Translations of Historical Works from Middle Persian into Arabic

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Abstract

This article maps the mainly lost Sasanian historiographical literature through the Arabic translations of Middle Persian works and the information preserved in early Arabic sources. Although only two texts have been preserved in the original Middle Persian, the Arabic sources reveal a sizeable corpus in translation.

Keywords

Middle Persian – historiography – translation – Arabic

Studies of the great Arabic translation movement usually focus on Greek and Syriac texts, which were translated into Arabic from the mid-8th century onward, and rightly so, as these were crucial to the scientific and philosophical development of the early Arab-Islamic culture.¹ However, this was not the only form of translation activity in the period. At first, translations from Middle Persian seem to have dominated the scene. While the focus of translation from Greek and Syriac was on science, medicine, and philosophy, very few such texts were translated from Middle Persian, in which language few books had been produced in these fields.² Instead, translations from Middle Persian

¹ For the translation movement in general, see Gutas, *Greek Thought*.

² Later Middle Persian compilations, such as the *Dēnkard*, show that Late Sasanian scholars were familiar with Greek philosophy, science, and medicine, but there is little firm evidence for the existence of complete works in Middle Persian in these fields. Modern scholars have

dominated in historiography and historical narratives. Very little was translated in this field from Greek or Syriac, while several Middle Persian historical texts were translated into Arabic. In some cases, we have positive evidence for the one-time existence of such translations, even if they have later been lost. Mostly, though, we face the perennial problem that few texts have been preserved and none in both the original and in direct translation. Before having a look at what there was in Middle Persian and what was translated into Arabic, we have to define what we mean by historical works. Middle Persian, Arabic, and Classical Persian histories make no difference between the mythological, legendary, and historical periods of Persian history. Thus, e.g., al-Ṭabarī discusses the history of Persia in the same manner from the Creation to the end of the Sasanians.

Much of what historians of the early Islamic centuries tell us even about historical kings is fictitious. When we, e.g., read of Alexander the Great's travels beyond inhabited lands, we move, from a modern viewpoint, from history to fiction. Although fiction and entertainment are anachronistic terms for the literature of the period, there was a difference between serious and less serious books, mirrored, e.g., in the chapter headings of Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*, namely "Tales [*asmār*] of the Persians" (p. 364) and "Titles of the books composed by the Persians concerning their kings' history [*siyar*] and true tales [*al-asmār al-ṣaḥīḥa*]" (p. 364). Only the latter works belong to history proper (Category A), the others fall outside of serious historiography (Category B). The following shows categories of Middle Persian historical literature and the titles we know.³ The categories partly overlap, and as most books are only known by their title, some may have been listed under the wrong heading.

often made conclusions on the basis of distorted Greek names in Arabic works, trying to explain these by Middle Persian script and assuming hypothetical Middle Persian originals, with very little further evidence. The two strongest cases are still those studied by Nallino in 1922 ("Tracce"), but even these would benefit from further study. For non-historical translations from Middle Persian, see Gutas, *Greek Thought*, p. 25–27, 34–45, and 108–110 (with further references). Gutas is somewhat too willing to assume the existence of Middle Persian books on the basis of later information.

- 3 Macuch, "Pahlavi literature," is unfortunately not very helpful, and there is no usable study of Middle Persian historiography that would take into account both the preserved Middle Persian texts and the Arabic (and Classical Persian) translations. Cereti, *Letteratura*, is useful for the preserved Middle Persian texts. I have briefly discussed many of the texts in Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāy-nāmāg*, where the focus was on the *Ḥwādāy-nāmāg*. The present article partly uses the same material for a different purpose. I exclude astrological history, or political astrology, for which see Gutas, *Greek Thought*, p. 45–46 and 108–110, and Borrut, "Court astrologers".

1 List of Historical Works

A. History proper

A1. General

Ḥwadāynāmag

Siyar/Taʿrīḥ al-mulūk/mulūk al-Furs/al-ʿAğam

A2. Dynastic history (Sasanians)

Siyar/Taʿrīḥ al-mulūk/mulūk al-Furs/al-ʿAğam

Taʿrīḥ mulūk Banī Sāsān

Kitāb al-Ṣuwar

Kitāb Aḥbār al-ʿAğam

A3. History of individual kings and heroes

Ayādgār ī Zarērān

Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr

Kitāb Bahrām wa-Narsī

Kitāb Bahrām Šūbīn

Šahrbarāz and Abarwīz

(Alexander Romance)

A4. Sistanian history

Kitāb al-Baykār

Kitāb al-Sakīsarān

Rustam and Isfandiyār

B. Stories set in history

Šarwīn of Dastabāy

[*Balāš and the Indian Princess*]⁴

(Abar) Wizārīšn ī čatrang ud nihišn ī nēv-Ardašīr

C. Political literature

Āyīnnāmag

Gahnāmag

ʿAhd Ardašīr

Tansarnāme

Siyāsat Ardašīr

Tadbīr Anūšīrwān

Istiḡāmat al-bilād li-Āl Sāsān

etc.

