

Arabic Picture-Poems and the Simple ‘Tree’

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DOI: [10.56004/3.2jb](https://doi.org/10.56004/3.2jb)



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Abstract: Arabic picture-poems have a thousand-year history but have been largely ignored by western literary historians and art historians. Only one poet working in the medium has attracted a small body of scholarly studies, al-Jilyānī (AD 1136–1206). This paper will give an overview of existing scholarship on the topic, describe the codified auditory features of classical Arabic poetry that can give rise to different levels of pictorial patterning, and analyse a chronological series of four picture-poems that employ the same motif, a tree, to different effect. Situating picture-poetry more generally in relation to current issues in Arabic literary history, it will suggest how knowledge of, or lack of access to, the manuscript-supports and -formats of pre-modern Arabic literature may inflect our approaches to it.

Keywords: Arabic picture-poems, pattern-poems, al-Iskandarānī, al-Jilyānī, Ḥamdūn Ibn al-Ḥājj, print transcripts, scrolls

Existing scholarship on Arabic picture-poetry: contexts of discussion

Handwritten Arabic picture-poems have a long history, lasting into the early twentieth century (see [Bray 2019: 110–13](#) for an overview from al-Jilyānī onwards). They are as much a visual as a verbal form, and as such have fallen between two stools in western scholarship: they are seldom mentioned in histories of Arabic literature and are ignored by Islamic art historians. Only one poet working in the medium, al-Jilyānī (AD 1136–1206), has attracted a small, recent body of scholarly studies that combine textual and visual analysis.¹

¹ In addition to those cited in this article, see the discussions and references in [Bray \(2019\)](#) and [Bray \(2020\)](#). On al-Jilyānī's life and wider literary output see [Bray \(2020: 247\)](#).

Previously, however, in the 1980s and 90s, pioneer studies of Arabic picture-poetry had been published not by Arabists but by Europeanists, as part of cross-cultural surveys. Dick Higgins (1987) and Ulrich Ernst (1991) enlisted the aid of language specialists and established the main principles of picture-poetry in Arabic scripts—how to read it, and its aesthetic purpose²—as well as identifying what is currently the earliest but one known Arabic example and summarising its text. The earliest specimens, pattern- rather than picture-poems, where the words form patterns or geometric figures but not pictures of things, date from before AD 910, and were reproduced in typeface and discussed by Lara Harb (2017). In what follows, to avoid speaking diffusely about what is a very broad but very under-researched topic, I will leave aside pattern-poems and focus on Arabic poems that are intended to be representational or have a representational component. Pattern and picture-poems are interconnected, since both belong to the larger category of Arabic 'generative' poetry, where one poem is derived from another. Some of the methods of generation are described later in this article.

Higgins brought his survey up to the present,³ whereas Ernst concentrated on the medieval period. In 1954, A. L. Korn, another Europeanist, had surveyed 'several pioneer Orientalists of the nineteenth century' who had studied later, Persian and Turkish, pattern and picture-poetry written in Arabic scripts (Korn 1954: 291–96). Korn asked contemporary Orientalists for help 'in matters of bibliographical and linguistic detail', but none of them seem subsequently to have pursued the topic themselves. His examples postdate the formative period of the genre in Arabic, and so will not be cited here as context. The only limitations on Higgins' and Ernst's findings are that they had access only to typographic renderings of isolated figures, not to manuscripts or extended sequences of picture-poems,⁴ and that they could not discuss the prosodic protocols governing picture-poetry or pattern-poetry. For the latter, we can now turn to Harb.

A handful of descriptions of Arabic pattern or picture-poetry by literary scholars of the pre-print era have so far been published, dating from the late ninth or early tenth century AD and from the thirteenth century onwards.⁵ The twentieth-century Arab scholars who discussed and published specimens of picture or pattern-poetry of the Fatimid, Mamluk

² Higgins (1987: 229): 'everywhere either there is some concealment or the unravelling of some concealed purpose, giving a quality of sudden suspense or the enthralment of the spirit ... which can be said to be its life-core'. Ernst (1991: 771) summarises textual aspects (panegyric), prosodic technique (metrical permutation) and visual repertory, with an emphasis on geometric figures.

³ Higgins (1987: 166). The example that he cites as having been published in Egypt in 1983 is said to be by the poet and critic 'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād (1889–1964). I have not seen it and do not know whether al-'Aqqād created it or copied it.

⁴ Ernst (1991: 771) gives a generalised description of geometric figures by al-Jilyānī, but I have not traced the British Library MS he refers to.

⁵ See Harb (2017, especially 138); and section 'Problematics of picture-poetry: (1) literary history' below.

and Ottoman periods⁶ were constrained by the typographical limitations of the time, and although some of them—and also some western cataloguers (see [Bray 2020: 248](#) and nn. 9, 10)—had access to manuscripts, they did not photograph them. But in 1995 Aḥmad al-‘Irāqī edited the collected poems of Ḥamdūn Ibn al-Ḥājj al-Sulamī (1760–1817) with black and white reproductions of a few manuscript figures, and in 2010 Kamal Abu Deeb published the longest known manuscript of al-Jilyānī’s picture-poems; his printed text follows the colour-coding of one MS and includes colour photographs taken from three manuscripts in all. Since then, all five of the currently known manuscripts of al-Jilyānī’s picture-poems, with different contents and titles, have been digitised and are available online on public access.⁷ This is a considerable but not a complete step forward, for al-Jilyānī’s poems were originally written as scrolls, but all have since been copied and bound as codices ([Bray 2020: 252–53](#)). In order to be fully legible, the folios have to be printed off and pasted together in the sequence of the sheets that formed the scroll (see [Fig. 3](#) for two examples), and in all the manuscripts but the Gotha MS, which has the fewest poems, there are losses or faulty sequences. It is not yet known whether al-Jilyānī was unique in using the scroll format, whether the phenomenon of change of format in copying and transmission applies to other poets; nor do we know what other contemporary uses of scrolls may have inspired al-Jilyānī to use the format (contemporary scroll formats and uses are described in [Bray 2020: 253–54](#)).

There has been a scattered interest in historic Arabic picture-poems over the past decade by young scholars who are interested in connecting today’s Arabic concrete poetry to an Arab past (e.g. [Younis 2015](#); [Baransi 2019](#)).

⁶ E.g. Cheikho (1899); Badawī (1979 (1954)); al-Khāl (1956); ‘Ānūti (1970); Shaykh Amīn (1972); Sallām (1990).

⁷ Gotha Ms. Orient A.2259: http://archive.thulb.uni-jena.de/ufb/receive/ufb_cbu_00005651; Jerusalem Khālidīyya AKDI 1649-238, digitised and put online by the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library: <https://w3id.org/vhmmml/readingRoom/view/510021>; Manchester John Rylands Library Arabic MS 690 [23]: https://luna.manchester.ac.uk/luna/servlet/detail/Man4MedievalVC~4~4~993874~218961?sort=reference_number%2Cimage_sequence_number%2Cparent_work_title%2Cdate_created&qvq=w4s:/when%2F1334%2B%25255B735%2BAH%25255D;sort=reference_number%2Cimage_sequence_number%2Cparent_work_title%2Cdate_created;lc:Man4MedievalVC~4~4&mi=0&trs=1; Paris BnF Ar.3140 (digitisation of a black and white microfilm): <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b11001842t/f1.image.r=arabe%203140>; Uppsala Carolina Rediviva University Library Arabic MS O Sp. 28 Fol: <https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/attachment/document/alvin-record:163349/ATTACHMENT-0238.pdf>. (All accessed 3 December 2025.)

Classical and modern Arabic picture-poetry

Until the early twentieth century, Arabic picture-poetry shared with ordinary poetry the traditional literary and social functions of self-praise and praise of a patron while being technically experimental, though strictly within the limits of established prosody. Today's picture-poetry sometimes takes visual inspiration from earlier Arabic examples, but breaks with classical Arabic prosody and conventional themes; it nods to European concrete poetry and is a poetry of protest (examples in Baransi 2019). The most fundamental break, however, is that it is a print or digital medium, whereas pre-print-era (that is, roughly speaking, pre-nineteenth-century) Arabic picture-poetry was intrinsically dependent on the flexibility of format and articulation afforded by the paper folio or scroll as support and by written script and coloured inks as medium. Paradoxically, it is digitisation that has now made these characteristics retrievable and comprehensible. When picture-poems were transmitted in codex form if they had originally been written on scrolls, or in monochrome type when they had originally been scribed in colour combinations, they became partly indecipherable.

European and Arabic varieties of visual verse and pictorial calligraphy: how Arabic picture-poetry differs

When European readers think of picture-poems or concrete poetry, they probably think primarily of poems in which words are arranged in the shape of the things that the poems talk about, such as George Herbert's 1633 *The Altar* and *Easter-Wings* or Guillaume Apollinaire's 1918 *Calligrammes*. Poems like these combine simplified shapes with innovative verse forms and metre. Visually, they bear a superficial resemblance to the widespread genre of Islamic pictorial calligraphy in which Arabic script is used to write sacred names or phrases in the shapes of animals and so on; for example, a calligraphic lion that spells out his name and invokes blessings on him may be used by Shi'is to represent 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the Prophet Muḥammad's cousin, son-in-law, and in their view true successor, as the 'Lion of God'.⁸ Fully-fledged examples are known from the fifteenth century (Blair 2006: 380, with examples in figs 10.15, 11.14 and 12.9), and the art is very popular still. Unlike the shapes in concrete poetry, however, those in devotional calligraphy follow established templates; similarly, their texts are fixed, not original.⁹ Manuscript-era Arabic picture-poems are different from both printed concrete poetry and devotional calligraphy. Unlike concrete po-

⁸ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shiite_Calligraphy_symbolising_Ali_as_Tiger_of_God.png. (Accessed 3 December 2025.)

