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The Assyrian Heroic Epic Of Qa ĩne Gabbara: A Modern Poem In The Ancient Bardic Tradition

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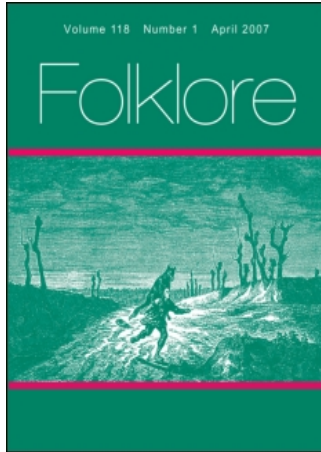
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TOPICS, NOTES AND COMMENTS

As contributions to this section, the Editors welcome comment and debate on topical issues or on recent articles or reviews appearing in the journal. Shorter accessibly written items of general interest, reports on work in progress, notes and queries are all also welcome.

The Assyrian Heroic Epic of *Qaṭīne Gabbara*: A Modern Poem in the Ancient Bardic Tradition

Sargon Donabed

Abstract

This work discusses a modern Assyrian epic, *Qaṭīne Gabbara*, in both its oral and written traditions, and examines its importance in marking continuity in culture, traditions and language. Building on an earlier study by Younan Hozaya, this essay shows how *Qaṭīne Gabbara* fits within the genre of heroic epic, thereby bringing new light to a vastly overlooked and understudied Assyrian cultural tradition.

Introduction

The poetic epic, or *hūmasa*, entitled *Qaṭīne Gabbara* (“Qaṭīne the Great”) was composed over many years in the mid-twentieth century by the musician and poet William Daniel (1903–88). [1] Daniel’s work, written in three volumes containing approximately six thousand lines of verse, is the definitive epic for contemporary Assyrians, just as the tale of *Gilgamesh* fills that role for their ancient ancestors. Its importance for modern scholarship lies in its originality as a literary work, by a trained artist and poet, based on folk narratives of the Assyrians in northern Mesopotamia. The oral sources for the epic stem from Assyrian folk traditions in the mountainous region of Hakkari (prior to World War I), the plains of Nineveh and the Urmi region in today’s south-eastern Turkey, northern Iraq and north-western Iraq, respectively. The tales are still well known in many villages in northern Iraq, and are not restricted to any specific age group: it is common to find both schoolchildren and the elderly reciting them.

This modern heroic epic is vital to our understanding of both the culture and values of the Assyrians from their own perspective. Indeed, it also serves as a treasury of the modern Assyrian language, which has consistently been ranked less important than the classical or liturgical language, Syriac, in the eyes of scholarship.

The aims of this essay are: to set out the reasons why *Qaṭīne Gabbara* may be considered a true heroic epic; to explore the place of the epic genre in Assyrian poetry; and, finally, to demonstrate the importance of this modern Assyrian literary folk epic. Special attention will be paid to the work of Younan Hozaya and

his particular insight into a folktale that is both ancient and modern. It is my hope that this article will prompt a more detailed discussion of modern poetry and its importance to, and influence over, an evolving Assyrian culture.

In the first section, I will discuss the heroic epic in general, and illustrate the features that *Qaṭīne Gabbara* shares with the heroic epic as a genre. The second section will examine *Qaṭīne Gabbara*'s structure and poetic elements, its commonalities with "classical" Syriac poetry, and the combination of literary and folk sub-genres. The final section considers the mutual influence of the celebrated poet and the "unsung bard," as we shall call the less famous singer of traditional folk epics, and looks at the subtle and pronounced variation between the literary and oral versions of the story of the hero Qaṭīne.

Qaṭīne Gabbara and the Heroic Epic Genre

The first question to be addressed is whether or not *Qaṭīne Gabbara* fits into the category of epic or heroic poetry, or perhaps both, if they are considered the same genre (Johns-Putra 2006, 12). The epic remains a broadly defined genre of poetry, and one of the major forms of narrative literature. It retells in a continuous narrative the life and works of a heroic or mythological person or group of people (Jackson 1994, xiii–xv).

