

Who was the *real* Antar?

In *River of Eden*, the name of the curious half-Chinese, half-Bedouin General Chen is given as Antara—or simply *Antar*—and is derived from a real Arab adventurer and poet who lived in 580 AD. Antar was celebrated in his own day as a hero because he rose from a slave birth to become a great tribal chief. The son of Shaddād, a well respected member of the Bedouin tribe of *Banu Abs* and Zabaibah, an African female slave, the young Antar was shunned by his tribe due to his mixed heritage. But Antar's remarkable personal qualities and courage in battle—not to mention his skills with poetic verse—eventually gained him respect with the people.

Antar fell in love with his cousin Abla, and he sought to claim her hand in marriage. But Abla's family strongly objected on the grounds that Antar was the son of a slave, therefore lacking full rights. Fortune smiled on the heroic warrior when his tribe was threatened by another clan and needed his assistance to fend them off. Since tribal law forbade true slaves from defending the tribe in battle, Shaddād finally acknowledged Antar as his true son and granted him freedom. The war—and Abla's hand in marriage—were both won.

Antar's poetry often speaks of chivalry, courage and heroism in battle, as well as his love for Abla. One of his best-known poems is included in the *Mu'allaqāt* (translated as *Hanged Poems*). In turn, the Bedouin warrior's stature and fame gave rise to many legends over the centuries, and he eventually became immortalized in the popular Arabic epic *Sirat Antar*. In it he represents the fictional ideal of a Bedouin chief: rich, generous, brave, and kind.

And not only was Antar a celebrated Arabian hero, he was also a Christian.

To learn more about Antar, follow these links:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antarah_ibn_Shaddad

<http://www.cwo.com/~lucumi/antara.html>

English Translation of the Hanged Poem of Antar:

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/hanged/hanged2.htm>