⁹ A wide range of examples is given in Khan (2001: 84, 118: boats); (2001: 150–1: various objects); (2001: 152–7: zoomorphic); (2001: 158–9: plants, fruit); (2001: 160–1: buildings).

etry, they do not use unconventional metre or free verse, nor do they follow visual and textual conventions like Arabic pictorial calligraphy. Like both, they use shapes symbolically, but their fundamental difference from either is that their sound-patterns and corresponding visual patterning derive from a single source rather than from separate visual and verbal domains. That source is the rules of Arabic prosody.

Outline of classical Arabic prosody: rhyme and metre

How does Arabic prosody give rise to picture-poetry? Two factors are exploited: a simple one, rhyme, and a more complex one, metre. Taking rhyme first, from its oral beginnings in around the sixth century AD, Arabic poetry has followed auditory patterns that also became visual patterns as soon as poems started to be written down a couple of centuries later. The most prestigious kinds of poetry were composed in monorhyme of varying richness.¹⁰ Written from right to left, the lines of a poem of any length, from two lines to over a hundred, all in the same metre, with no grouping into verses, and usually with a gap between the first and second hemistichs, would form a simple abstract pattern combining uniform line length + uniform caesura + uniform rhyme scheme (e.g. *manzili*, *hawmali*, *sham'ali*, *tajammali*; the first two half-lines may rhyme) that looks like this on the page:

rhyme ----- (rhyme) -----	1
rhyme -----	2
rhyme -----	3
(etc.)	

As for metre, the rhythmic structure of classical (i.e. non-vernacular) Arabic poetry was described for all time, at least in the opinion of pre-modern poets and critics, by al-Khalil ibn Aḥmad (d. ca. AD 791) from listening to the oral recitation of verse; aurality is underlined by the legend that it was hearing coppersmiths hammering that inspired his analysis of metrical feet. The way that al-Khalil identified and classified the fifteen or sixteen metres of poetry and the relationships between them has, however, been found puzzling by modern European scholars, firstly because he does not use terms or concepts corresponding to syllable, length or stress, and secondly because he uses visual as well as verbal devices to describe the feet making up each metre and show how they are stressed. I summarise

¹⁰ Støetzer (1998) gives a full theoretical overview. Essentially, classical Arabic rhyme can be monosyllabic, as in the English *bog*, *dog*, *fog*, or multisyllabic, as in the English *commination*, *domination*, *fulmination*. The same word may not be repeated, but, unlike English, Arabic as a language lends itself to long sequences of rhymes.

Gotthold Weil's argument for the stress-quantitative nature of classical Arabic poetry and al-Khalil's analysis of it (Weil 2012); there is no modern consensus on the issue.

The grammarians of his time adopted an abstract three-consonant base, $f^c l$, to show how unvarying grammatical prefixes, infixes and suffixes applied to any trilateral root (trilateral roots predominate in Arabic) form all noun patterns and allow all verbs to be conjugated; for example, they use the paradigms *fa'ala*, *fā'ilun*, etc., rather than individual lexical items exhibiting these patterns. In the same way, al-Khalil uses abstract paradigms based on $f^c l$ to express the number and articulation of consonants and vowels in the feet that make up poetic metres. Thus in his method of describing it, the metre *ṭawīl* consists of a sequence of two feet, expressed by the paradigms *fa'ūlun mafā'ilun*, repeated once in each hemistich, giving a total of eight feet per line; this parses such real examples as the two feet *qifā nabki min dhikrā*, 'Halt! Let us weep at the remembrance' or *matā yashtaḥi minki l-*, 'When will my [heart] be cured of you?' Al-Khalil then goes on to arrange the metres in concentric circles which show where the same core elements occur in the feet of different metres; these elements carry the stress pattern of each metre, allowing variation in the unstressed parts. The components of feet can be expressed not only by the $f^c l$ verbal paradigms but even more simply by combinations of the visual symbols *o* and *|o*: thus *o |o |o o* scans *qi (= o) fā (= |o) nab (= |o) ki (= o)* or its paradigm *fa'ūlun ma-*, the first foot of *ṭawīl* and beginning of the second foot. The visual symbols, which stand for how consonants and vowels are combined, correspond roughly to our 'shorts' (*o* = *˘*) and 'longs' (*|o* = *—*).¹¹ We shall see that it is the fact that al-Khalil identifies patterns common to different metres that enabled one kind of picture-poetry to be constructed (it is discussed below as 'generative poetry'). The fact that he does so visually as well as verbally may have been an added inspiration.

Examples of basic abstract prosodic rhyme patterning made pictorial: the simple 'tree'

A figure that occurs in three different times and places in surviving Arabic picture-poetry, and is perhaps one of the earliest, is the simple 'tree'. One example dates from the end of the tenth century AD, two from the end of the twelfth century, and one from the end of the eighteenth century or beginning of the nineteenth. They all work in the same way prosodically and thereby produce the same picture, but they differ in their symbolism, their poetic conventions, and in what can be reconstructed of their original manuscript *mise en page*.

The first example, by al-Iskandarānī, was published in Arabic in 1950 by Muḥammad Kāmil Ḥusayn and reproduced, unread, by Ernst (1991); the three other examples that are now

¹¹ The possible combinations are consonant + vowel (Cv) or consonant + vowel + consonant (CvC), parsed not according to written word divisions but phonetically over a sequence of words within a phrase.

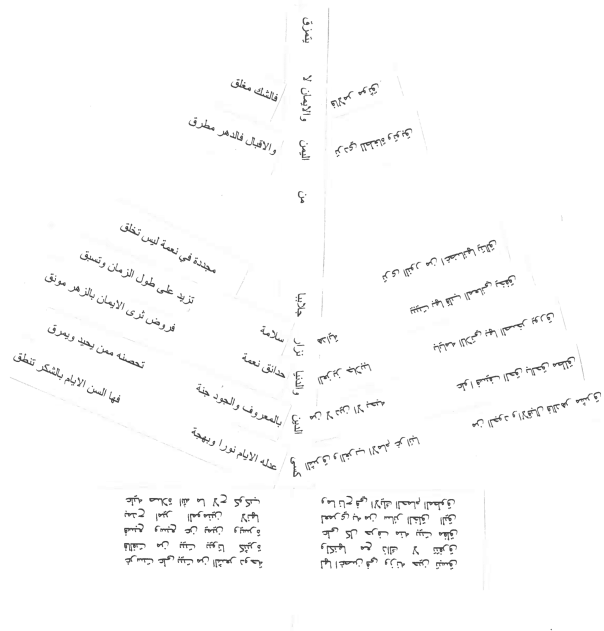


Fig. 1: Fig. 1: Al-Iskandarānī's poem to the Fatimid caliph al-ʿAzīz (r. 976–996), lines 18–22 and 'tree', after Ernst (1991: fig. 296), and Ḥusayn (1950: 144).

known had not then been published, so that neither author was fully aware of this first example's significance. The second example, by al-Jilyānī, was reproduced, unread, by Abu Deeb (al-Jilyānī 2010) but not read until 2015 (published by Bray 2019); both authors were unaware of the earlier example and therefore missed the full literary and historical import of al-Jilyānī's piece. Though reproduced by Abu Deeb as a photograph (the plates in al-Jilyānī 2010 are unnumbered and unpaginated), the third example, again by al-Jilyānī, has not previously been read. The last example, by Ḥamdūn Ibn al-Ḥājī, was reproduced in a blurred black-and-white photograph and read in 1995 by Aḥmad al-ʿIrāqī, and is cited in Bray (2020) in relation to al-Jilyānī's use of the simple 'tree' figure (see pl. 14.4, opposite p. 248, for al-ʿIrāqī's photograph); it seems not to have been reproduced or cited elsewhere. This is the first time that all four simple 'trees'—so far the only known early, or datable, manuscript-era Arabic examples constructed in this way—have been considered together. It is also the first time their texts have been examined in detail. I will therefore reproduce them all in full, in both transliteration and translation, after explaining the identical technique that the three poets used to construct their 'trees'. (Al-Jilyānī also produced complex 'trees'; three examples from the Manchester MS are illustrated on unnumbered double pages of al-Jilyānī (2010); the manuscript contains four in all, which can be viewed online

as JPGs 54, 72, 136 and 190. See Fig. 3 below for the rendering of one of them in the Gotha MS. Cognates of al-Jilyānī's complex trees have not yet been identified.)

The principle of the simple 'tree' is a tree trunk with symmetrical upswept branches on either side. The trunk and the branches are written as lines, or in al-Jilyānī's case are inscribed with lines, of verse in the metre *ṭawīl*, following the eight-foot paradigm. In my transliterations, I use capitalisation to mark metrical stress (ti-tUm-tum, ti-tUm-tum-tum)¹² and an asterisk to mark the caesura:¹³

*fa'Ūlun mafā'ilun fa'Ūlun mafā'ilun * fa'Ūlun mafā'ilun fa'Ūlun mafā'ilun*

The final foot carries the rhyme, which will form both the top of the 'tree' and the tip of each 'branch'. The branches decrease in length from the bottom of the 'tree' to the top, one word or phrase from the 'trunk', then two, then three, etc., being read off to form the first, second and third, etc. words of each pair of branches. These head-words are metrical segments; they need not be complete feet, but each 'branch' with its head-word or -words taken from the 'trunk' will scan perfectly. Even when there are indications that the poem could be read in one direction rather than another, it makes sense whether it is read from top to bottom or bottom to top, and whether all the lines on one side are read first or the 'branches' on each side are read in alternation. The anaphoric sound-structure of 'tree' poems complements the obligatory end-rhyme and may in turn be enriched, in the non-repeated segments of line inside the 'branches', with deliberate assonance and alliteration or internal rhyme; but at the same time the poet sticks strictly to the prosodic rule that no one word may be used twice as an end-rhyme in the same poem. He thereby signals that, despite its novel appearance, this is courtly poetry in the highest classical Arabic linguistic and literary register, not to be confused with the various forms of popular poetry in regional vernaculars, which followed different rules.