It has been said that the earliest epics, sometimes called "primary" or "original" epics, were shaped from the legends of an age when a nation was conquering and expanding (De Vries 1963, 194–209; Maier 2002, 7). Works such as the Sumerian/Assyrio-Babylonian *Gilgamesh*, the Indian *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and the Germanic *Nibelungenlied* are well-known examples of this "folk epic" genre. Yet the definition of the epic genre itself continues to be debated (Johns-Putra 2006, 12–13; Maier 2002, 4–7), and John Maier remarked, with good reason, that the "Western epic tradition includes as much diversity as conformity to rules of genre" (Maier 2002, 41).

The epic, which makes great demands on a poet's knowledge and skill, is arguably the most ambitious of poetic forms. The earliest recorded heroic epics (primary or folk epics) may have evolved from legend and myth, and yet, despite their wide geographical range, their core principles seem to be consistent. The circumstances reflected in the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are much the same as those of the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* or the Irish stories of Cú Chulainn (Wolff 1987). As Joseph Campbell wrote on numerous occasions, all cultures inherently share the major aspects of the *mythos* that governs the ideals behind such tales (Campbell 1990, 3; see also Ó Coileáin 1978, 183).

But there are also later literary or secondary epics, most notably Virgil's *Aeneid* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Undoubtedly, the problem of distinguishing the literary from the folk epic lies mainly in the difficulty of deciding which elements are traditional and which are attributable to the author's embellishment.

The William Daniel literary version of *Qaṭīne Gabbara* retains folk qualities that are manifest in the oral tales that continue to be told among Assyrians today. There seems little doubt that these folk tales are a manifestation of a collective consciousness that created the majority of the stories. Yet, it is plain that Daniel's personal influence has helped to make it a hybrid. Whether or not it can be

considered a true “folk epic” or simply a “literary epic” is questionable and open to debate.

Comparative analysis using C. M. Bowra’s definition of the “heroic epic” enables us to classify the work in question without becoming overinvolved in semantic arguments. In essence, “... heroic poetry may be concerned with any action in which a man stakes his life on his ideal of what he ought to be” (Bowra 1952, 48). *Qaṭīne Gabbara* certainly does this.

Added ambiguity has been generated, however, by authors wishing to further categorise this genre by distinguishing the heroic epic from the epic poem. John Clark states:

Poets of heroic epic have in a sense always been with us, but their productions belong to many stages of poetical development, beginning from the untutored poem of thin but sometimes nervous matter, and reaching to the poem of great technical skill and poetical decoration (Clark 1973, 6).

Clark draws a simple but firm distinction between the heroic epic and the epic poem, focusing on the technical superiority of the latter: “Heroic epic is the *sine qua non* of epic poetry. The poet of the first is a builder, the poet of the second, a master-builder” (Clark 1973, 7). Both the length of the poem and the complexity of the story have much to do with this differential classification, which can be useful in some instances. Perhaps such a distinction can be made between a “heroic poem” and a “heroic epic.” Leaving aside this specific debate, we can say that *Qaṭīne Gabbara* is simply a “heroic epic,” as it displays numerous characteristic features of the genre.

Like any other literary genre, the heroic epic has certain defining elements. To be classed as such, a poem should generally contain the following fundamentals (De Vries 1963, 211–17; Oinas 1978, 5):

1. A hero who embodies national, cultural or religious ideals, and upon whose actions the fate of his people depends to some degree.
2. A course of action in which the hero performs great and complex deeds.
3. The intervention and recognition of divine or mystical powers.
4. A concern with eternal human problems.
5. An elaborate poetic style.

The specific characteristics of the hero or heroine himself or herself closely match these defining qualities of the heroic epic poem. In other words, there is also a formula for fashioning a hero. For Jan De Vries, the classic definition of a hero was epitomised in the statement of Glaucus in the *Iliad*: “My father Hippolochus sent me to Troy with the instruction always to be brave and surpass all others and not to disgrace the ancestors” (Homer, *Iliad*, Book vi, lines 207–9, cited by De Vries 1963, 180).

