught of a

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18 On the *nasīb* see for example: Stetkevych, 1994, pp. 59-61.
new political order, an outrage that is compounded by the cowardice and complacency he sees in his fellow citizens.

These two opening lines project the poetic persona of al-Ilbīrī most concisely and powerfully. The poet feels and chooses to write “against the grain”: in his mourning, as in his victories, he is standing alone. His loyalty means isolation and his orthodoxy is a form of self-ostracism. We can here recall another facet of Abū Ishāq that immortalises such a persona: the old man who would not yield to ageing. We thus see how the poetic persona of Abū Ishāq surfaces consistently in his ascetic as well as in his political poems.

In the second part of the elegy to Elvira, Abū Ishāq complies with his role of public mourner in a more traditional fashion. From a focus on his poetic individuality, he shifts attention to the city of Elvira. In this section, the poet deploys a rhetorical arrangement that facilitates bonding with his audience, a bonding based on a shared commemoration of the deserted Elvira. Elinson has examined the use of repetition in Ibn Shuhayd’s poem as a rhetorical device that:

> Creates a rhythm and a continuity that allow for a certain comfort and expectation that can act as a counterbalance to the unpredictability and severe rupture that occur with a traumatic loss. As well, this expectation can serve to shorten the distance between the poet and the audience: after a rhythm is established, the audience comes to sense come next. The line between the poet and the audience is blurred to the point where all the mourners are standing together, listening and reciting at the same time. (Elinson, 2008, el. vers., loc. 2065)

Elinson points out how the rhythm created by the repetition of particles such as the vocative ya and the enumerative kam was registered by Ibn Rashīq in his ‘Umda as a customary device of expressing sorrow and grief. In his words, such repetition is not unlike “the ritual movements associated with prayer, or the swaying and repetition of God’s name in the context of a Sufi dhikr” (Elinson, 2008, el. vers., loc. 2057). To these, we may here add the ritual wailing of professional mourners, typically women, at funerals. The formulaic repetition of kam to enumerate the glories of the fallen city occupies the second segment of Abū Ishāq’s elegy (lines 4-8):

4. وَكَمْ مِنْ مُحِيبٍ كَانَ فِيهَا مُصَلَّحٌ ۖ نُجَابُ إِلَى جَلْوَةِ يَدِهِ السَّابِسُ
5. وَكَمْ مِنْ نَجِيبٍ أَجُنَّتْهُ عَالَمُ ۖ وَأَبَوَاهمُ كَانُواْ نَجَاحًا لِلرَّكَابِ
6. وَكَمْ نَفَعُ فِيهَا الأَمَامَيْنِ وَفَقَّضَتْ ۖ لَمْ يَدَبْ أَبَادَتْ بِهَا وَمَرَّتْ
7. وَكَمْ طُلِبَ الْحَمْوُسُ وَكَمْ مَسَّتْ ۖ عَلَى الأَرْضِ فَخَازَتْ بِهَا وَكَوَاكِبٌ
8. وَكَمْ فَرَتْ فِيهَا النَّعْيَة ضَرَاعُمًا ۖ وَكَمْ صَرَعَتْ فِيهَا النَّخَةُ كَوَاعِبٌ
4. How many, there, answered to a cry for help! Deserts are traversed in search of the generosity of their hands.
5. And how many noblemen she engendered! And how many scholars stopped their camels at her doors,
6. How many realised their hopes there, satisfying their wishes and desires,
7. How many suns rose from her, and how many moons and stars walked on her soil
8. How many gazelles there hunted young lions, and how many buxom girls defeated great heroes!

The tropes evoked by the poet retain a distinctive character: they aim to celebrate a shared sociality. It is remarkable that no physical attribute of the city is recalled. No monumental grandeur, no architectural display of power, as for instance in Ibn Shuhayd's ode:

14. And the palace—that of Banu Umayyad— so abundant with everything, but the Caliphate was even more abundant.
15. And the Zahiriyya with its boats that shined brightly and the 'Amiriyya that was filled with stars.
16. And the Grand Mosque that was jammed with all who recite, hear and study anything they wished to.