“Stories set in history” (B) refers to stories that are not relevant for the grand narrative of national history, but are entertaining side episodes. Categories B and C do not belong to historiography proper, but they will be briefly mentioned

⁴ The title is mine, as the text is not referred to by any title in the original.

as they tangentially touch historiography, being attributed to historical characters. Category C is selectively introduced, and, e.g., works of pure *andarz* ('wise sayings') will not be discussed, even though they, too, are mostly attributed to historical characters.⁵

Middle Persian literature rarely mentions non-religious book titles and almost all books discussed in this article have been lost, which means that most of the titles we know are in Arabic and the books are attested only in Arabic sources. Many of the translations, too, have gone lost and the remaining are free versions of the originals.⁶ In individual cases, the books may have been first composed in Arabic, based on learned Persian oral lore, with the Arabic author either putting down things he had heard from Persian informants or being himself of Persian extraction.⁷ We know that there were learned informants (such as the early ninth-century 'Umar Kistrā and the somewhat later *al-mōbad al-Mutawakkilī*) and that Arab authors, such as al-Maḳḍisī (d. after 355/966), used native informants.⁸

1.1 *History Proper*

Let us start with works of General history (A₁). There are no signs that Sasanian Iran would have produced any works on the history of the world outside Ērānšahr. In Middle Persian works, other nations and peoples, such as Hephthalites, Byzantines, and Turks, only appear as enemies, or allies, of the Persians. Thus, general history is restricted to the history of Persia. There seems to have been only one book which falls into this category, viz. the *Ḥwadāynāmag*, which, as sources inform us, related the history of mankind (i.e., Iran) from the Creation until the Arab conquest.⁹ The title of the book is found only once in Middle Persian, in the *Bundahišn*,¹⁰ but its Arabic

5 I will also not discuss texts that may be useful for studying history but are not historiographical themselves, such as inscriptions and apocalyptic texts with their *post facto* prophecies.

6 For a discussion of what "translating" meant in the first millennium, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, p. 51–58.

7 There do not seem to be purely fictitious stories set in Sasanian times in early Arabic literature: the existing stories always relate to episodes also known from serious historical works, however much embellished and developed.

8 For 'Umar Kistrā and *al-mōbad al-Mutawakkilī*, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, p. 74–76. For using informants in general, see Hämeen-Anttila, "al-Maḳḍisī."

9 I have recently studied this book in detail, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*. I do not want to repeat my conclusions here, but it may be useful to state that I take it as proven that the *Ḥwadāynāmag* was a concise and dry king list of perhaps some 10–30 pages, not a voluminous storybook that would have resembled Firdawsī's *Šāhnāme*.

10 *Bundahišn* 35A.7. See also Agostini-Thrope, *Bundahišn*, p. 189. This had earlier slipped from my attention, and Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, p. 1, is to be corrected accordingly.

translations, titled *Siyar al-mulūk* or *Siyar/Ta'riḥ Mulūk al-Furs/al-ʿAğam*, are mentioned in several early sources, especially on the so-called List of Ḥamza.¹¹ The following have been credited with a book of this title: Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d. ca. 139/756), *Kitāb Siyar mulūk al-Furs*; Muḥammad ibn al-Ġahm al-Barmakī (d. after 218/833), *Kitāb Siyar mulūk al-Furs*; *Kitāb Ta'riḥ mulūk al-Furs*, which was taken from the Treasury (i.e., the Caliphal library) of al-Ma'mūn (d. 218/833); Zādūye ibn Šāhūye al-Iṣbahānī (mid-3rd/9th century?), *Kitāb Siyar mulūk al-Furs*; Muḥammad ibn Bahrām ibn Mityār al-Iṣbahānī (3rd/9th century), *Kitāb Siyar mulūk al-Furs*; and Bahrām ibn Mardānšāh (3rd/9th century), the *mōbad* of Kūrat Sābūr of the province of Fārs, whose translation is given on Ḥamza's list as *Kitāb Ta'riḥ mulūk Banī Sāsān*, but the title seems to belong to Mūsā ibn ʿIsā al-Kisrawī's book and has only erroneously been attributed to Bahrām on the list, while the original title of his book may have been *Ta'riḥ mulūk al-Furs*.¹²

It should be emphasised that Ḥamza does not claim that all these books represent the same Middle Persian text and, moreover, he does not define their Middle Persian original(s). The identification with the *Ḥwadāynāmag* comes from a number of other sources that make the equation between *Siyar/Ta'riḥ al-mulūk* and the Arabic translation of the *Ḥwadāynāmag*.¹³ As the title *Siyar al-mulūk* was also used for other books, it is possible that some of these represent a different Middle Persian text.