One can further improve this by adding the ideals of honour and loyalty, and, at some major juncture of the epic, the wisdom of compassion, learned typically through a selfless act. To be classed as a heroic epic, *Qaṭīne Gabbara* should, in theory, contain some if not all of the aforementioned fundamental elements, and it should also be particularly concerned with the formation and traits of the hero. Accordingly, the following heroic epic features are found in the passages of Daniel’s *Qaṭīne* quoted below, with my own English translations:

1. *Qaṭīne*'s almost "super hero" status, exemplified by his strength and ability to wield a mighty shield, as seen in the following lines:

سَمَحًا لِيَهْنَقًا، وَشَقًا حَمًا، وَشَقًا دَلَمًا لِيَهْنَقًا،
 لِيَهْنَقًا لِيَهْنَقًا، لِيَهْنَقًا لِيَهْنَقًا، لِيَهْنَقًا لِيَهْنَقًا
 (Daniel 1961, vol. I, 65, lines 261–2).

[Five of the most powerful men in the region,
 Were unable to move it from the ground but a fraction.]

2. "The Great Deed:" Battling Qorezmanko the Muslim, or facing the demon Shidda or Lilith, and saving his people:

دَلَمًا لِيَهْنَقًا، دَلَمًا لِيَهْنَقًا، دَلَمًا لِيَهْنَقًا،
 دَلَمًا لِيَهْنَقًا، دَلَمًا لِيَهْنَقًا، دَلَمًا لِيَهْنَقًا
 (Daniel 1961, vol. II, 43, lines 273–4).

[The monster's spirit trembled and her foundation shook
 As if the voice said, her days were numbered.]

3. *Qaṭīne*'s constant concern with honour, righteousness and bravery in the face of fearsome obstacles:

لِيَهْنَقًا، دَلَمًا لِيَهْنَقًا،
 لِيَهْنَقًا، دَلَمًا لِيَهْنَقًا،
 لِيَهْنَقًا، دَلَمًا لِيَهْنَقًا،
 لِيَهْنَقًا، دَلَمًا لِيَهْنَقًا،
 [2]، لِيَهْنَقًا، دَلَمًا لِيَهْنَقًا،
 دَلَمًا لِيَهْنَقًا، دَلَمًا لِيَهْنَقًا،

(Daniel 1961, vol. I, 62, lines 227–32).

[Neither the lands without water,
 Nor the fires of the desert,
 Not the frightful mountains,
 Not the existence of demons,
 Or the burden of the task
 Will ever tire my soul.]

4. Complex poetic style, throughout *Qaṭīne Gabbara*.

Furthermore, it is evident that the qualities themselves frequently overlap. For instance, defeating the monster is essential to assure the continuity and prosperity of the Assyrian people.

In the realm of research on this genre, Younan Hozaya's work, originally published in Assyrian, is perhaps the quintessential study of *Qaṭīne* as an epic. The following synopsis of the epic's structure is borrowed from his study (Hozaya 1996, 73). I have taken aspects of his schema and will give some specific examples from the epic itself for the sake of comparison. In addition to listing the aforementioned "heroic epic" qualities or fundamental elements, Hozaya divides the epic into three sections in order to simplify and reveal the foundation and core principles of *Qaṭīne Gabbara*:

1. Beginning—What are the sources for the epic? (The folk tales.)
2. Prime objective—Why an epic? (To tell a situation and offer hope.)

3. Course and process. (Including building a hero, constructing a situation and teaching a moral.)

Undoubtedly, Hozaya's division provides for a concise overview of the poem's composition, and his parameters allow us to see the literary epic in the light of its initial objectives.

Yet we must be careful to distinguish the elements of this literary or written epic from those of the folktale version of the epic circulating in oral tradition. According to Hozaya, the oral version of the story of Qaṭīne contains "three threads" or distinctive themes with which the tale is primarily concerned, namely: Ethics, Possessions and Religion. I have used Hozaya's divisions and discussed them in more detail while incorporating my own distinctions and comments. Generally, although I would agree with Hozaya's interpretations, I prefer to classify these three consecutive thematic sections of the story simply as the First, Second and Final Battles in a story with a typically tripartite structure about a super-hero fighting to protect his people from three different invasive forces.