The first example is currently known to exist only in a typographical transcript. Ernst (1991) reproduces it (fig. 296), describing it as having been 'discovered by Abdullah al-Udhari, London'.¹⁴ It in fact comes from the first, 1950 edition of Ḥusayn's pioneering survey of Egyptian Fatimid literature, *Fī adab Miṣr al-Fāṭimiyya* (Ḥusayn 1950); in the revised edition of 2015 the figure is no longer reproduced (Schippers 1994: 18–19, 23, cites the 1970 edition and summarises Ḥusayn's analysis). I have not been able to identify a manuscript. The poem is ascribed to an otherwise unknown poet, al-Iskandarānī (mentioned by Qutbuddin 2005: 12 n. 35) and occurs in a manuscript unidentifiable from Ḥusayn's reference.

¹² We assume that sense stress would have overlaid metrical stress, which sometimes falls on unstressed or meaningless segments such as case endings.

¹³ I mark the caesura to facilitate analysis; it is present in al-Iskandarānī's 'tree', but not in al-Jilyānī's or Ibn al-Ḥājj's.

¹⁴ A scholar and translator of Arabic literature, al-'Udhari was born in Yemen in 1941 and has lived in London since 1962.

However, it can be dated securely to the reign of the fifth Fatimid caliph, al-‘Azīz (976–996), for it is in his praise and mentions both his given name, Nizār, and his regnal title of al-‘Azīz. His accession was unexpected (Walker 2015), so the poem cannot pre-date it. The ‘tree’ is actually only the final part of a panegyric that has twenty-two preceding lines, of which the last five, numbered xviii to xxii below, describe the ‘tree’ and how to read it. The ‘tree’ itself, for which al-Iskandarānī used the word *dawḥa*, has a trunk and seven branches, which he calls *aghṣun*, facing each other on right and left, numbered 1 R, 1 L, etc. below.

Ḥusayn explains what the tree symbolises in Isma‘īlī (‘Sevener’) Shi‘ism and particularly to the Fatimid caliphs, who claimed descent from the Prophet’s daughter Fāṭima through his legate al-‘Alī: the Prophet is supposed to have said ‘My family [*ahl baytī*] are a tree [*shajara*] whose root is firm and whose branches [*furū‘*] reach heaven’ and: ‘I am a tree [*shajara*] and Fāṭima is its root [or: branch]; ‘Alī is its seed; Ḥasan and Ḥusayn are its fruits. Those who love my family are its leaves, and verily, verily, they shall be with us in paradise’; see Ḥusayn (1950: 185), and (for a related discussion) Qutbuddin (2005: 150–51). Al-Iskandarānī’s ‘tree’, however, focuses solely on the imam, the sacred Fatimid caliph himself.¹⁵

Here is the poem in transliteration and translation. Capitals in the Arabic mark metrical stress; bold typeface in Arabic transliteration and English translation of the ‘tree’ correspond to the elements in the ‘trunk’ that are progressively repeated in the ‘branches’:

Introductory description of the ‘tree’ poem:

(xviii) gharAstu ‘alĀ baytin minA l-shi‘ri dAwḥatan * lahĀ aghṣunUn
fī waznihĪ ḥīna tAbsuqu

(xix) fa-Allaftu mIn baytin buyŪtan kathĪratan * wa-lĀkinnahĀ ma‘
dhāka lĀ tatafArraqu

(xx) fa-sAb‘un wa-sAb‘un ‘an yamĪnin wa-yAsratin * ‘alĀ kulli
ḥArfin minhū bAyṭun mufAllaqu

(xxi) bi-mAdḥi amĪri l-mu‘minĪna li-Annahā * la-‘Umri bi-hĪ min
sā’iri l-khalqi Alyaqu

(xxii) ‘alAyhi ṣalĀtu l-lāhi mĀ lāḥa kAwkabun * wa-mĀ nāḥa fī l-ayki
l-ḥamĀmu l-muṭAwwaqu

¹⁵ A wider context for poetry in praise of the Fatimid imams is provided by Smoor (1992: 90–104). Qutbuddin (2005) analyses both specifically Fatimid religious motifs and conventional Arabic poetic devices used in poems devoted to the Fatimids; the attributes of the imams are enumerated on pp. 162–3.

'trunk':

**kasĀ l-dīna wA-l-dunyā nizĀru jalĀbiban * minĀ l-yumni wA-l-
īmāni lĀ yatmāzzaqu**

'tree':

(1) R **kasĀ** l-sharqa wA l-gharba l-imĀmu gharā'iban * minA l-jūdi
wA l-iqbāli fA l-dahru mUshriqu

(1) L **kasĀ** 'adluhU l-imāma nŪran wa-bAhjatan * fa-hĀ alsunU l-
ayyāmi bI l-shukri tAnṭiqu

(2) R **kasĀ l-dīna** mAn lā dīna illā bi-ḥUbbihi * 'ulUwwan fa-sAyyfu
l-ḥaqqi bI-l-ḥaqqi mUṭlaqu

(2) L **kasĀ l-dīna** bI-l-ma'rūfi wA-l-jūdi jUnnatan * tuḥAṣṣinuhū
mimman yaḥīdu wa-yAmruqu

(3) R **kasĀ l-dīna wA-l-dunyā** l-'azīzu jalĀbiban * bi-Ayyāmihi l-lātī
bihĀ -l-ṣakhru yUriqu

(3) L **kasĀ l-dīna wA-l-dunyā** ḥadĀ'iqa nA'matin * fa-rAwḍu tharĀ
l-īmāni bI-l-zahri mŪniqu

(4) R **kasĀ l-dīna wA-l-dunyā nizĀru** hidĀyatan * yabItu bihĀ
qalbu l-mu'Āniya yAkhfiqu

(4) L **kasĀ l-dīna wA-l-dunyā nizĀru** salĀmatan * tazIdu 'alĀ ṭūli
l-zamĀni wa-tAsbiqu

(5) R **kasĀ l-dīna wA-l-dunyā nizĀru jalĀbiban** * tarĀ l-nūra mIn
aghḏānihĀ¹⁶ yata'Allaqu

(5) L **kasĀ l-dīna wA-l-dunyā nizĀru jalĀbiban** * mujAddadatAn fī
ni'matin laysa tAkhlaqu

(6) R **kasĀ l-dīna wA-l-dunyā nizĀru jalĀbiban** * minA l-yumni
tUrdī li-l-ṭughĀti wa-tŪbiqu

¹⁶ Ḥusayn reads *aghṣānihā*, 'whose branches'.

(6) L *kasĀ l-dīna wA-l-dunyā nizĀru jalĀbiban * minA l-yumni*
wA-l-iqbāli fA-l-dahru mUṭriqu

(7) R *kasĀ l-dīna wA-l-dunyā nizĀru jalĀbiban * minA l-yumni*
wA-l-īmāni fA-l-amru mŪthaqu

(7) L *kasĀ l-dīna wA-l-dunyā nizĀru jalĀbiban * minA l-yumni*
wA-l-īmāni fA-l-shakku mUghlaqu

Translation:

Introductory description of the ‘tree’ poem:

(xviii) On one line of poetry, I have planted a mighty tree whose branches, when it grows, are metrical,

(xix) and out of one line, I have made many, which yet are not disparate,

(xx) for there are seven on the right and seven on the left, each word of which splits into another line

(xxi) in praise of the Commander of the Faithful, of whom they are more fitting than of any in creation.

(xxii) God keep him for as long as stars may shine and collared doves coo in the woods!¹⁷

‘trunk’:

Nizār has clothed the Faith and the world in robes of success and belief that cannot be torn.¹⁸

¹⁷ Traditional poetic expressions.

¹⁸ Antithesis between faith, *dīn*, and the world, *dunyā*, and chiasmus between faith-belief, *dīn-īmān*, and world-success, *dunyā-yumn*.

'tree':¹⁹

(1) R The imam **has clothed** east and west with wonders of bounty and good fortune; these are brilliant times!²⁰

(1) L His justice **has clothed** the imam in light and splendour;²¹ and lo! the tongue of Time speaks its gratitude.

(2) R He without loving whom there is no faith **has clothed the Faith** in exaltation, and the sword of truth has in truth been loosed.

(2) L He **has clothed the Faith** in an armour of goodness and bounty that shields it against all deviants and renegades.²²

(3) R Al-ʿAzīz **has clothed the Faith and the world** in the robes of his reign, a time to make stones burst into leaf.

(3) L He **has clothed the Faith and the world** in gardens of bliss, making the soil of the meadows of belief bloom.

(4) R Nizār **has clothed the Faith and the world** in divine guidance, making troubled hearts beat high;

(4) L Nizār **has clothed the Faith and the world** in peace, ever-increasing and foreordained.²³

(5) R Nizār **has clothed the Faith and the world in robes** through whose folds the light can be seen gleaming.

(5) L Nizār **has clothed the Faith and the world in robes** of ever-renewed blessing that cannot wear out.