Another question is whether they were independent translations. Rozen, "K voprosu," tried to differentiate between them on the basis of the terminology used by Ḥamza, but I am not convinced by his reasoning. The term mostly used by Ḥamza is *naql*, which at the time was the standard word for translation¹⁴ but can also mean transmission. It seems possible that most of the "translations" on the list should be understood as variant versions of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ' s translation.

Sasanian Dynastic history (A2) is less clearly documented, and we have no idea of the titles of Middle Persian books dedicated to the Sasanian dynasty

11 This is to be found in Ḥamza, *Ta'riḥ*, p. 9–10, and several other sources. For full documentation, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, p. 59–67.

12 Elsewhere, we also find Ishāq ibn Yazīd, Farruḥān, ʿUmar ibn al-Farruḥān, Bahrām al-Harawī al-Maḡūsī, and Rāmīn credited with similar books, but all seem dubious, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, p. 72–74.

13 Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, p. 1. Hoyland, *History of the Kings*, p. 135–143, has expressed some doubt as to identifying Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ' s *Siyar* with the *Ḥwadāynāmag*, but the evidence does point in this direction.

14 Cf. Legendre, "Translations," who studies the terminology in connection with the change of language of the *dīwān*.

in general, but we have two Arabic titles that refer to books translated from Middle Persian, *Kitāb al-Šuwar* and *Kitāb Ta'riḥ mulūk Banī Sāsān*. The first is mentioned by al-Mas'ūdī in his *Tanbih*, p. 106, where he speaks of a large book that he had seen in the possession of a noble family in Iṣṭaḥr in 303/916. Among other things, it contained pictures of the 25 kings and 2 queens of the Sasanians, from Ardašīr to Yazdağird ibn Šahriyār ibn Kisrā Abarwīz, as well as “the way of life of each one of them with its private and public details and the notable events and important occasions that had taken place during their rule.” Furthermore, he tells us that it was based on a manuscript found in the middle of Ġumādā II in 113/731 and had been translated into Arabic for Hišām ibn 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (r. 105–125/724–743).¹⁵

The one-time existence of *Kitāb al-Šuwar* is proven by extensive quotations from it in Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī's *Ta'riḥ*, p. 38–49, and occasional quotations elsewhere, mostly unattributed and sometimes derived from Ḥamza, as in the *Muğmal*.

The other dynastic history, *Kitāb Ta'riḥ mulūk Banī Sāsān* by Hišām ibn Qāsim al-Iṣbahānī (date unknown), and the book by the same title by Mūsā ibn 'Isā al-Kisrawī (active in the 860s) are only known from Ḥamza's list, although it is probable that some of the al-Kisrawī quotations in literature derive from this work. Hišām's book is completely lost except for the mention of its title. It is possible, but not necessary, that the two works should be considered versions of Ibn al-Muqaffa's translation of the section of the Sasanians in the *Ḥwadāynāmag*. For *Kitāb Aḥbār al-Ağam*, see below.

Much better documented are the histories of individual kings (A₃), that we find more evenly distributed between several dynasties. The only two preserved Middle Persian historical texts belong to this category. *Ayādgār ī Zarērān* relates the battle of King Vištāsp (Guštāsb) against Arğāsp, king of the Hunnic peoples. The original shows traces of Parthian and metric structure, so that it has probably been an epic text in Parthian before it became codified in Pahlavi prose.¹⁶

This text is nowhere said to have been translated into Arabic, but its contents did reach al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). Al-Ṭabarī's version loosely follows the Middle Persian original, but as translation strategy of historical texts was in general loose, this does not help us to decide whether al-Ṭabarī had a written source at his disposal or whether he relied on orally transmitted learned tradition.

15 Cf. Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, p. 36–39.

16 Cf. Cereti, *Letteratura*, p. 184–187, 200–202. Note that being composed in Parthian does not mean that it was necessarily composed in Arsacid times.

The story of Zarēr surfaces in Arabic also in another source, al-Ṭaʿālibī's *Ġurar*, p. 262–276, a universal history written in 412/1022 or a few years earlier, of which only the Persian part has been edited. Al-Ṭaʿālibī's main source was the Early New Persian *Prose Šāhnāme*, compiled in 346/957 from a number of texts, the majority of which would probably have been in Middle Persian. This was also Firdawsī's main source for his *Šāhnāme*. The story of this compilation is told in the so-called *Old Preface*, a text which has been added to some manuscripts of Firdawsī's *Šāhnāme* but the core of which probably originally belonged to the *Prose Šāhnāme*.¹⁷

Al-Ṭaʿālibī used Early New Persian, not Middle Persian, sources, and the work he translated was the compilation, not the individual texts as such, but still, it reflects the transmission history of Middle Persian historiography in the Islamic period. It is not possible to know whether the compilers of the *Prose Šāhnāme* used an existing Arabic translation of the story of Zarēr, but it is more probable that it was directly translated from Middle Persian into Early New Persian. In any case, al-Ṭaʿālibī's version is closer to the Middle Persian original than al-Ṭabarī's version, so he could not have used al-Ṭabarī here.