- *Ethics.* Hozaya considers that the ethical concerns of the poem are probably most apparent in the conflict surrounding Awanis the Armenian and Qaṭīne. Here, Hozaya sees a clear correspondence with the stories many Armenians tell of Queen Shamiram the Assyrian, a mythical figure in Mediterranean and Near-Eastern culture. The ancient Greek historian Diodorus Siculus referred to her as Semiramis, and she has often been identified with Sammu-ramat, wife of Šamši Adad V who ruled Assyria from 824 to 811 B.C.E. (Leick 1999, 145; Diodorus Siculus 2000, book III, ch. 1). The legend of Shamiram and Ara "the beautiful" is well documented among Armenians and certainly stems from Urartian history. Many of these Armenian stories are less than favourable to Shamiram's womanly dignity, thus making honour a core topic. More simply, I would call this ethical conflict the First Battle or First Invasion. There is little doubt that the section is concerned with an affront to Assyrian dignity as well as an assumption that, despite rivalries, friends should recall and rekindle their camaraderie.
- *Possessions.* Qaṭīne has his second major battle with Qorezmanko the Muslim. Hozaya interprets this villain as a symbolic figure representing the invader(s) of Assyrian lands, from the north and east, namely the Mongols and Kurds (Hozaya 1996, 80). Conceivably, since these peoples were semi-nomadic, much of their material possessions, and indeed cultural property (land, traditions, music, and so on), were "appropriated" from the Assyrians of the region, and, in essence, Qaṭīne was protecting the "possessions" of his people. Here, although I concur with Hozaya's interpretation, I prefer to place this stage of the story and its thematic concerns under the heading of the Second Battle or Second Invasion, the battle against the invasion of both physical and cultural territory. It is obvious that the folktale focuses on Qaṭīne's defence of his people and his battle with the supreme villain archetype for recompense. He becomes vengeance incarnate who seeks to end his people's suffering, ultimately justified in his actions.
- *Religion/Belief System.* The invasion from the south, as Hozaya terms it, is the concluding event, the final piercing of the Assyrian people and culture, and it centres on how Qaṭīne wrestles with this predicament and which aggressor he must fight as the archetype of the final invasion. In my own terminology, this is

the Third Battle or Third Invasion, and it indeed relates to beliefs and religion. This concerns Islam's entrance into a Christian world in what is seen as an attempt to usurp the religious beliefs of the hero's people. The bard portrays this affair as an exceedingly spiritual invasion.

Next, Hozaya lists three thematic categories that are prominent in the written version as opposed to the oral versions. These are: Assyrianism, Christianity, and Other Treasures.

- *Assyrianism*. This is constantly alluded to throughout Daniel's epic, as illustrated in the following lines referring to an Assyrian nation in terms consistent with nineteenth-century and twentieth-century political ideas about nation-states:

ܠܐ ܡܢ ܠܒܐ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ
ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ
ܠܐ ܡܢ ܠܒܐ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ
ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ
(Daniel 1961, vol. I, 66, lines 277–80)

[It was his heart armoured with suffering,
That his nation for centuries had endured,
It was spirit equipped with resolve;
A holy determination to struggle for the nation (My translation).]

- *Christianity*. This seems an appropriate title, although "Salvation" or "Redemption" may be equally appropriate. Certain passages of the literary epic reflect an essentially Christian or religious spirit, and have much in common with prophecies about the coming of a saviour, the one who, it is foretold, would come to save the people. One instance occurs in the stanza:

ܐܝܬܐ ܠܐ ܡܢ ܠܒܐ ܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ
ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ
(Daniel 1961, vol. I, 65, lines 269–70)

[Are you not the one of whom our books have prophesied,
That shall come to free our boys and girls? (Warda and Odisho 2000, 18).]