¹⁹ The Arabic word order is verb-object-subject (except in line (1) L where it is verb-subject-object) so that each line begins with the verb *kasā*, 'has clothed'; it has not been possible to follow the word order exactly in the translation of lines 1–3; similar limitations apply to the other three poems translated in this paper.

²⁰ Antithesis between east and west, *sharq* and *gharb*; pun on west, *gharb*, and wonders, *gharāʾib*, and on east, *sharq*, and brilliant, *mushriq*.

²¹ Light, *nūr*: an allusion to neoplatonic Sevener Shiʿi dynastic theology.

²² Bounty is the hallmark of the good ruler in all Arabic panegyric; it stands for his bringing prosperity to the people. Here, because only the Fatimid elite shared the Fatimid caliph's Shiʿi Islam, it is particularly important to emphasise that all his subjects—who included Sunni Muslims, Christians and Jews—benefit from his bounty; this makes him proof against the rival Sunni caliphate of Baghdad.

²³ Rhyme between the last words of the first hemistichs, *hidāyatan* and *salāmātan*, and assonance between the first words of the second hemistichs, *yabītu* and *tazīdu*.

(6) R Nizār has clothed the Faith and the world in robes of success, to the utter undoing of the impious.

(6) L Nizār has clothed the Faith and the world in robes of success and good fortune, before which Fate bows its head.

(7) R Nizār has clothed the Faith and the world in robes of success and belief—this is an accomplished fact.

(7) L Nizār has clothed the Faith and the world in robes of success and belief, beyond all doubt.

When, some two centuries later, al-Jilyānī constructed his ‘tree’, it was in praise of Saladin, the son of a self-made Kurdish condottiere, who had risen to become vizier to the last Fatimid imam before presiding over the ousting of the dynasty and installing himself as ruler of Egypt. Saladin claimed legitimacy as having brought the Fatimid domains back into the Sunni fold. The poem tacitly acknowledges Saladin as the founder, not the inheritor of a regime, declaring that he owes his position to his own exertions and the virtues bestowed on him by God, ‘the Lord of the Throne’ (Qur’an 9:129, 23:86, 27:26). The ‘tree’ shape symbolises the long-standing Arabic verbal trope of the dynastic tree, and seems to be unique among the motifs applied to Saladin by his poets (see [Latiff 2018](#) for an overview of poetic counter-crusading themes and motifs, including those particular to Saladin).

Since Saladin’s name occurs only in the first line leading off from the lower left, my reading starts from the left. There are ten alternating branches, which the line forming the ‘trunk’ of the tree, from which they are read off, seems to cap, and which I have therefore put last; detailed instructions for reading, seemingly supplied by the copyist, are given in Gotha MS Orient. A 2259, f. 33b (see [Bray 2020: 255](#) for a translation). There is self-allusion to the poem’s shape in the ‘trunk’, which refers to Saladin’s gifts to mankind as ‘trees’ (*shajarāt*), in the ‘trunk’ and lines 7 to 10, where the source of the gifts—Saladin himself—is called a stock (*aṣl*), which can also mean root, trunk or guiding principle, and in line 10 R, which wishes long life to their ‘branches’ (*afnān*), perhaps a reference to other members of the Ayyubid family.

The poem is technically more complex than al-Iskandarānī’s. Metrically, the first and second hemistichs have different last feet, a permitted and common variation of the standard metre, those in the second hemistich being one syllable shorter, giving two rhythms per line instead of a single repeated rhythm. In terms of how the ‘trunk’ is read, in lines 3 L and R, the consonantal outline *m n* takes the vowel *a* (*man*, ‘who’); elsewhere it reads *min* (‘of’). Stylistically, the syntax is more demanding and the vocabulary richer, and there is prominent use of polysemy, reflected in my translation. Al-Jilyānī’s ‘tree’ is

also more complex visually than the monochrome print rendition of al-Iskandarānī's 'tree'. The segments that have to be read off from the 'trunk' into each new pair of 'branches' are penned in different colours; this is functional colour-coding. The rhyme-words are also penned in colour; this seems to be purely decorative.²⁴

However, none of the MSS of al-Jilyānī's picture-poems is an autograph,²⁵ and although the colophons of both the Manchester John Rylands and the Paris BnF MSS reproduce the passage in which al-Jilyānī's son claims to have transcribed the contents from what he could find of his father's *Nachlaß*, their contents are not identical, and only the Manchester and the Jerusalem MSS, the former dated 735 (AD 1334), the latter undated, seem possibly to fit within this time frame. The Gotha, Uppsala and Paris MSS can be dated several centuries later on stylistic and circumstantial grounds (Abu Deeb in *al-Jilyānī* 2010: 54–57; summarised by *Bray* 2019: 113). So, just as we have access to al-Iskandarānī's 'tree' only in a modern typographic version, al-Jilyānī's 'tree' is accessible only in later, scribal interpretations. The texts of the poems and the contours of the figures inside which they are written remain fixed in all renderings, because they are dictated by the rules of metre and rhyme, but with no similar Ayyubid artefacts to compare them with, it is difficult to guess how close the calligraphic and artistic styles of the manuscripts are to al-Jilyānī's originals.

Transliteration of Manchester John Rylands Ar. MS 690, ff. 57b–58a (as before, capitals in the Arabic mark metrical stress; bold typeface in Arabic transliteration and English translation of the 'tree' correspond to the elements in the 'trunk' that are progressively repeated in the 'branches'):

'tree':

(1) L **mawĀ**zīnu qīṣṭin min hudAn wa-maṣĀliḥin * bi-kaffay ṣalĀḥi
l-dīni mUntaṣabĀtu

(1) R **mawĀ**ʿiduhŪ najzun wa-sAṭwatuhŪ radan * fa-ḥAsba l-ʿulĀ
ṣawlun lahŪ wa-ṣilĀtu

(2) L **mawĀhibu** ḍĀʿa l-nīlu fl fayadĀnihā * fa-khUṣṣa wa-ʿAmmat
wa-hya mUntasharĀtu

(2) R **mawĀhibu** hUnīta l-mafĀza bi-fAḍlihā * wa hUnīta ʿAwdan
bishruhŪ subuhĀtu

²⁴ The transliteration at Bray (2020) (pl. 14.2) reproduces the colour coding of the MS.

²⁵ The claim made by Tadghūt (2018; see Bray 2020: 249) that the Jerusalem Khālidiyya MS is al-Jilyānī's autograph does not seem to be supported by the digitised version, which has since become available.

- (3) L **mawĀhibu mAn** lā yaṭruqu l-mannu ṣUn‘ahū * wa-lĀ ya‘tarīhi
fī l-nadĀ fatarĀtu
- (3) R **mawĀhibu mAn** ‘alyā’uhū muṭma’Innatun * wa-lḥsānuhū
ṭab‘un lahū wa-ṣifĀtu
- (4) L **mawĀhibu mIn dhī** ‘azmatIn mutayAqqāzin * lahū wathabĀ-
tun fī l-waghĀ wa-thabĀtu
- (4) R **mawĀhibu mIn dhī** ḥikmatIn wa-siyĀsatin * taṭūfu qulūbun
ḥawlahū wa-dhawĀtu
- (5) L **mawĀhibu mIn dhī l-‘arshi** Aḥkama nAẓmahā * wa-lAysa li-
mĀ lamma l-ilĀhu shatĀtu
- (5) R **mawĀhibu mIn dhī l-‘arshi** lAysat bakhīlatan * wa-lĀ hiya
bi-l-idmāni mUktasabĀtu
- (6) L **mawĀhibu mIn dhī l-‘arshi Athbata** rAsmahā * fa-hUnna ‘alĀ
wajhi l-zamĀni simĀtu
- (6) R **mawĀhibu mIn dhī l-‘arshi Athbata** ḥUkmahā * fa-lAm tan-
fihī l-da‘wĀ wa-lĀ l-da‘awĀtu
- (7) L **mawĀhibu mIn dhī l-‘arshi Athbata Aṣlahā** * ka-mĀ
thabatAt fī kaffihī l-barakĀtu
- (7) R **mawĀhibu mIn dhī l-‘arshi Athbata Aṣlahā** * bi-ḥilmin wa-
ba’sin mā lahū nabawĀtu
- (8) L **mawĀhibu mIn dhī l-‘arshi Athbata Aṣlahā** * fa-ṭĀba
l-shadhĀ minhunna wa-l-nafaḥĀtu
- (8) R **mawĀhibu mIn dhī l-‘arshi Athbata Aṣlahā** * fa-ṭĀ‘a ūlū
wuddin lahū wa-‘udĀtu
- (9) L **mawĀhibu mIn dhī l-‘arshi Athbata Aṣlahā** * fa-ṭĀlat bihĀ
āthāruhĀ l-ḥasanĀtu
- (9) R **mawĀhibu mIn dhī l-‘arshi Athbata Aṣlahā** * fa-ṭĀlat wa-lAm
yaqsur bihĀ l-‘azamĀtu

(10) L **mawĀhibu mIn dhī l- ʿarshi Athbata Aṣlahā * fa-ṭĀlat lahĀ**
adhkāruhĀ l-ʿaṭirĀtu

(10) R **mawĀhibu mIn dhī l- ʿarshi Athbata Aṣlahā * fa-ṭĀlat lahĀ**
afnĀnuhĀ l-khaḍirĀtu

‘trunk’:

mawĀhibu mIn dhī l- ʿarshi Athbata Aṣlahā * fa-ṭĀlat lahĀ bayna
l-warĀ shajarĀtu

Translation (adapted from [Bray 2020: 256–57](#)):

‘tree’:

(1) L **Scales** of justice—orthodoxy and the common good—are held aloft in the hands of Saladin;

(1) R His **pledges** are all fulfilled; his onslaught is destruction; his greatness is doubly assured by his ferocity and his benefactions.