The second historical work that has been preserved in Middle Persian is *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr*, which relates the beginning of the Sasanian dynasty.¹⁸ Like in the case of the *Ayādgār*, we have no information about its potential translation into Arabic, and it is also included in Firdawsī's *Šāhnāme* VI, p. 138–214, and al-Ṭaʿālibī's *Ġurar*, p. 473–480, and, hence, it was in all probability included in the *Prose Šāhnāme*, but as al-Ṭabarī is again able to include its material into his *Taʾrīḥ*, it must have found its way into Arabic literature earlier.

All the individual histories that we know from mentions in Arabic literature relate to the Sasanian period. Three such works are mentioned by Ibn al-Nadīm. According to topic, the earliest of these is *Kitāb Bahrām wa-Narsī* (*Fihrist*, p. 364), which refers to Bahrām Gūr and his brother Narsē or, perhaps, his trusted commander Mihr-Narsē, both prominent in the vagaries of Bahrām Gūr. The latter is occasionally abbreviated to Narsī in Arabic sources. Whether the story focused on Bahrām's adventures in India, his battle against the invading Hephthalites, Mihr-Narsē's campaign against the Byzantines, or all of these cannot be known on the basis of our present sources.

Another Bahrām, whose adventures gave enough material for a separate monograph was Bahrām Čūbīn. The translator of the book, *Kitāb Bahrām Šūbīn* (written Šūs in Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*, p. 364), Ġabala ibn Sālim, is known

17 For the *Prose Šāhnāme*, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāy-nāmag*, p. 141–146.

18 See Grenet, *La geste*.

by name, although he remains a rather obscure character.¹⁹ Arthur Christensen reconstructed in his 1907 book in Danish Bahrām Čübīn's story (*Romanen*), but he laboured under the wrong assumption that everything we learn from Arabic sources about Bahrām Čübīn must come from this book, so his "reconstruction" is unfortunately only useful as a collection of materials.

It may be this book that al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūǧ* §644, has in mind, giving a valuable summary of its contents, which deserves to be quoted in full:²⁰

Persians have a separate book for the stories of Bahrām Ġübīn and his stratagems in the country of the Turks to which he travelled, saving the daughter of the King of the Turks from a beast called *sim'*, which is like a great goat and which had captured her from among her maidens when she had gone to a park. (The book contained Bahrām's story) from the beginning of his affair until his death and included his genealogy.

Interestingly, the summary focuses on the encounter with the *sim'*, which is not known from other works, except for a mention in Bal'amī's *Tārīḥ* and *Tārīḥnāme*.²¹ It implies that the work contained legendary material and narrative elements that far outreached the dry facts of Bahrām's role in history. Bal'amī, *Tārīḥnāme* II: 764, refers to al-Ṭabarī's inadequacy in the discussion of Bahrām. "I found a fuller version," he continues, "in *Kitāb-e Aḥbār-e 'Ajam* and will relate it based on this book," which he proceeds to do in *Tārīḥnāme* II, p. 764–805, mixing long extracts of this book with what al-Ṭabarī had transmitted.

The title of the book is, technically, given in Persian, but the simple addition of the article would turn it into Arabic, *Kitāb Aḥbār al-'Aǧam*. The additions of Bal'amī are partly paralleled in al-Dīnawarī, *Aḥbār*, and *Nihāyat al-arab*,²² which can be assumed to derive them from an Arabic source.²³ Likewise, the

19 See Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, p. 305.

20 The fragment has already been translated by me in Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāy-nāmag*, p. 33.

21 Bal'amī, *Tārīḥ*, p. 756; *Tārīḥnāme* II: 804. Here, the animal is a bear (*ḥirs*). As Andrew Peacock, *Mediaeval Islamic Historiography*, has shown, Bal'amī's Persian version of al-Ṭabarī's work is very free and its manuscript tradition wild, which is why it defies any attempts of a truly critical edition.

22 E.g., Bal'amī, *Tārīḥnāme* II, p. 767, cf. al-Dīnawarī, *Aḥbār*, p. 82; *Nihāya*, p. 353. Al-Dīnawarī only quotes very sparingly from this source.