- *Other Treasures*. This third category of what Hozaya sees as the written version's distinctive aspects includes: "responsibility," "growth," "union" and "resolve" (a strong will), "heritage" and "sacrifice." I have termed this section *The Warrior's Journey*, as these are all attributes or struggles of the heroic warrior, exemplified in the following stanza:

ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ
ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ
ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ
ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ
(Warda and Odisho 2000, 18)

[I will ascend the mountain of miseries
Even if embedded with razors
From before my sword, spawn of lightning,
The monster cannot flee (My translation).]

It is clear that Daniel is attempting to illustrate the basic individual elements of heroism and tailor it to his own modern understanding and desire for an "Assyrian Hero." However, as discussed earlier, these ideals are entirely connected to the oral versions and are mere extensions of the basic fundamental ideas in the folk epic. This leads us to the second part of our discussion, namely the structure and poetic elements of the poem and the issue of other influences.

Structure and Poetic Elements

What influence, then, did both the "Syriac" style of poetry and that of the Sumero-Akkadian epics have on the genre of modern Assyrian heroic poetry? I will give a brief background of the styles of so-called Syriac poetry that have continued to the modern era in the writings of such poets as the late poet and Syrian Orthodox Bishop Youhanon Dolabani of Mardin, and Abdel Messiah Nu'aman of Qarabash, who wrote in the "classical" or "liturgical" language.

Of the various types of what is termed Syriac Poetry, the two most well known are the liturgical hymns or *madrashé*, which are lyrical in nature, and metric homilies or *memre*, which are said to be closer to the epic genre. Assyrians prior to the ninth century composed poetry in a variety of different metre and strophe lengths, and also arranged acrostic poems.

A fixed number of syllables per line of verse forms the core structure of classical Syriac metre. Verse lines of all lengths from two to twelve syllables are known, but the metres most used in hymnody are: dodecasyllabic verse formed of three equal groups of syllables; heptasyllabic verse formed of two groups of either four plus three syllables, or three plus four; and pentasyllabic verse also formed of two groups, usually either two plus three, or three plus two.

The oral version of *Qaṭīne Gabbara* follows a syllabic pattern but slightly skewed from previous genres. The lines usually follow the rhythm of seven plus eight, or eight plus seven, or eight plus eight syllables per line, and each line is separated into two segments. Rhyme is sometimes of concern, but may take a slightly secondary role to counted syllables. By contrast, the written version composed by Daniel is significantly more infused with rhyme. The rhyming of *miye* ("water") with *beriye* ("steppe"), and *atra* ("country") with *netra* ("a bit"), are typical traits of Daniel's lyric voice.

Although the various genres of ancient and medieval Assyrian poetry are well documented in academic studies, scholarship has completely neglected the modern minstrel, the bard and the singer of traditional poetry. Few Assyrian heroic epic ballads have survived to the modern day in written sources. But it was a collection of oral folktales that gave birth to the greatest of these, *Qaṭīne Gabbara*.

The oral nature of this traditional literature means that we must base our study on the use of the Assyrian language. Modern Assyrian, with all its various dialects, is the language that has evolved from one or more tongues spoken in the confines of Northern Mesopotamia (ancient Assyria). It thus contains elements of the language scholars refer to as Akkadian, but has more characteristics in common with what scholars call Imperial (Assyrian) Aramaic. It should be noted, however, that the naming of the language spoken by the Assyrians is anything but precise. The eastern Assyrians (Bohtan, Hakkari, Nineveh Plains, Urmia) and

western Assyrians (Tur Abdin, Mardin, Amid/Diarbekir), refer to their spoken language as *sureth/surayt* (ܣܘܪܝܬ). Scholars, on the other hand, often refer to the language of the Assyrians as “neo-Aramaic” or “neo-Syriac,” but both of these terms are imprecise and misleading. “Neo-” as a prefix seems genuinely odd when referring to a language whose beginnings are obscure but certainly stretch back several millennia. “Aramaic” itself is problematic; as Simo Parpola has stated: “This was not the language spoken by ethnic Arameans but a creation of the [Assyrian] Empire . . .” (Parpola 2004, 9). This does not diminish the Aramaic or Syriac character of the language of the Assyrians, but rather names it after the most common denominator. Since Aramaic was spoken by Jews (and is still today in some regions), Persians, Arabs and various other ethnic groups, we must be explicit about which form we are discussing. Given that scholarship is inconsistent in its naming of the language of the Assyrians, it is more precise and better suited to the purposes of this essay to refer to it by its cultural character, Assyrian.