(2) L His are **gifts** before which the Nile in flood is nothing; they belong to him alone, whence they spread among all people.

(2) R By virtue of these **gifts**, may you enjoy victory and a return on them heralded by the proclamation of God’s glory!

(3) L They are **the gifts of one whose** deeds are indefatigable, whose generosity is incessant,

(3) R **The gifts of one whose** loftiness is assured, whose beneficence is a natural attribute,

(4) L **The gifts of a man** of firm purpose, vigilant, in war both bold and staunch;

(4) R **The gifts of a man** wise and politic, a winner of hearts and minds.

(5) L These are **gifts** that **the Lord of the Throne** has composed: what God has joined together cannot be put asunder;

(5) R **Gifts** bestowed by **the Lord of the Throne**, neither niggardly nor won by chariness;

(6) L **Gifts whose protocol** has been **ordained by the Lord of the Throne** who bestowed them, they are branded on the forehead of Time;

(6) R **Gifts** against **whose ruling, ordained by the Lord of the Throne**, there is no appeal of any kind.

(7) L **They are gifts whose stock has been set by the Lord of the Throne**, as firmly as the blessings in [Saladin's] hand;

(7) R **They are gifts whose stock has been rooted by the Lord of the Throne** in clemency and undeflected ardour;

(8) L **Gifts from whose stock, set by the Lord of the Throne**, wafts sweetest musk;

(8) R **Gifts whose law, fixed by the Lord of the Throne**, commands friends and enemies alike.

(9) L **Gifts whose law was so fixed by the Lord of the Throne** that its benefits will surely endure;

(9) R **Gifts of stock planted by the Lord of the Throne**, they have grown, and [Saladin's] labours have grown still more.

(10) L **Gifts of stock planted by the Lord of the Throne, long** will be the fragrant litany of their remembrance!

(10) R **Gifts of stock planted by the Lord of the Throne, long** may be the reach of their sheltering green branches!

'trunk':

11. **Gifts of stock planted by the Lord of the Throne, they have grown into trees towering over humankind.**

Al-Jilyānī, a political refugee from Spain, designed his 'tree' as part of a longer public presentation piece to win Saladin's patronage (see [Bray 2019: 107–8](#) for some of al-Jilyānī's

autobiographical allusions to his relations with Saladin). Given our present knowledge of al-Iskandarānī's 'tree', it might seem evident that al-Jilyānī's derives from it technically and is meant as an ideological riposte to it. In that case, to appreciate it, Saladin and his court would have had to be familiar with the Fatimid prototype, either al-Iskandarānī's poem, or a paradigm derived from it or from which it derived. But there is a two-hundred-year gap between al-Iskandarānī and al-Jilyānī and little evidence as yet to fill it. A Hebrew 'tree' poem from Spain by Abraham ibn Ezra (d. ca. 1167) (*Abraham ibn Ezra* 1922), which is reproduced typographically by Higgins (1987) (fig. 2.28) and Ernst (1991) (fig. 299), looks very similar to al-Iskandarānī's 'tree';²⁶ it shows that the visual paradigm not only survived but also travelled; however, this does not prove that the Fatimid ideological paradigm remained part and parcel of it, since the poem, although panegyric, is in praise of a rabbi.

It is fortunate that the 'tree' that al-Jilyānī devised for Saladin exists to complicate the picture of survival and circulation, as the other extant simple 'tree' by al-Jilyānī lacks the ideological charge that suggests a strong link with a Fatimid paradigm. This latter 'tree' was written in praise of one of Saladin's sons, al-Malik al-Ghāzī, who ruled Aleppo from 1186 to 1216. It is mainly composed of variations on the convention whereby a poet uses praise of the patron to boast about his own craftsmanship. Al-Jilyānī refers to his poem once as tree-shaped, in the 'trunk', once as many-branched (line 2 R), three times as a 'brocade' (in the 'trunk' and in lines 11 L and R), and once as a banner (line 2 R), as well as comparing it, conventionally, to jewellery. Although the Jerusalem Khālidiyya and Manchester John Rylands MSS both give instructions on how to read this 'tree', they relate rather to how to read it continuously with the preceding section of the much longer composition of which it is the final element, as does the Uppsala MS, f.99a. Unlike the poem to Saladin, where the order of the lines affects the development of ideas (and which likewise forms the end of a sequence of linked picture and pattern-poems, see Fig. 3), it seems to me that al-Malik al-Ghāzī's 'tree' is not progressive and that the lines can be read in any order, even randomly, though the Uppsala MS says they should be read alternately from left to right. My translation reflects this interpretation. Similarly, although the Khālidiyya MS employs multiple colours and different styles and thicknesses of script in the branches of the tree, they are superfluous to the mechanics of the poem, and are absent from the John Rylands and Uppsala versions.

²⁶ Higgins (1987) (fig. 2.28); Ernst (1991) (fig. 299). Published in tree form with a base, like al-Iskandarānī's tree, as poem no. 125 in *Kovets hokhmat ha-Rav Avraham ibn Ezra* (Collected Works of Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra's Wisdom), ed. David Kahana 1922 (*Abraham ibn Ezra* 1922: 1: 168–9). The poem is mentioned by Schippers (1994: 19), who goes on to describe the shape and summarise the content of a further Hebrew tree poem composed by the Toledan Todros Abulafia (1247–1306). Both of the Hebrew poems are panegyrics of rabbis. I am most grateful to Liran Yadgar for the references to Schippers and Kahana, and for summarising the content, structure and monorhyme scheme of Abraham ibn Ezra's tree poem. I am also very grateful to Omri Livnat of Tel Aviv University for alerting me to his ongoing work on a manuscript of two further, unpublished Hebrew tree poems from thirteenth-century Spain.

Transliteration and translation of MSS Khālidiyya AKDI 1649–238 ff. (1b–2a, unnumbered) and John Rylands 690 ff. 103b–104a (as before, capitals in the Arabic mark metrical stress; bold typeface in Arabic transliteration and English translation of the ‘tree’ correspond to the elements in the ‘trunk’ that are progressively repeated in the ‘branches’);²⁷

‘trunk’:

ra’Aytu ‘ulĀhu mā lahĀ ḥalyun mīthlahā * fa-ṣUghtu lahĀ
mudabbajAn wa-mushAjjarā

‘tree’:

(1) L **ra’Ā** l-malikU l-ghāzī ḥuqŪqan fa-Aqbalat * nufŪsu l-warĀ taf-
dīhi jAhran wa-mUḍmarā

(1) R **rasĀ** amruhŪ bi-l-‘adli wA-mtadda bi l-nadā * wa-Aqbala bi
l-ṣun‘i l-jamīli mu‘Ammarā

(2) L **ra’Ā** l-nāsu mInhu mā aqArra ‘uyūnahum * fa-kUllun bi-mĀ
yaqḍi munĀhu [mubA]shsharā

(2) R **ra’Aynā** lahŪ waṣfan bi-qAwlin mushA‘ ‘abin * fa-Aṣbaḥa
bAndan li-l-fakhĀri [munAshsharā]

(3) L **ra’Aytu** rijĀlan qad ta‘Āzama shA’nuhum * wa-lAm ara mīthla
l-zāhirA l-mulki mAkhhbarā

(3) R **ra’Aytu** nadĀhu l-baḥra yU‘jizu ‘Ābiran * fa-‘Abbartu ‘Anhu fī
l-qarīḍi muḥAbbarā

(4) L **ra’Aytu ‘ulĀhu** bi-l-afĀḍili Ūli‘at * yarĀ birrahUm farḍan wa-
farḍan muqArrarā

(4) R **ra’Aytu ‘ulĀhu** fī -l-‘ulŪmi tawāssa‘at * fa-Abraza Ādāban wa-
sAmtan muḥArrarā

²⁷ The left side of the figure in the John Rylands MS is damaged and partly illegible, as is the right side in the Khālidiyya MS; this reading is a combination of the two. The Uppsala MS ff.99a–98b has minor variants. The John Rylands version is PDF 210 of the digitisation and the Khālidiyya version is PDF 003 in the Hill Manuscript Library digitisation. The modern foliation of both MSS is interrupted in places and, in the case of the Khālidiyya MS, seriously confused. Medieval Arabic MSS are unpaginated. The catchwords that appear on the text pages of the John Rylands MS do not appear on the picture-poem pages.