23 Grignaschi, "La *Nihāyatu-l-'arab*," identified this with ps.-Ibn al-Muqaffa's *Sīyar mulūk al-'Aǧam* but cf. Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāy-nāmag*, p. 89–99.

additions in Bal'amī show signs of having been translated from Arabic.²⁴ The title *Kitāb Aḥbār al-Aḡam* implies a larger history, general or dynastic, but all the material that I have as yet been able to locate relates to Bahrām Čübīn.

The third work belonging to this category is *Šahrbarāz and Abarwīz*, given by Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, p. 364, in a corrupt form (*Šahrīzād ma'a Abarwīz*).²⁵ The outlines of this narrative can be sketched on the basis of later Arabic, Persian, Syriac, Greek, and Armenian sources. A detailed comparison of the available sources shows that Greek and Syriac sources create a seemingly realistic picture of Šahrbarāz, one of Kisrā Abarwīz's commanders in the war against Byzantium and a later usurper of the royal power, while Arabic and Persian sources develop the story as literature and add details of complicated and entertaining plots and concentrate on his adventures with the Persian king rather than his role in the Byzantine wars, which also matches what we know about the story of Bahrām Čübīn.

The *Alexander Romance* would also belong to this category, but it seems improbable that the *Romance* was ever translated into Middle Persian and from there into Arabic, despite this being rather commonly assumed. The idea goes back to Theodor Nöldeke's discussion in 1890 (*Beiträge*), where he pointed out that many of the Greek names in one of the existing Syriac versions are distorted in a way that could – according to Nöldeke – be explained through the complicated Pahlavi script. Otherwise, there is no evidence either in Middle Persian or Arabic literature for there ever having been a Middle Persian translation of the text.

Nöldeke's hypothesis has occasionally been criticised, and in 1998 ("Gli antecedenti") and again in 2001 ("The Syriac Version") Claudia Ciancaglini studied the question in great detail, managing to show how weak Nöldeke's argument actually is. Kevin van Bladel, "Syriac sources" (2007), has thereafter defended Nöldeke's argument but without providing sufficient answers to Ciancaglini's arguments, who replied in "Ancora" (2015). All considered, it seems rather improbable that a Middle Persian *Romance* ever existed.²⁶

The next category, Sistanian history (A4), would by modern standards fall outside the sphere of history, but, if we follow the historians who wrote the

24 E.g., in the *Nihāya*, p. 356, the irritated Bahrām Čübīn uses the Arabic expression *ilayka 'annī lā umma lak* "get off, scoundrel!" which Bal'amī translates as: *ḥāmūš bāš, ke mādar az to tahī nišīnād* "be quiet, may your mother be left without you!", which sounds like an attempt to translate *lā umma lak*, literally "there is no mother for you." Cf. also Bal'amī, *Tārīḫnāme* II, p. 784, where the text includes the Arabic sentence *lā wa-lā karāmata yā fāsiq* (cf. *Nihāya*, p. 365).

25 This work is fully discussed Hämeen-Anttila, "Letters."

26 For a full discussion, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, p. 45–51.

national history of Iran, then we have to allow Sistanian works into the sphere of historiography, as they relate the history of events that were considered as historical as the battles between Iran and Byzantium in the Sasanian period.

Two such works have been mentioned and briefly described by al-Mas'ūdī, viz. *Kitāb al-Baykār* and *Kitāb al-Sakīsarān*:²⁷

This (*Bāb al-Lān*) is one of the fortresses in the world that are considered impenetrable. The Persians mention it in their poems and tell how Isbandiyār ibn Bistāsf built it. Isbandiyār waged many wars in the East against various peoples. He was the one who travelled to the furthest parts of the Turkish lands and destroyed the City of Brass (*Madīnat al-Ṣufr*). The deeds of Isbandiyār and all the things we have told are mentioned in the book known as *Kitāb al-Baykār*, which Ibn al-Muqaffa' translated into Arabic (*Murūğ* §479–480).

On *Kitāb al-Sakīsarān*, he writes:

Persians tell numerous tales about Afrāsiyāb's death and his battles, the battles and raids between Persians and Turks, the death of Siyāwuš, and the story of Rustam ibn Dastān. All this is found explained in the book titled *Kitāb al-Sakīsarān*, which was translated by Ibn al-Muqaffa' from Ancient Persian into Arabic. The story of Isfandiyār (...) and how Rustam ibn Dastān killed him is narrated there, as well as how Bahman ibn Isfandiyār killed Rustam and other wonders and tales of the Ancient Persians. Persians think highly of this book because it contains stories about their ancestors and their kings' histories. Thank God, we have been able to narrate many of their histories in our earlier books (*Murūğ* §541).