The confusion surrounding the naming of the language is matched by ambiguity concerning the word “poetry,” which, as Pereira has pointed out in his *Studies in Aramaic Poetry*, can refer to various different genres and cultural expressions:

The notions “Aramaic” and “poetry” have multiple meanings. While one could maintain that there is only one Aramaic language, it does encompass several forms and dialects—many of which have their own poetry. Moreover, what is called “poetry,” one can distinguish between several forms and genres (Pereira 1997, 3).

Moreover, since modern Assyrian poetry has not received significant academic attention, there is little direct source information on the subject, requiring us to step outside the realm of Assyrian studies and rely on comparisons with the literature of other language groups. Celtic literature, for example, like Assyrian, combines both oral and written texts, has a strong bardic tradition (from ancient to pre-modern), and presents significant linguistic diversity (Ó Coileáin 1978, 174–80).

Modern Assyrian poetry is part of the evolutionary scheme beginning with Sumerian and Akkadian literature and poetry. The epic of Gilgamesh, perhaps the best known of all heroic epics and originally in the Sumerian language, was written down in cuneiform characters on clay tablets found at Nippúr in Mesopotamia and dates back to around 2000 B.C.E. The standard version is based on the twelve-tablet Akkadian rendition of the poem found among the twenty-five thousand tablets in the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (668–27 B.C.E.) at Nineveh. Unquestionably, it has made a lasting impact on all poetic genres in Mesopotamian literature.

The ancient period of poetic literature is well documented, as is the Christian period. The advent of so-called Christian Aramaic or Syriac poetry is quite well evidenced and owes much of its form to Bardaisan of Edessa (154–222 C.E.). This Assyrian philosopher and court poet is chiefly accredited with the *madrashé* style.

This style is perhaps best illustrated in the writings of Ephrem Suryōyō or Ephrem the (As)syrian (fourth century C.E.), who is sometimes considered the greatest poet in the Syriac language. Ephrem’s work is regarded as highly

"sophisticated in form and content," and it is evident that he drew on earlier Mesopotamian models (Pereira 1997, 110). Certainly, Ephrem built solidly on the Bardaisanite form, which, in turn, was firmly constructed on the foundations of Assyrian/Babylonian tradition.

Despite the classical style of writing, the oral style of poetic singing is well attested in northern Mesopotamia. Perhaps the two best known genres among the Assyrians are the *lilyānā* (possibly: "it is not I"), which are sung by women, and the men's songs known as *rāwē* ("to be satiated, to be drunk, elated," and, by extension, "to fall in love" by association with the giddiness and euphoria of intoxication; Benjamin 1998, 9). The common Assyrian term *zammārē* and the Kurdish term *dengbêž* for singers or bards are generally used in these regions, respectively. The Yezidi style is known as *qewl* and is of a more strictly religious nature.

During his visit to northern Mesopotamia in 1870, philologist Albert Socin visited the Dominican monastery close to the village of Mar Yaḡo, where he met *Shamasha* (Deacon) Dawid Semya (David the Blind). *Shamasha* Dawid is perhaps the most famous bard in modern Assyrian history. His forte was the *dorektā*, a genre of song that, although certainly influenced by liturgical hymnody and religious vocabulary, is nevertheless related to the epic genre and indeed can be classed as a sub-genre of the epic (Murre-van den Berg 1998, 499–515; Mengozzi 2002, 67–9). While Dawid Semya is the most well-known practitioner of this genre, the best known authors of *dorektā* were Joseph of Telkepe and Israel of Alqosh in the seventeenth century (Mengozzi 2002, 85–7). Interestingly, Joseph of Telkepe's work was heavily influenced by the then current persecution of Christians by the ruling powers, a factor reminiscent of certain themes that appear in *Qaṭīne Gabbara*.