(5) L **ra'Aytu 'ulĀhu mālikan** ṣafwa rAfdihim * [ʔqulŪban] ta'Āfu
l-wirda flmā takAddarā

(5) R **ra'Aytu 'ulĀhu māḍiyan** ḥadda bA'sihā * li-bĀ'in ta'Addā aw
li-qArnin taṣAddarā

(6) L **ra'Aytu 'ulĀhu mā lahĀ** fa-hwa [...] * yarĀ l-māla Adnā mā
yanīlu wa-Anzarā

(6) R **ra'Aytu 'ulĀhu mā lahĀ** min [ma'Ā]thirin * yubAshshiru bi-l-
mulki l-muqīmi mu'Azzarā

(7) L **ra'Aytu 'ulĀhu mā lahĀ ḥalyun** zīnatan * siwĀ lāmatIn dir'an
wa-ʿAḍban mudkAkkarā

(7) R **ra'Aytu 'ulĀhu mā lahĀ ḥalyun** fAynatan * wa-lĀkin ḥulĀhu
ʿaskarUn lazza ʿAskarā

(8) L **ra'Aytu 'ulĀhu mā lahĀ ḥalyun mīthlhā** * niẓĀma ḥakīmin
li-l-kalĀmi takhAyyarā

(8) R **ra'Aytu 'ulĀhu mā lahĀ ḥalyun mīthlhā** * madīhan
wa-kUllun fī madĀhā taḥAyyarā

(9) L **ra'Aytu 'ulĀhu mā lahĀ ḥalyun mīthlhā** * fa-ṣUghtu
li-dhikrāhā thanĀ'an mu'Atṭarā

(9) R **ra'Aytu 'ulĀhu mā lahĀ ḥalyun mīthlhā** * fa-ṣUghtu
li-ḥusnĀhā ḥulīyyan musAtṭarā

(10) L **ra'Aytu 'ulĀhu mā lahĀ ḥalyun mīthlhā** * fa-ṣUghtu lahĀ
fī waṣfihĀ mā tayAssarā

(10) R **ra'Aytu 'ulĀhu mā lahĀ ḥalyun mīthlhā** * fa-ṣUghtu lahĀ
naẓman yarŪqu mufAssirā

(11) L **ra'Aytu 'ulĀhu mā lahĀ ḥalyun mīthlhā** * fa-ṣUghtu lahĀ
mudabbajAn mutanAwwarā

(11) R **ra'Aytu 'ulĀhu mā lahĀ ḥalyun mīthlhā** * fa-ṣUghtu lahĀ
mudabbajAn yu'jizU l-warā

Translation:

‘trunk’:

I have seen his superiority. Since no adornment can match it, I have fashioned in its honour a ‘brocaded’, tree-shaped poem.²⁸

‘tree’:

(1) L Holy War-waging prince al-Malik al-Ghāzī protects their rights, and all humankind would die for him, publicly or anonymously.

(1) R His rule is anchored in justice and has spread through generosity; it flourishes because of his good deeds.

(2) L The people rejoice at what they **see**; all have heard the good tidings of what his wishes command.

(2) R We **see** him described in many-branched words which are a banner unfurled to glory.

(3) L I have **seen** men that are considered great, but none that I have seen so truly as he, whose royalty is patent.

(3) R **Seeing** that the flow of his generosity cannot be forded, I have afforded it expression in finely-wrought verse.

(4) L I **have seen his superiority**. It is enamoured of supreme virtue, and sees doing good as an incessant duty.

(4) R I **have seen his superiority** extended to learning; he is conspicuous for culture and civility and for pious demeanour.

(5) L I **have seen his superiority**. He has the unmixed suffrage of all [?hearts] that detest troubled waters.

(5) R I **have seen his superiority**. It exceeds all bounds in breadth, height or precedence.

²⁸ Poems are often compared to precious textiles with a complex weave. It is not clear whether ‘brocaded’, which al-Jilyānī applies to his own picture- and pattern-poems, was also a generic term in common use at this time (see Bray 2019: 109).

(6) **L I have seen his superiority for what it is.** He [...] considers wealth the least and paltriest of what he can bestow.

(6) **R I have seen what exploits his superiority achieves,** a happy presage of a long, happy reign.

(7) **L I have seen his superiority, unadorned** save for the armour of the fear it inspires and the sword of a caustic tongue.

(7) **R I have seen his superiority, unadorned** but that his noble attributes are legion, an army.

(8) **L I see his superiority, which no adornment can match,** as resembling the order that a sage gives to choice words.

(8) **R I see his superiority, which no adornment can match,** as resembling a panegyric whose scope astounds everyone.

(9) **L I have seen his superiority. Since no adornment can match it, I have fashioned** a fragrant encomium to commemorate it.

(9) **R I have seen his superiority. Since no adornment can match it, I have fashioned** these well-penned jewels in honour of its beauty.

(10) **L I have seen his superiority. Since no adornment can match it, I have fashioned** as good a description of it as I can!

(10) **R I have seen his superiority. Since no adornment can match it, I have fashioned** this delightful poem to expound it.

(11) **L I have seen his superiority. Since no adornment can match it, I have fashioned** a refulgent 'brocade poem' in its honour.

(11) **R I have seen his superiority. Since no adornment can match it, I have fashioned** in its honour a 'brocade poem' that defies competition.

The fourth and last simple 'tree' poem was also written in praise of a ruler, the ruler of Morocco Sulaymān ibn Muḥammad (r. 1792–1822). Ḥamdūn Ibn al-Ḥājj al-Sulamī, its author, born in the same year as its dedicatee, was his tutor from 1783 and is better known as a religious scholar than as a poet. Whereas al-Iskandarānī's poem for al-ʿAzīz and al-Jilyānī's

for Saladin and his son used conventional motifs appropriate to their dedicatees' circumstances and careers, the amorous images and lyrical register employed here by Ibn al-Ḥājj are symbolic; when the poem was written, Sulaymān was an experienced ruler verging on middle age (see Bray 2020: 261), and was a man of austere religious views to which the poem makes no reference.

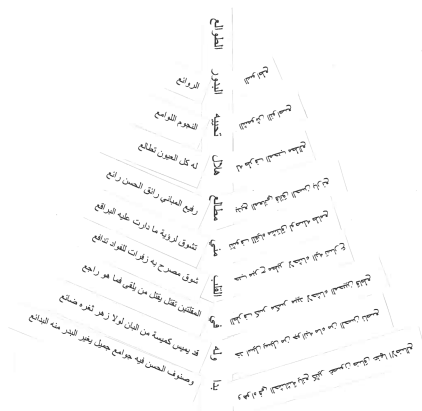


Fig. 2: Ḥamdūn Ibn al-Ḥājj al-Sulamī's poem to the Moroccan sultan Sulaymān ibn Muḥammad (r. 1792–1822), after al-ʿIrāqī (Ḥamdūn Ibn al-Ḥājj al-Sulamī 1995: 549–50). (Al-ʿIrāqī's transcription reproduces only the text, not the 'tree' form of the poem, of which he provides a blurred black and white photograph.)

Transliteration and translation (as before, capitals in the Arabic mark metrical stress; bold typeface in Arabic transliteration and English translation of the 'tree' correspond to the elements in the 'trunk' that are progressively repeated in the 'branches'):

'trunk':

badĀ wa-lahŪ fi l-qalbī minnī maḥĀli'u * hilĀlun tuḥAyyihi l-
budŪru l-ṭawĀli'u

'tree':

(1) R **badĀ wa-hawĀhu** fi l-ḥushĀshati yĀni'u * kathĪru ghuṣŪnin
ḍāqa 'Anhā l-aḍĀli'u

(1) L **badĀ wa-ṣunŪfu** l-ḥusni fīhi jawĀmi'u * jamīlun yughĪru l-
badra minhu l-badĀ'i'u

- (2) R **badĀ wa-lahŪ** khaddun asīlun yasīlu min * jawĀnibihī mĀʿun
minA l-ḥusni nĀṣiʿu
- (2) L **badĀ wa-lahŪ** qaddun yamīsu ka-mīsatin * minA l-bāni lAwlā
zahru thAghrihi ḍĀʿiʿu
- (3) R **badĀ wa-lahŪ** fī l-muqlatAyni taqAttulun * yuqAattilu mAn
yalqā fa-mĀ huwa rĀjiʿu
- (3) L **badĀ wa-lahŪ** fī l-ṭarfi kAsrun mukAssirun * mubīdun
li-Aḥshāʿi l-muḥIbbīna qĀṭiʿu
- (4) R **badĀ wa-lahŪ** fī l-qalbi shAwqun muṣArriḥun * bihī zafarĀ-
tun li-l-fuʿĀdi tudĀfiʿu
- (4) L **badĀ wa-lahŪ** fī l-qalbi ḥUbbun mubAarriḥun * muṭīrun li-
Aḥshāʿin ilAyhī tusĀriʿu
- (5) R **badĀ wa-lahŪ** fī l-qalbi mInnī tashAwwuqun * li-rUʿyati mā
dārat ʿalAyihi l-barĀqiʿu
- (5) L **badĀ wa-lahŪ** fī l-qalbi mInnī tashAwwufun * li-luqyāhu
mUshtāqun li-wāṣlihi ṭĀmiʿu
- (6) R **badĀ wa-lahŪ** fī l-qalbi mInnī maṭĀliʿu * raffʿu l-mabĀnī
rāʿiqU l-ḥusni rĀʿiʿu
- (6) L **badĀ wa-lahŪ** fī l-qalbi mInnī maṭĀliʿu * badīʿu l-maʿānī
fāʿiqU l-ḥusni bĀriʿu
- (7) R **badĀ wa-lahŪ** fī l-qalbi mInnī maṭĀliʿu * hilĀlun lahŪ kullu
l-ʿuyŪni tuṭĀliʿu
- (7) L **badĀ wa-lahŪ** fī l-qalbi mInnī maṭĀliʿu * hilĀlun lahŪ ṭarfu
l-muḥIbbi maṭĀliʿu
- (8) R **badĀ wa-lahŪ** fī l-qalbi mInnī maṭĀliʿu * hilĀlun tuḥAyyihi
l-nujŪmu l-lawĀmiʿu
- (8) L **badĀ wa-lahŪ** fī l-qalbi mInnī maṭĀliʿu * hilĀlun tuḥAyyihi
l-shumŪsu l-nawĀṣiʿu

(9) R *badĀ wa-lahŪ fi l-qalbi mInnī maṭĀli‘u * hilĀlun tuḥAyyihi*
 l-budŪru l-rawĀ‘i‘u

(9) L *badĀ wa-lahŪ fi l-qalbi mInnī maṭĀli‘u * hilĀlun tuḥAyyihi*
 l-budŪru l-sawĀṭi‘u

Translation:

‘trunk’:

**Lo, he comes! He in my heart doth rise, a crescent saluted by
 moons ascending.**²⁹

‘tree’:

(1) R **Lo, he comes!** My passion’s ripe and many-branched; my
 breast cannot contain it.³⁰

(1) L **Lo, he comes!** combining every beauty, so handsome that the
 moon envies his charms.³¹

(2) R **Lo, he comes! he** with smooth cheeks; smoothly flows from
 them beauty of the purest water.³²

(2) L **Lo, he comes! he,** swaying as sways the willow—which lacks
 the blossom of his smile.³³

(3) R **Lo, he comes! He in** his eyes bears slaughter, slaying all whom
 he meets beyond revival.³⁴

(3) L **Lo, he comes! He in** his glance bears languor, to languishing
 lovers’ hearts lethal.³⁵

(4) R **Lo, he comes! He in my heart** leaves longing, expressed by
 gushing heartfelt sighs.