According to what is told in the *Book of al-Sakīsarān* the Persians say that his paternal grandfather Kay Qāwūs was the king before Kay Ḥusraw and that Kay Ḥusraw had no offspring, so he gave the kingship to Luhrāsb (*Murūğ* §543).

The translation of *Rustam wa-Isfandiyār* is attributed by Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, p. 364, to Ġabala ibn Sālim, and while nothing is said about its content, it most

27 The former clearly reflects Persian *paykār* "battle," the latter is unclear but may refer to "the chiefs of the Sakas/Sistanians."

probably related the tragic battle between the two, with more or less extensive discussion of its background and the later events.²⁸

These three books did probably not exhaust Sistanian stories that were available in written Middle Persian form, but we have no further evidence of their Arabic translations. Such stories probably also survived in oral form, but the Arabic translations make it highly probable that there existed a written Sistanian tradition, whether with or without a parallel oral tradition.²⁹

1.2 *Stories Set in History*

In addition to historiographical literature, by the end of the tenth century there existed a rather voluminous literature of stories in Middle or Early New Persian. Many of these were set in history though they were not considered “serious” parts of Persian national history. Thus, e.g., Firdawsī himself mentions an existing story of *Bīžan and Manīze* (*Šāhnāme* III, p. 305–306, vv. 19–22) and an analysis of the style of the story in the *Šāhnāme* supports its separate origin.³⁰ Like *Bīžan and Manīze*, most such stories probably never reached the Arabs, but some were translated into Arabic.³¹ One such example is *Balāš and the Indian Princess*, which is known in two Arabic versions, one of which is attributed to al-Kisrawī, who may have added this romantic and tragic story to his version of Ibn al-Muqaffa’s *Siyar al-mulūk*.³²

We can also add to this category *Šarwīn of Dastabay*, a story already mentioned by Abū Nuwās (d. ca. 198/813) in a poem³³ and later surfacing in short mentions in a number of works by historians and geographers, both in Arabic and in Persian.³⁴ While we cannot trace the plot of the story, we know through these occasional mentions that it contained heroes and witches, perhaps damsels in distress, and other elements familiar from Persian stories and epics that have strong links to folk literature. While Arabic and Persian literature provides various dates for *Šarwīn*, Greek sources help us date the historical model of the main character to the reign of Yazdağird I, and the early reference in Abū Nuwās’ poem puts the origin of the story itself firmly in the time when Middle

28 al-Ġāhiz, *Risālat al-Ḥanīn* (*Rasā’il* II, p. 408) mentions *Sīrat Isfandiyār*, which may refer to the original Middle Persian text, as it is read to him by a *mōbad*.

29 For the *nāme* literature and a potential written Middle Persian collection of Sistanian tales, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāy-nāmag*, p. 167–173.

30 See Hämeen-Anttila, “*Bīžan*.”

31 For their further life in Iran, see also Orsatti, “Last years.”

32 This work is fully discussed in Hämeen-Anttila, “When Scheherazade fails.”

33 *Dīwān* V, p. 143–146, no. 148, vv. 18–19.

34 See especially *Muğmal*, p. 95. This story is fully discussed in Hämeen-Anttila, “*Šarwīn of Dastabay*.”

Persian was still the literary language in Iran. In its fully developed form, it seems to have been closer to storytelling than historiography.³⁵

(*Abar*) *Wizārišn ī čātrang ud nihišn ī nēv-Ardašīr*, which has been preserved in the original Middle Persian, tells of the invention of chess at the time of king Khusraw and Buzurgmihr and belongs to these marginally historical stories. Like the fully historical *Ayādgār* and *Kārnāmag*, it found its way into the *Prose Šāhnāme* and from the New Persian version it was further translated into Arabic by al-Taʿālibī in his *Ġurar*, p. 622–624.³⁶

1.3 *Political Literature*

Another group of texts related to historiography and sometimes sharing elements with it is political literature (C), which refers to the governance and administration of the Sasanian state, often in the form of pseudepigraphs. Al-Masʿūdī, *Tanbīh*, p. 104, mentions *Āyīnnāmāh* and *Kahnāmāh* (for *Āyīnnāmag* and *Gahnāmāg*), which he briefly describes as follows:

Persians have a book called *Kahnāmāh*, in which there are (listed) the ranks in the kingdom of Fārs, which were 600, according to their counting. This book forms part of the *Āyīnnāmāh*. The meaning of *Āyīnnāmāh* is “book of customs” (*kitāb al-rusūm*), and it is large, (going up to) thousands of pages. It is rarely found complete except in the hands of *mōbads* and suchlike.

Al-Masʿūdī merely mentions the books but does not claim them to have been translated into Arabic. Yet, Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, p. 132, attributes the translation of the *Āyīnnāmag* to Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ.