Mutual Influence: The Unsung Bard and the Celebrated Poet

The *Qaṭīne Gabbara* of William Daniel was strongly influenced by modern Assyrianism, which we must distinguish from the Assyrian cultural consciousness or collective folk memory that pervades the songs of the unsung bard, the singer of traditional stories who rarely becomes famous. Certainly, the folk stories are permeated with Assyrian cultural and religious ideals, but these are quite distinct from what we find in Daniel's work, which has more affinity with the nineteenth-century and twentieth-century Assyrianism of, among others, Ashur Yusef and David Barsum Perley of Harput, Naum Elias Faik of Amid/Diārbekir, and Fraidon Owrahēm Athuraya of Urmia. As discussed earlier, this Assyrianism has more to do with modern political ideas than with Assyrian collective tradition. And it is also evident that Daniel's work is unquestionably more artistic, sophisticated and intellectual in nature than the folk stories on which he based his epic.

The stories of *Qaṭīne* in the oral tradition display the variability typical of oral narratives and differ slightly from one another. As Hozaya has shown, three different introductions or beginnings are known for the oral or bardic version (Hozaya 1996, 77). Two of these are quoted here from Hozaya's transcription of the Assyrian originals, with my own translations into English.

The *Lilith* demon mentioned in these verses was also referred to in the Bible (Isaiah 34:14), and was certainly borrowed from ancient Assyria and Babylonia. These demons were probably night demons, both male (*lilû*) and female (*lilitu*), and they were associated with deserts; they were mentioned in magical texts and were known throughout Mesopotamia and beyond (Black and Green 1992, 118). It has been suggested that *Lilith* may be identified with the demon *ki-sikil-lil-la-ke* mentioned at the beginning of *Gilgamesh*. In the stories of Qaṭīne, Lilith is both the archetype of evil and the actual demon itself. The references to this mythological figure serve as a good example of the cultural continuity from the ancient Assyrians to their modern descendents that pervades the epic.

The evidence shown above seems to indicate the “epic” quality of *Qaṭīne Gabbara*. Since the oral folktales of the Assyrians influenced William Daniel in his writing of his *magnum opus*, we may in turn call this piece a true literary heroic epic. It may be argued that Daniel added a high level of Assyrianism to the folktales. Although this is certainly a correct assumption, it can be retorted that Daniel simply elaborated on existing cultural features of the poetry to fit Assyrian philosophical thought of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Daniel also employed common traditional literary devices as well as previously unseen, innovative stylistic devices; this is even truer of the roving minstrels and unsung bards whose songs inspired the famous poet.

The traditional stories of *Qaṭīne* have also given rise to local aetiological legends about topographical features of the Assyrian region, and customs associated with the legends. One such legend, well known among the Assyrians, states that while “leaping” from mountain to mountain, *Qaṭīne* leapt so powerfully into a rock face that his hand became stuck. Although he pried his hand loose, his ring remained embedded in the stone and, thus, the legend tells how a particular landmark came into being, most notably in the area in northern Iraq known as *Qaṭīne’s Ring*. This legend has also given rise to many local myths about the extraordinary magic present in the “ring.” “*Qaṭīne’s Ring*” is just one of the many legends that have become attached to the physical landscape of the region. Whether the shape of the rock formation inspired the story or the story existed already and became associated with the rock formation, remains unknown. But there is no doubt that the collective memory of the account has become part and parcel of northern Mesopotamian lore.

I must reiterate that this corpus of folktales is still told today by Assyrians throughout their respective homelands in the Middle East, thereby making it a living folk tradition. *Qaṭīne Gabbara* is also the most comprehensive modern Assyrian epic that spans both oral and literary traditions. Indeed, this work’s main importance to Assyrian studies and Middle Eastern literature lies in the fact that it demonstrates the existence, and continuing vitality, of the Assyrian heroic epic genre that scholarship had hitherto ignored.