²⁹ Crescent moon = slender, beautiful youth in poetic convention. Casting panegyric in the form of a love poem is another poetic convention. The first and second hemistichs rhyme, marking this as the first line of the poem.

³⁰ Many-branched, *kathīru ghuṣūnin*, alludes to the shape of the poem.

³¹ The moon, *badr* pl. *budūr*, stands for beauty or, metaphorically, a beautiful person. The first as well as the second hemistichs of (1) R and L rhyme, marking them as a starting point for reading the ‘tree’.

³² Pun on smooth, *asil*, and smoothly flowing, *yasilu*; smooth cheeks denote youth.

³³ Pun on swaying, *yamīsu*, and as sways, *mīṣata*.

³⁴ Pun on slaughter, *taqattul*, and slaying, *yuaqtillu*.

³⁵ Pun on languor, *kasr*, and languishing, *mukassir*.

(4) **L Lo, he comes! He in my heart** leaves painful love, fluttering
the breast that yearns toward him.³⁶

(5) **R Lo, he comes! He in my heart doth** set a yearning to behold
his person.

(5) **L Lo, he comes! He in my heart doth** raise desire to meet, eager
hankering for a tryst.³⁷

(6) **R Lo, he comes! He in my heart doth rise,** lofty, lovely and
lustrous.³⁸

(6) **L Lo, he comes! He in my heart doth rise,** witty and surpass-
ingly comely.³⁹

(7) **R Lo, he comes! He in my heart doth rise, a crescent,** cynosure
of every eye.

(7) **L Lo, he comes! He in my heart doth rise, a crescent,** sought
by every lover's glance.

(8) **R Lo, he comes! He in my heart doth rise, a crescent saluted**
by shimmering stars.

(8) **L Lo, he comes! He in my heart doth rise, a crescent saluted**
by radiant suns.

(9) **R Lo, he comes! He in my heart doth rise, a crescent saluted**
by moons in their splendour.

(9) **L Lo, he comes! He in my heart doth rise, a crescent saluted**
by moons in their brilliance.

³⁶ The first hemistichs of (4) R and L rhyme with each other, *muṣarriḥun/mubarrīḥun*.

³⁷ The first hemistichs of (5) R and L alliterate with each other, *tashawwuqun/tashawwufun*.

³⁸ Alliteration between lofty, lovely, lustrous, *rafiʿ, rāʿiq, rāʿiʿ*. From (6) R onwards, all the first hemistichs rhyme with each other completely with a final rhyme in *maṭālīʿu*; as the latter is a non-obligatory rhyme, the repetition is not a defect.

³⁹ Assonance between witty, surpassingly comely, (*badiʿu l-)**maʿānī, fāʿiq, bārīʿ*; near-rhyme between the whole of the two second hemistichs.

Generative poetry

Al-Iskandarānī and Ibn al-Ḥājj's 'trees' are at present accessible only in versions that separate them from their *mise en page*. By contrast, al-Jilyānī's, because they survive within sequences, combining picture and pattern-poetry, can be placed within a tradition of generative poetry, albeit one that has barely begun to be mapped. As has already been mentioned, an early Iraqi discussion of unusual poetic forms analysed by Harb places its prosodic and patterned, if not its pictural, beginnings some three hundred years before al-Jilyānī (see Harb 2017: 138), who employs many of the metrical devices that it illustrates. A detailed typology of the shapes and devices al-Jilyānī uses is wanting, but two techniques are prominent. To guide the reader the letters, syllables or complete words that are to be read off the 'trunks' of simple 'trees' into the 'branches' are either split up and spaced out (as in his second 'tree': *ra-*, *ra'A-*, *ra'Ay-*, *ra'Aytu* etc.) or colour-coded, or both. This technique is extended to more elaborate figures, pictural or geometric (see Fig. 3) and enables the same letter, syllable or word to be used not only at the beginning of a line of verse, as in a simple 'tree', but at any point where it fits metrically. This allows al-Jilyānī to reassemble letters and syllables into new words and entire new lines and poems, usually with a new rhyme and a new metre, and to give them any shape he wants (though he always chooses symmetrical ones). Generating a new poem in a different metre from the base poem is possible because of the relationship between Arabic metres described earlier. Most commonly, al-Jilyānī's base metre will be *ṭawīl* (*fa'ūlun mafā'ilun*, ti-tUm-tum, ti-tUm-tum-tum) and that of the generated poem *basīṭ* (*mustafīlUn fā'ilUn*, tum-tum-ti-tUm, tum-ti-tUm):

(reading from left to right)

ṭawīl: ~ _ _ ~ _ _ _ ~ _ _ ~ _ _ _
basīṭ: _ _ ~ _ _ ~ _ _ _ ~ _ _ ~ _

For the same poems in codex format see PDFs 119–35 (unnumbered folios, sequence interrupted) and 137–45 (unnumbered folios) of the John Rylands MS 690.

The generative potential of colour-coding was pushed to its limits in fifteenth-century Spain, where we find a poem, which its modern editors were able to transcribe only in black and white, that is capable of generating new poems not only in new metres and in classical monorhyme but also in strophic multirhyme (see references in Bray 2019: 111–12).

All these types of verse play metrical, linguistic and visual games with the reader and demand their active collaboration, which al-Jilyānī facilitated by providing transcripts of his

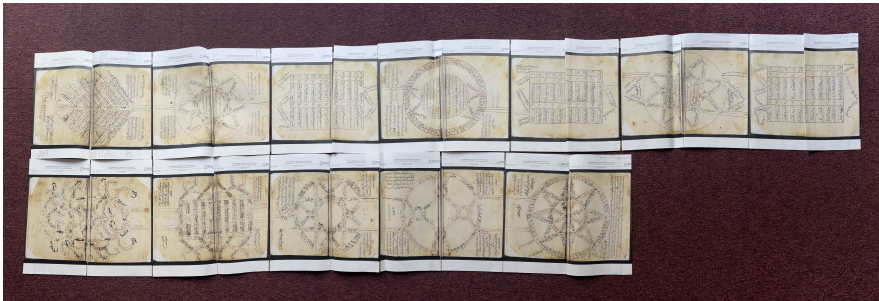


Fig. 3: Al-Jilyānī Gotha Research Library, University of Erfurt, MS Orient A. 2259, ff. 33b–40a and 43b–48a, <urn:nbn:de:urmel-0a4e366c-ab50-4cd2-b1a8-49a915222315> (Public Domain), showing a simple and a complex 'tree' finial and the *mise en page* on scrolls of the poem sequences that they belong to.

more complex pieces.⁴⁰ New approaches in Arabic literary history, which contextualise literary production in the society and politics of its time, have begun to provide a fresh framework for understanding this kind of writing.

Problematics of picture-poetry: (1) literary history

Arabic picture-poetry has had a scanty and a mixed reception over the past millennium. The medieval men of letters who took notice of it and recorded its characteristics were all writing in Syria and contemporary with al-Jilyānī (Yāqūt, d. 1229, who met him) or near-contemporary (Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, d. 11270) and their observations described either what his poetry looked like or what technical terms were applied to it.⁴¹ Ḍiyā' al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr's (d. 1239) reaction to this kind of verse was strongly judgmental; he called it trivial nonsense and identified it with Muslim Spain or North Africa on the basis of one unnamed exponent.⁴²

With the twentieth century came the summing-up of a century of modern literary scholarship, in the form of narrative literary histories, based largely on printed editions and on the criterion of what could be considered normative and therefore significant. Rarities such as picture-poetry were left out. Other criteria were ethical and aesthetic. Both modern and medieval critics have raised moral objections to literature written to flatter the powerful, as much medieval Arabic poetry was, including picture- and pattern-poetry. To twentieth-

⁴⁰ I think that al-Jilyānī originally provided his dedicatees with the transcripts in the form of separate booklets, as 'keys' to reading the poems; later, in the codices into which the poems were copied, poems and transcripts alternated (see Bray 2020: 251). Abu Deeb's edition consists mainly of al-Jilyānī's transcripts.

⁴¹ Yāqūt (1990, *Buldān*, vol. 2, 182, s. n. Jilyāna); Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a (1965, *Uyūn*, 635).

⁴² Ibn al-Athīr Ḍiyā' al-Dīn (1959–1962, *Mathal*, vol. 3, 211).

century scholars, word-games, too, seemed morally and aesthetically unrewarding, and they gave short shrift to the periods when verbal virtuosity was prominent.