While these books have been lost and there is no further information of their potential translations,³⁷ some political texts have been preserved in Arabic translation. An interesting piece is *ʿAhd Ardašīr*,³⁸ which purports to be the political testament of Ardashīr to all Sasanian kings that were to follow

35 The stories of *Kalīla and Dimna* and other story collections of Indian origin are not historical, but some of the stories of *Hazār afsān(e)* may well have been set in historical context. For these collections, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāy-nāmag*, p. 42–45.

36 See Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāy-nāmag*, p. 158–159. See also Firdawsī, *Šāhnāme* VII, p. 314–319.

37 There are some *Āyīn* books that were translated into Arabic (or composed as Arabic pseudepigraphs), but there is no reason to assume that every book that includes the word *Āyīn* in its title is necessarily part of the *Āyīnnāmag*. Cf. Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāy-nāmag*, p. 39.

38 al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Ḍamm (Rasāʾil* II, p. 191).

him. The text is usually considered to derive from the sixth century, and it partly overlaps with the *Tansarnāme*, another lost text, which is said to have been translated by Ibn al-Muqaffa'. Ibn al-Muqaffa's translation has been preserved in a Persian translation quoted in full in Ibn Isfandiyār's *Tārīḥ-e Tabaristān*, p. 15–41.³⁹

Al-Ğāhiz, *Damm* (*Rasā'il* 11, p. 193), also mentions *Siyāsat Ardašīr*, *Tadbīr Anūšīrwān*, and *Istiḳāmat al-bilād li-Āl Sāsān* together with the *Ahd*, and further titles may be found in Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, p. 132, 134, and 186.⁴⁰

While these texts are interesting in themselves and were translated into Arabic, they concentrate on how a state should be administered and have little bearing on history. The same goes for wisdom literature, where we have numerous *andarz* collections attributed to ancient kings, some translated into Arabic. Perhaps worth pointing out is *Husraw ud rēdag-ē*, the Arabic version of which is to be found in al-Ta'ālibī, *Ġurar*, p. 705–711, clearly an indirect translation through the *Prose Šāhnāme*. Likewise, the geographical text *Šahristānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, preserved in Middle Persian, belongs to the margins of historical literature as it focuses on the founding of cities and is thus oriented towards the past, but it was never translated into Arabic.⁴¹

2 Middle Persian Historiography

Even though we only have two strictly historical works preserved in Middle Persian, the Arabic translations show the true extent of Middle Persian historical literature, which comes nowhere close to Byzantine or Arabic historiography but still contains a good number of texts, especially as we have to assume that we only know a small part of the total production of Middle Persian authors. We must, though, also allow for pseudepigraphs and works based on learned oral lore but composed in Arabic. Bearing in mind that, as far as we know, there existed no Achaemenid or Arsacid historiographical tradition and that Middle Persian literature was underdeveloped before the sixth century, the development of Middle Persian historiography in the sixth century and later produced surprisingly many historical texts.

39 For a brief but very informative article, which also lists the known Arabic fragments of the *Tansarnāme*, see de Blois, "Tansar." See also Boyce, *Letter of Tansar*.

40 Cf. also Grignaschi, "Quelques spécimens," for the edition of some of these.

41 One might also mention the *Mazdaknāmag*, which has erroneously been considered as a historical work on the life of Mazdak, but see Tafazzoli, "Observations," and Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, p. 35–36.

In the Late Sasanian and Early Islamic periods, there seems to have been a strong tendency to use history as material for literature or, put in other words, to add literary embellishment to historical texts.⁴² We find this tendency fully developed in Firdawsī's *Šāhnāme*, which can be seen both as a historical source and a major contribution to world literature. On a lower key, this mixture of history and fiction can be seen in several texts that we know to have existed and partly still possess in Arabic translation (e.g., *Šarwīn of Dastabay*; *Balāš and the Princess*; *Šahrbarāz and Abarwīz*).

Looking at the titles we know from Arabic sources, this mixture seems to have been the main form of Middle Persian historiography, but it did have another side, too. Despite widespread misunderstandings, the *Ḥwadāynāmag* was most probably a dry list of kings with very little if any narrative elements and literary embellishments,⁴³ and the *Kitāb al-Šuwar* may likewise have been more of a list than a storybook.

It is probable that some of the gaps in later Arab-Islamic historiography reflect gaps in the Middle Persian tradition. The most obvious one concerns the history of nations and peoples other than Iran. The existing Middle Persian literature, in the original language or in translation, is solipsistic: other nations are mentioned only as a backdrop against which Persian history is played. Turanians and Byzantines, Hephthalites and Turks are not there to be discussed for their own sake but only in relation to Persia.