Conclusion

We must acknowledge here that the bardic tradition not only survived but flourishes even now within this community, and yet it is vastly understudied and highly misunderstood. It is regrettable that the oral traditions of the Assyrians, such as the song genres *rāwē*, *lilyānā*, *dorekta* (or *dorekyāta*) and the heroic epic genre, *hūmasa*, are lacunas in scholarly studies of Middle Eastern literature. Much more extensive research must be undertaken. Also, we can see that the genre of the heroic epic is varied and distinct from other known genres of Assyrian poetry, although it shares commonalities with other poetic forms and genres, and thus must be studied in conjunction with these. Finally, we can surmise that these people indeed retained many of their ancient customs, traditions and ideas by passing them on through oral traditions.

It is also unfortunate that the assumption still prevails in some scholarly circles that cultures whose literature is predominantly oral are somehow less “advanced” and their literature less philosophical and technically sophisticated than that of

cultures more reliant on the written word. This mindset would dismiss the oral literature of the Celts, Maori, Lakota, Navajo and others, deeming them unequal to the written traditions of the Greeks, Romans and so on. It also grossly underestimates the technical accomplishment, philosophical quality, artistic value and far-reaching cultural influence of epics such as *Qaṭīne Gabbara*.

It is my hope, therefore, that the balance may be redressed by future research to shed further light on the epic poetry of Assyrian oral tradition, involving both the comparative study of other bardic traditions and the detailed analysis of the processes of oral transmission of history, philosophy, music and other forms of cultural expression.

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This article is dedicated to my teacher of Assyrian poetry and oral presentation, *Malfono* Ninos Aho. His work both influenced a generation of writers, musicians, and artists, as well as furthered the evolution of the modern Assyrian poem and its oral recitation. It is my hope to pen a follow-up article on his folk and intellectual poetry both past and current, with the aim of broadening knowledge of the genre. Many thanks to Mr Nicholas Al Jeloo for his research in the region (especially on the legend of the Ring), to Mr Nineb Lamassu of the Firodil Institute and Mr Mikhael Benjamin of the Nineveh Centre for Research and Development for their valued input and uncanny sense of detail with respect to oral tradition and the folklore of the Assyrians. Also to Shamiran Mako of the Council for Assyrian Research and Development for very insightful suggestions and helping me keep things in perspective.

Notes

- [1] The title of the hero, Qaṭīne Gabbara ("Qaṭīne the Great"), is a standard play on words. The old usage of the term ܩܬܝܢܐ, not used in later Syriac, is similar to that of Hebrew ܩܬܝܢܐ ("to be small or insignificant"). *Hūmasa* derives from the root ܡܫܥܐ, which retains the meaning "to muse upon." This is a cultural Assyrian word seemingly not attested in classical Syriac. The modern definition is mentioned in Yoab Benjamin's (unpublished) Modern East-Assyrian dictionary currently being completed and edited as a project of the Assyrian Academic Society.
- [2] Since the users of the Urmi dialect of modern Assyrian do not produce the sound 'ain (ܐ) in the spoken tongue, it is a common occurrence to see (as in line 231) ܩܬܝܢܐ reproduced with an *allap* (ܐ) rather than the correct form ܩܬܝܢܐ. This feature is also common in Akkadian. Similarly, ܩܬܝܢܐ should in fact be written with a *beth* (ܒ), therefore ܩܬܝܢܐ, but due to spirantisation of the letter it becomes a *waw* (ܐ) in many cases of spoken Assyrian and thus finds its way into some variations of the written word. Thanks to Nineb Lamassu for catching this discrepancy in my version compared with the actual written text.
- [3] Here "leaper" is likely to refer to an idiomatic expression commonly used in modern spoken Assyrian: *q̄l l'urha* ("cutting a path"). Thus, "leaper" may make sense by extension since jumping from one point to another is the fastest way to "cut a path."
- [4] There is some discrepancy as to the correct genus *alnus* or *populus*. Margoliouth (1902, 134) translates it as "white alder," whereas Warda and Odisho (2000, 20) translate it as "poplar."
- [5] A second meaning "sheep pen" for "stables" is also used.

- [6] Hozaya gives a *waw* rather than a *mem*, “he drinks blood and a cup” rather than “he drinks blood from a cup.” This remains unclear since “and a cup” may be another allusion to the supernatural nature of Qaṭīne.

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