



*The Stone Serpent, Barates of Palmyra's Elegy for Regina his Beloved – An Eastern Serenade*

by Nouri Al-Jarrah

Translated from the Arabic  
by Catherine Cobham

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A single line in Aramaic on a tombstone in the Arbeia Roman Fort Museum in South Shields fired Nouri Al-Jarrah's imagination as he discovered the story of Barates of Palmyra,

who fell in love with the young Celtic woman he named Regina (Queen), freeing her from Roman slavery, and marrying her. How extraordinary that the tombstones of both of them have been discovered beside the twisting stone serpent of Hadrian's Wall. Living for nearly 40 years in exile in the UK, Syrian poet Nouri Al-Jarrah relates to his fellow Syrian Barates of Palmyra and brings this ancient story of love and freedom to a new audience through this epic poem.

Introducing the work, the poet writes:

“Who is this adventurer who came from the East to liberate a woman from the West and name her Regina, provocatively, as a challenge to the system of slavery that existed in the Roman Empire? Who is Barates from Palmyra and who is Regina the Celt? A farm worker was turning over the earth in the remains of a Roman fort in the heart of the British Isles, and produced these two names for us. How did a young man tanned by the sun of Palmyra come to put his arm around the waist of a Celtic girl with a red plait, and wander with her over the lush green hills by Hadrian's Wall, down to the River Tyne, where brown men from Nineveh rowed in small boats carrying cargo from the big ships, chanting in sad voices songs that sounded like strange prayers. It is strange too that these men with their strong muscles and brown faces had left behind their boats in the warm waters of the Euphrates and joined the fleets of Septimius Severus, arriving in this cold water in the North, to become labourers and oarsmen in the shadow of a Roman wall that twists like a stone serpent.



*Nouri Al-Jarrah inspects Regina's tombstone at the Arbeia Roman Fort in South Shields*

“Who is Regina, and who is Barates? Archaeologists found the Celtic woman's tombstone in the Roman fort of Arbeia. She had died young, in her thirties, and a few miles away they found the grave of Barates. Everything we know about Barates is also everything we know about Regina, contained in one line that the shattered lover had engraved in Aramaic, his native language, on the Palmyrene-style tomb of the beloved woman. So we know that he freed her from slavery, named her Regina ('Queen'),

and she became his lover and his wife, and then he lost her. The hero of this poem did not forget to include his Syrian identity on the tombstone. A single line fired my imagination, and I, and this poem, are indebted to it.”

In addition to the main epic dramatic poem *An Eastern Serenade*, that is Barates’ elegy to his beloved wife Regina who died young, aged 30, nine further poems – all set at Hadrian’s Wall during Barates’ time there – take readers even deeper into individual experiences of those living with Roman occupation and empire, of Celts enslaved by the Romans or fighting for their lands and freedoms, and of exiles conscripted into the Roman army from far-off lands. They are: *Regina’s Song by the River*, *The Archer from Palmyra*, *The Birth of the Painted Warrior*, *News of Boudicca*, *A Roman Elegy*, *The Tongue of Fire: The Ruin*, *Julia Domna’s Missing Fingers*, and *The Edict of Caracalla*.

In the course of the poems, the poet creates an enthralling spiritual and mythological atmosphere for that ancient time, introducing readers to many ancient gods such as Baal, a Syrian deity known well and worshipped across many parts of the ancient world in different ways, sometimes as god of the sun, patron of sailors and seafaring merchants, or as god of weather, of rain and fertility; and El, god of mankind and all creatures, god of gods; and the virgin goddess Anat, Baal’s older sister and his wife; to symbols such as the eagle – the emblem of the armies of the Roman Empire, who were inspired by ancient Syrians for whom the eagle was considered a great symbol; the rainbow, considered by Aramaeans to be a god; the snake, considered in ancient Eastern mythology as guardian of the waters.

After translating the poems **Catherine Cobham** wrote:

"These poems say so much in such concentrated lyrical ways about exile, empire, migration, borders – not to mention the visceral evocation of northern English weather."

While **Nouri Al-Jarrah** has commented:

“Mythologies can no longer be reproduced as they are without a reinterpretation. The poet must range between the epic text, in its own time, and today”

Professor of Arabic at Rome’s LUISS Guido Carli **Francesca Maria Corrao** writes:

“Nouri Al-Jarrah is not an antihero but a modern hero representative of a new generation in search of space to create a future in a world filled with the overwhelming presence of the fathers”

Writing about an earlier collection, **Abdo Wazen**, cultural editor of *Independent Arabia*, says:

“Nouri Al-Jarrah’s poem, *A Boat to Lesbos*, immediately found its place at the vanguard of the tragic poetry that has been written within Syria, in the Syrian exile and in the Arab world. The work has become part of world poetry, not just through the medium of translation but through its poetic lexicon, which fuses the universal, as expressed through the legacy of ancient Greece, with the Syrian and Arab dimension.”



**Nouri Al-Jarrah** was born in Damascus in 1956. He attracted attention with his debut collection of poems, *The Boy*, published in Beirut in 1982 and has become an influential poetic voice on the Arab literary scene. Since 1986 he has lived in London, publishing 16 further collections, and founding and editing a number of Arabic literary magazines. His poetry draws on diverse cultural sources, and is marked by a special focus on mythology, folk tales and legends. Selected poems have been translated into a number of Asian and European languages. *A Boat to Lesbos and other Poems* (Banipal Books, 2018) was his first collection in English translation, joining the original Arabic book’s editions in French, Spanish, Turkish, Italian, Greek and Farsi.

Translator **Catherine Cobham** taught Arabic language and literature at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, for many years, and has translated works of a number of Arab writers, including poetry by Adonis, Mahmoud Darwish, Ghayath Almadhoun and Tammam Hunaidy, and novels and short stories by Naguib Mahfouz, Yusuf Idris, Hanan al-Shaykh and Fuad al-Takarli.

Publication date: 12 October 2022. To interview Nouri Al-Jarrah, to get an Advanced Reading PDF or review copy of *The Stone Serpent*, email [Margaret@banipal.co.uk](mailto:Margaret@banipal.co.uk).