The second gap concerns Persian history itself. The national history consisted of two separate traditions. Zoroastrianism was born in the Eastern parts of the Iranian cultural area, and the earliest history was tied up with this religious background. The earliest dynasties, the Pishdādians and the Kayanids, come from the East Iranian traditions in the *Avesta*. From this religious past, the historical narrative jumps to Alexander the Great – mainly seen as an accursed conqueror and destroyer – and to the Arsacids and the Sasanians, moving the focus to the West and to real historical events.

This left the Achaemenids in the dark, except as far as the last of them interacted with Alexander. It was obviously the lack of sources that caused this, rather than any national amnesia. The same goes for the almost complete disappearance of the Seleucids and even the marginalisation of the Arsacids, the Persian historiography not having deep roots in the native tradition. This was the world view Arab historians received and retained.

42 Cf. also Orsatti, "Last years."

43 See Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*.

3 Dating the Translations

There is no translation literature without translators. In this case, we know, however, very little about them. In addition to the list of Ḥamza and occasional references elsewhere in Arabic or Persian literature, our main source is Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, p. 305, which lists translators from Persian into Arabic and includes those on Ḥamza's list. Almost all the translators of historical works are shadowy and do not allow for any proper prosopographical study, but the following attempts to draw a timeline of translations before 900. Note that the list takes the evidence at face value and every item should be studied in detail to assess the credibility of the information:

- before 743 *Kitāb al-Šuwar*, manuscript found in 113/731 and translated for Hišām ibn ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 125/743)
- before 743 *Rustam and Isfandiār* by Ġabala ibn Sālim, scribe of Hišām
- before 743 *Bahrām Čübīn* by Ġabala ibn Sālim, scribe of Hišām
- before 756 *Kitāb Siyar mulūk al-Furs* by Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ (d. ca. 139/756)
- before 756 *Kitāb al-Baykār* by Ibn al-Muqaffa‘
- before 756 *Kitāb al-Sakīsarān* by Ibn al-Muqaffa‘
- before 756 *Tansarnāme* by Ibn al-Muqaffa‘
- before 756 *Āyīnnāme* by Ibn al-Muqaffa‘
- before 756 *‘Ahd Ardašīr* by Ibn al-Muqaffa‘
- before 813 *Šarwīn of Dastabay*, mentioned by Abū Nuwās (d. ca. 198/813)
- before 833 *Kitāb Siyar mulūk al-Furs* by Muḥammad ibn al-Ġahm al-Barmakī (d. after 218/833)
- before 833 *Kitāb Ta’rīḥ mulūk al-Furs*, taken from the library of al-Ma’mūn (d. 218/833)
- mid-9th century *Kitāb Siyar mulūk al-Furs* by Zādūye ibn Šāhūye al-Iṣbahānī
- before 868 *Siyāsāt Ardašīr*, mentioned by al-Ġāḥiẓ (d. 255/868)
- before 868 *Tadbīr Anūšīrwān*, mentioned by al-Ġāḥiẓ
- around 870 *Ta’rīḥ mulūk Banī Sāsān* by Mūsā ibn ‘Isā al-Kisrawī (active in the 860s)
- around 870 *Balāš and the Indian Princess* by Mūsā ibn ‘Isā al-Kisrawī
- 9th century *Kitāb Siyar mulūk al-Furs* by Muḥammad ibn Bahrām ibn Miṭyār al-Iṣbahānī
- 9th century a book by Bahrām ibn Mardānšāh

Even though Ibn al-Muqaffa‘’s importance distorts the table, it is clear that much was translated already in the eighth century. Several of the later translations were also probably considerably earlier than the table shows: al-Ġāḥiẓ died in 255/868,

but he was probably aware of the *Siyāsa* and the *Tadbīr* before his last year and their translations may well have been from the eighth century or early ninth.

In the tenth century, Middle Persian texts started being translated into Early New Persian, mainly through Arabic sources (e.g., the *Tansarnāme*).

Although Middle Persian translations were a minor branch of the translation movement, they did leave their traces in Arabic literature and historiography. Universal histories included Biblical history and Persian history in detail, while the history of other nations, Greeks included, remained vague and superficial and were often passed by without any mention.

In literature proper, in the sense of belles-lettres, Persian influence was remarkable, although it is usually ignored. Complete story collections of Persian origin, such as *Kalīla wa-Dimna* and *Hazār afsāne*, better known by the title it received in Arabic, *Alf layla wa-layla* (the *Thousand and One Nights*), are well known, but their Persian origin either tends to be pushed aside once briefly acknowledged, or the whole collection is marginalised as extraneous to “real” Arabic literature. However, both Middle Persian collections and individual stories found their way into Arabic literature at a time it had no artistic prose narratives. By the time al-Tanūhī and al-Hamaḍānī were writing, there existed a centuries-long Arabic tradition of fictitious narratives of Persian origins in a historical garb.

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