By contrast, the twenty-first century has seen a decisive historical turn in pre-modern Arabic literary studies; the question of how artists chose to interact with power has become central, and literary aesthetics are viewed both in the light of their social functions and of the wider intellectual currents of their times. The historical turn extends to issues of origin and diffusion too. The question has long been argued whether non-classical Arabic verse forms originated in Iraq or in Spain, in the classical language or a vernacular. In the twentieth century, investigations were sometimes marked by extreme partisanship. Now, though, how genres interacted and fertilised each other seems more important than questions of primacy or ultimate origin (see e.g. Blankinship 2019: 10 for a contextualisation of the emergence of Arabic strophic poetry). In the particular case of al-Jilyānī's picture-poetry, which is classical but not conventional, the question of whether it was shaped by the Spanish or the Syro-Egyptian milieu involves not only textuality, but also visuality and indeed performance (see below), not to mention its functions as propaganda. Al-Jilyānī's picture-poems are a demonstration writ large that identifying literary forms and explaining their directions of travel will depend on questions of context, including specific content and purpose, as well as of format and technique.

Contextualisation is, in fact, a major problem with picture- and pattern-poetry, for images have often been transmitted or collected and reproduced in print with no context; for example, Bakrī Shaykh Amīn (1972), after claiming the sixteenth century AD as the start date of *tashjīr* (making tree (*shajara*)-shaped poems), goes on to reproduce three 'tree' poems in a standardised modern lithographic script, giving no sources and with almost no explanation. The first, with eleven 'branches' on each side, is dated by him to 1330 (AD 1912) and is by an unidentified 'Shaykh Muḥammad Fahmī'. It is in the metre *basīṭ* and is a prayer to the Prophet for relief from sickness. The second, with nine pairs of branches, is given no date and no author; its metre is *tawīl*; it deviates from the examples analysed in this paper by being asymmetrical in content while remaining symmetrical in form: the first four lines on the left are a traditional poetic opening passage using amatory themes; the 'trunk' and remaining 'branches' are an equally traditional complaint of the times in which the poet lives. The third poem, also in *basīṭ*, of eight paired branches, is undated but attributed to 'a religious scholar of Hama, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Faḥḥām'; it is a lyrical love poem in the same idiom as Ibn al-Ḥājj's 'tree'. Visually, all three poems are laid out (whether by the authors or by the editor is not stated) in the same way as al-Iskandarānī's 'tree', with the caesura marked by a gap in the 'branches', but in addition with a gap between the lower and the topmost 'branches' (Shaykh Amīn 1972: 186–9).

As well as a historical turn in Arabic literary history, there has been a more recent manuscript turn. Given that until the nineteenth century Arabic literature found physical expression only in manuscripts, in current scholarship, thanks to digitisation, the manuscript has begun to displace the printed edition as the source for writing Arabic literary history. The case of picture-poetry shows one of the reasons why this is a necessary development: the examples just given and that of Ibn al-Ḥājj's 'tree' in al-ʿIrāqī's non-figural transcription show how problematic it is to rely on print versions—but the digitisation of al-Jilyānī also shows some of the limitations even of inspecting handwritten sources, whether on-screen or by physical examination.

Problematics of picture-poetry: (2) manuscript traditions

We already know that what we have today are only later scribal interpretations of al-Jilyānī's originals; as a matter of style, this is an aesthetic and art-historical problem, but it is not the only problem. I should like to end by listing some of the things that are components of the al-Jilyānī manuscripts but are not visible. As al-Jilyānī himself tells us, picture scrolls took a long time to plan and were difficult to execute (see [Bray 2020: 259](#)). Economically speaking, they were therefore objects of high luxury, not only because they are lavish with paper and coloured inks, but also because, socially and intellectually, they represent an investment of erudition on the part not only of the poet but also of the reader, who must have a sound grasp of scansion, grammar and sometimes abstruse syntax and vocabulary in order to decode them, even with the help of the transcripts that al-Jilyānī provided. This was conspicuous at the time, but is not evident to the modern eye.

Another invisible problem is how the scrolls work. Neither observers nor his own autobiographical remarks tell us how al-Jilyānī performed or presented his picture-poem scrolls. In a workshop in Oxford in 2015, in a small group, we deciphered the sequence of poems on one long scroll, but our performance was inelegant—we did not know how to manipulate the scroll so as to demonstrate our readings without getting tangled up in the paper as we chased the 'generated' poems up and down their geometric matrices. Perhaps we should have used al-Jilyānī's transcripts and scrolled to and fro gradually, unrolling the whole scroll only once all the parts had been identified in the transcript. Al-Jilyānī himself must have planned a method that impressed and satisfied his Ayyubid patrons, given the continuing demand for his picture-poems recorded in his dating of his compositions and naming of their dedicatees.

Another unsolved problem is the format of the manuscript transmissions. The poems only work as scrolls, but have only been transmitted as codices. The John Rylands MS seems to be of a genuinely early date, but it still postdates al-Jilyānī's son, the scribe of its purported exemplar. With some blips, it does yield continuous texts of a large number of picture-poem sequences, but others suffer from gaps or misplaced folios. Owing perhaps to a later rebinding, the Khālidiyya MS, which seems to be one of the earliest, is incoherent. The Gotha MS, of uncertain but probably later date, yields good continuous texts, but contains far fewer pieces than the John Rylands MS. The probably late Uppsala MS is beautifully written. Like the John Rylands MS, it has fourteen picture-poems of varying length. There are slight differences of sequence between the two MSS, and both have a few misplaced pages, but not the same ones. The Paris MS, which is late and of monstrous dimensions, is a mashup between bits of al-Jilyānī and a copyist trying his hand at devotional talismans using al-Jilyānī as free inspiration (for the scribe's devotional figures cf. Tyser 2023, pls 3.2–6). Since the Manchester, Uppsala and Gotha MSS were copied accurately enough for it to be possible to reconstruct scrolls from them, they presumably reproduce either scrolls or scroll-based exemplars, but scrolls are never mentioned either in the copying notes of manuscripts, or in the contemporary or near-contemporary accounts of al-Jilyānī that we saw earlier, or indeed by al-Jilyānī himself.

This could be explained by the fact that scrolls of a number of kinds were in wide use throughout his lifetime and the following centuries, as were a range of complex text layouts in codices: perhaps both were too obvious to need mentioning at the time, though both are only now beginning to be studied. So why did three of al-Jilyānī's copyists recognise that they were dealing with a picture-text that must be rendered continuously, even in codex form, and two apparently not? All the Jilyānī manuscripts (except the Paris MS) are beautifully written, drawn and coloured, and are evidently skilled work. The answer seems to be that any deficiencies can be put down to the brutal rebinding of good copies (John Rylands, symptomatically, has an upside-down quire). That an understanding of historical examples of generative picture-poetry more complex than the simple 'tree', if not of scroll-formatted sequences, remained alive well into the Arabic print age is shown by a manuscript in Leiden University Library, which includes two picture-poems in a manuscript of a work on prosody copied on commission in Cairo in 1874, in an unaesthetic hand, from a beautiful, probably fourteenth-century North African exemplar.⁴³ The copyist, who is identifiable,⁴⁴ was evidently familiar with, or quickly able to grasp, the working of the

⁴³ A figure from the exemplar, the *khātām*, is photographed in black and white in Bannīs (1979: 96). The corresponding copy is Leiden University Library Cod. Or. 2709 (Ar 2067), Šāliḥ ibn Abī al-Ḥasan 'Alī al-Rundī (d. 1285), *al-Wāfi fī naẓm al-qawāfi*, f. 84b. The copyist uses red ink to mark the 'reading-off' junctures, and dots to stretch the text and form the figure when his handwriting leaves gaps.

⁴⁴ I am most grateful for this and other generously shared information to Dr Arnoud Vrolijk, *Interpres Legati Warneriani*, Curator of Oriental Manuscripts and Rare Books, Special Collections, Leiden University Libraries (email of 9 October 2019).

seal (*khātam*) and star-shaped poems, because his copies have bypassed the extraneous ornament of the exemplar to achieve a fully functional rendering.

Conclusion

The discussions in this article focussed on manuscript and textual issues, but contextual issues are just as important. Previous publications cited in the article show, incompletely because this is research in progress, that al-Jilyānī's picture-poems belong to a long-lived and widespread tradition of Arabic 'generative' pattern-, picture- and puzzle-poetry and indeed -prose, the latter not mentioned in this article (see Bray 2019: 110, 111–12). Their antecedents, signalled by Ḥusayn and Harb, go back some centuries earlier, and persisted in Middle Eastern manuscript cultures until the nineteenth and at least the early twentieth centuries, alongside print, introduced commercially from the 1830s. How widely these genres were recognised and appreciated in Arabic at different times and in different places across the Middle East is a question for further research. So too is the relation of Arabic examples, and examples which combine Arabic with other languages (see Bray 2019: 112), to developments in other languages, and in some cases scripts, across the Ottoman Empire and points west, and across Persia, India and points east. The political function of the genre as elite panegyric seems originally to have been its *raison d'être*, and its weight and significance in that function, which lasted into the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, also demand further investigation. The late examples of 'tree' poems examined in this article do not seem to have any political purpose, however, but to have had other cultural functions on lower social levels, and this too calls for research into their *Sitz im Leben*. The most recent development represents a change of both purpose and medium: it is the creative influence, mentioned briefly at the start of this article, of Arabic picture-poetry on politically subversive print and digital multimedia art.

Arabic picture-poetry belongs to several disciplines: to literary history, art history, and to social and political history. As a hybrid, its study had not been integrated into any of these fields, and as a literary form, it has met with a mixed critical reception from both medieval and modern critics. As performative artifacts, al-Jilyānī's scrolls exploited the possibilities offered by manuscript culture in a unique way, but lost their performative function in the course of transmission through being transformed into codices. It is only with photography and above all digitisation that it has become possible to reconstitute this particular manuscript medium and begin to understand how it worked.

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