

# Vainglorious Poetry (*Syi'r al-Fakhr wa al-Hamasa*) of the Umayyad Rulers of al-Andalus: A Textual Thematic Examination

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## ABSTRACT

*The Umayyad rulers of al-Andalus<sup>i</sup> were professional poets to some extent. The extensive study on the poetry of the Umayyad shows that, on one hand, more than 200 couplets of poetry found to be composed by the rulers themselves according to Ibrahim Baydun in his book *al-Shi'r al-Amiri fi al-Andalus (The Emirate Poetry in Andalusia)*. On the other hand, those poetic compositions in the forms of poetry and prose have shown many poetic qualities in many areas of Arabic rhetorical studies. Moreover, the Umayyad ruler-poets had also composed poetry on many popular themes and one of the most significant is the vainglory. Being approached through extensive hermeneutical tools, the study reveals the comprehensive employment of the vainglorious theme by many Umayyad rulers such as al-Dakhil and al-Rabadi. According to authoritative Andalusian sources, both had produced some 67 couplets of poetry during their life which many of them employing the theme of vainglory. This makes the vainglory the most popular Arabic literary genre employed amongst the ruler-poets of al-Andalus.*

*Keywords:* Vainglory, Poetry, Umayyad Rulers of al-Andalus, Arabic literary

## INTRODUCTION

Al-Andalus<sup>ii</sup> or Andalusia is home to great civilization during medieval era in European soils. It had given light to the European countries and had provided them with intellectual discourse for centuries during the Islamic reign of the Umayyad. One of the great achievements in these periods is the mushrooming of poetic activities among the professional poets and other parties from the education institutions to the royal palaces (*al-balat al-amiri*). However, the most phenomenal poetic activities were the active involvement of the Umayyad emirs and caliphs in poetic compositions which had never seen before. It is true that some caliphs in the East involved in poetic composition but were very much limited in numbers. In Andalusia, starting from its very first emir 'Abd al-Rahman b Mu'awiya dubbed al-Dakhil 138/755 – 172/788 till its last caliph 'Abd al-Rahman b Hisham 399/1009 – 422/1031, more than 200 lines of poetry had been composed and unambiguously ascribed to at least ten of the Umayyad rulers. From these compositions, the study shows that the vainglorious poetry was the most popular themes employed by these rulers.

## VAINGLORY – A GENRE IN ARABIC POETRY

As a literary genre, vainglorious poetry means a kind of poetic composition which employs expressions of self-pride, courage and enthusiasm (*al-fakhr wa al-hamasa*). In general, vainglorious poetry falls under the heading of panegyric poetry because it promotes praise as its prime goal. Nevertheless, the composition which are intended to lessen the opponents' capability by boasting of the poet's own nobility can also be categorised as vainglorious poetry.

Vainglorious poetry had been known to the Arabs since pre-Islamic era. As for the Andalusians, this genre of poetry began to flourish in line with the achievements of the rulers. The higher the achievements, the stronger the desire of the rulers to compose their vainglorious poetry. To the rulers, this kind of composition has a very close relationship with the glory of the kingdom they governed, the wars in which they were involved and the

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sovereignty that they maintained. Their appreciation of poetry and poets also contributed a great deal to the flowering of vainglorious poetry<sup>iii</sup>.

The topics and the objects used in the Andalusian vainglorious poetry are very similar to those of pre-Islamic history. Scenes of mountains (جبال, حالق), the barrenness of the plains and deserts (محل, قفر), the midday heat (هواجر الطرائق), hunting activities (صيد), dwelling in tents (ايطان السرادق) etc, were used throughout al-Dakhil's poetry.

The 'Falcon of Quraysh'<sup>iv</sup> had no other choices but to destroy his enemy with his sword and lances. From the very beginning of the conquest, he never lacked the strength to encounter any revolt within his realm. His first fight was against the governor 'Abd al-Rahman al-Fihri (d. 138/755), who ruled al-Andalus semi-independently from the Umayyad dynasty in Sham (Syria). Whenever he heard of a revolt, he quickly responded by leading an army to curb it, regardless of the hazardous implications of his action. The dignity and sovereignty of his kingdom were paramount, so he had to save it or he would be "the lowest of all beings" as described in his *Qaf*-rhymed verse.

On one occasion, when 'Abd al-Rahman was on the way to a war, his companions tried to persuade him to hunt the heron<sup>v</sup> which trespassed upon their encampment, but he refused to respond to such call. He always preferred to hunt the renegades or felons rather than the heron. In his verse he said:

*Urge me not to go hunting the heron,  
when intent upon the hunting of the felon (1)  
Whether in tunnel (they hide) or on the lofty mountain (they abide),  
(I will pursue them) when the midday heat burns (2)*

Despite the fact that he was a ruler who appreciated very much his magnificent palace al-Rusafah<sup>vi</sup>, he could still spend his night in a tent which was incomparable to his luxurious palace. On that he said:

*My shawl is the shadow of a frightening army,  
no need have I for a beautiful garden and proud castle (1)  
I could leave the tent or dwell in it,  
tell my word to those who reclines on soft pillows (2)  
Definitely, dignity can only be gained by strong determination,  
so sail to it through hardship's straits (3)  
Or else, you will be the lowest of all beings*

## FIGHTING THE ENEMY

For the founder of the Umayyad Kingdom, demonstrating his stern action and exaggerating his power in his poetry seems to be vital in front of his enemies. These expressions can be considered as a spiritual contribution to the strength of his kingdom. Especially in the period of unrest and civil wars, what is voiced in his poetry may have an important impact on the people's feelings and on his enemies alike. Al-Dakhil was "a very firm and strong man, very quick and stern in action, neither he feels weak nor he reclines to rest...he was truly a brave man (al Maqqari 1968). It was narrated that when some Quraysyi delegation wrote to al-Dakhil claiming their rights to provisions (tithe portions) yet at the same times complaining of his greed, he swiftly responded by telling his own glorious story in his popular Lamiyyat poem:

*What a contrast between the one who arose,  
in protest, drawing his double-bladed sword from its scabbard (1)  
He then traversed the deserts and seas,  
overcoming waves and barren wastes (2)*