Instead, Elvira is identified with its inhabitants, the population displaced and deported to Granada. It is the Arabo-Andalusian citizenry of Elvira which is the real subject of Abū Ishāq's elegy: their generosity (line 4), praised with imagery borrowed from the pre-Islamic ode; the learning of its scholars (line 5) and the liberality of its patrons (line 6), the splendour of its male and female aristocracy (the suns of line 7, the moons and stars of line 8). Thus, we discover that the persona of Abū Ishāq cannot be simply, and simplistically, read as the lone voice of a dissenter. As he mourns and praises Elvira, the poet is in fact eliciting an emotional response from his fellow-citizens, who have been forced to abandon their once-glorious hometown. Al-Ilbīrī is here appealing and giving voice to the swathes of people who saw their position suddenly overturned as they were forcibly displaced from Elvira to Granada. Abū Ishāq's fellow citizens, previously the proud members of an Arabo-Andalusian aristocracy, are now subject to the once-despised Berbers. It is likely that al-Ilbīrī, who enjoyed the protection of influential religious figures such as Ibn Abī Zamanīn in Elvira and Ibn Tawbā in Granada, was one of the few public voices who dared to express discontent
with Zāwi’s policies. His opening invective against the Abī al-Zamān is, on the surface, a reproach to their complacency or cowardliness, while on a deeper level it subtly calls the Muslim Andalusian to remember and re-live a shared past effaced by Zāwi b. Zirī and his Ṣanhājas. Thus, the poem is also a rumination on the dire fate of the Andalusian Muslims now fettered and gagged by the new lords of Granada.

As he praises Elvira, Abū Ishāq crafts an implicit praise for al-Andalus before the fitna. The ruins of Elvira that he evokes contain the memories of the refinement of a society now effaced by civil war. In contrast to the praise of Elvira, al-Ilbrī also constructs within the same poem a disguised invective against the Ṣanhājas. The accusations against the new lords of al-Andalus, the Berbers, who had ordered the dismantling of Elvira, would not be lost on his contemporaries. Implied in this praise of Elvira, although not explicitly stated as such, is the Arab-Andalusian contempt for the Berbers, and possibly, the blame the poet suggests they must bear for the civil unrest that eventually brought down the Umayyad caliphate. Al-Illbrī’s rage over the abandonment of Elvira is once again expressed through a double invective: the first against his fellow-citizens who sought accommodation with the Ṣinhāja Berbers; and second, against the Ṣinhājas themselves, whom—we infer from the poem—he despised as ungenerous toward the learned classes. We read in this poem the germ of the later, far-reaching critiques which Abū Ishāq would level against his contemporaries and his own rulers, culminating in his invective against the Jews of Granada.

CONCLUSIONS: UNTIMELINESS AS POETIC PERSONA

In his On Late Style, Edward Said discusses the concepts of timeliness and lateness in relation to the question of ageing and mortality (Said, 2006, pp. 3-24). The adjective untimely perhaps best defines the poetic persona of Abū Ishāq. We see its untimeliness in his ascetic poems, in the persona of an old man who cannot resign to old age. Such untimeliness also surfaces in his public poems, where al-Ibrī adopts the persona of a moral censor and a restorer of “the old customs” in a changing world. He crafts his public persona as that of a stubborn (anachronistic, one is tempted to say) custodian of orthodoxy in a problematic society, that of the Iberian Taifas. It was problematic, I argue, for the unprecedented political and social changes it generated since its onset by overturning a previous political and social arrangement. The poet, who thrived professionally in such an arrangement, expresses through the use of different poetic subgenres his angst
on contemplating the demise of the old order. Abū Isḥāq’s poetics, both in its ascetic as in its political manifestations, is centred on the struggle surrounding his incapacity to surrender to change. Whereas the zuhdiyat express this struggle on an intimate and existential level, the public poems convey it outwards. The struggle which al-Illbīrī stages in his poems is partly aimed at creating a bond with his audience, which we can think of as the Andalusian Muslims of Elvira. In his ascetic poems, Abū Isḥāq does not assume the role of a zāhid, an ascetic who has withdrawn from the world. Instead, his poetic persona is exasperatedly human. It embodies dismay in and despair of getting to grips with ageing and mortality. It is a persona designed to elicit sympathy and to allow a certain generation, i.e. the poet’s contemporaries, to identify themselves with the poetic subject. This is the reason, I surmise, for al-Illbīrī’s success as a writer of zuhd poetry. His zuhd was read and admired in public; biographers state that it was widely read at funerals (García Gómez, 1944, p. 112; Sanjuán, 2004, p. 184) and it clearly contributed to the poet’s prestige in Granada. It fulfilled the expectations of a cultivated audience with felicitous rhetorical choices. It also appealed to less bookish audiences by adopting a plain and easily accessible language. Abū Isḥāq, savvy to the power of poetry, did not hesitate to employ the many sub-genres of the Arabic qaṣīda for social ascent and as a political weapon, as demonstrated by a conjunct reading of his ascetic poems, panegyrics and invectives.

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