GOING PLACES WITH NĀŠER-E KHOSROW AND HIS TRANSLATOR

BY

LUTZ RICHTER-BERNBURG

Bonn/Berlin

The editor's choice of Nāšer-e Khosrow's (henceforth: NKh) Safarnāma (henceforth: SN) for publication in the Persian Heritage Series of major texts from that legacy in contemporary English versions deserves unhesitating applause. One may be hard put to decide whether it is because of intrinsic merit or the paucity of medieval Islamic travelogues that the SN qualifies as a major text, and it surely cannot by any means be termed "spontaneous". Yet there is no denying the instruction and pleasure to be derived from accompanying NKh on his peregrinations from his home in north-eastern Iran to Palestine, Egypt, and the two holy cities of the Hijaz and back. Undoubtedly the attraction results both from finding a reality still accessible today reflected—and as it were refracted—in the mind of an individual who died a good nine centuries ago, and from the confrontation with a reality accessible to his but vanished from many a contemporary mind.

Unfortunately, the care taken with the presentation of the book as a sensible object, handsomely printed and attractively produced as it is, did not extend to the rendering of the original Persian into an intelligible text for non-specialist readers of English. Thus the publication under discussion fails at one of the fundamental tasks of any translation, at "transporting"—to the degree intrinsically possible—the original into the target language. The character of the SN as a travelogue and record of outward, "objective", reality obviously demands, as the first qualification for any modern version, the correct rendition of its factual content; secondarily, clear indications of textual problems are in order—whether they originate in authorial negligence or error, or in a corrupt manuscript tradition. Such commentary could have been fitted even into the given format of a sparingly annotated translation.

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Naturally, such broad remarks have to be substantiated with concrete evidence. Since the text as a whole cannot be subjected to scrutiny line by line, a selection of typical examples will have to suffice as illustrations of the problems addressed.

By way of introduction to the text, it would not have been amiss for the translator to comment briefly on the textual basis of the translation at hand; the ‘Bibliography’ on p. 124ff., which is not annotated, does not fulfill this function. The way the translator treats, or rather skirts, difficulties of the text does not suggest a firm grasp of the problems involved (examples here below). But of course, quite apart from possible cruces, the text raises problems of terminology. In the following, I will in the main concentrate on issues of terminology in three sensitive areas: sovereign titulature and proper names; astronomical and calendric matters; and the description of the ‘Noble Sanctuary’ in Jerusalem.

Clearly, the terms sultān and malik cannot, as a matter of course, be translated as “sultan” and “king”, given the subsequent history of the former in Islamic history which has colored its use in English, and given the loose sense of malik as “ruler”, whether sovereign or beholden to a suzerain. It would have been simple enough to italicize both “sultan” and “king” and include them in the “Glossary of Terms” (p. 116). Remarkably enough, in its present form, the SN persistently refers to the Fatimid caliph-imam as sultān; it is only in NKh’s “directly” quoted request to a Cairene court official that he uses the “correct” form of address, ‘Prince of Believers’, with reference to the reigning Fatimid (in the translation, p. 56, this expressly direct discourse is needlessly transformed into indirect discourse, thus obscuring the effect). However, it amounts to a misrepresentation to refer, in the “Glossary of Persons”, to Fatimids as “sultān[s] of Egypt” (p. 107f.2) whereas Abbasids are granted the title “caliph” (p. 106-4)—certainly ironic with respect to a devoted Ismai-lite’s work (and note that NKh does call the Fatimids al-Mahdī and al-Mu‘izz descendants ‘Ali? of the ‘Prince of Believers Ḥosayn b. ‘Ali? [pp. 42, 44])! Also, the resonant Koranic term ‘Aziz Misr would have deserved a better translation than the totally colorless “ruler of Egypt” (p. 37).

With regard to the question of titles, it should be further noted that it is misleading boldly to translate amīr-e amirān (“the grand amir”) as “duke” while squeamishly rendering marzūbān ad-daylam as “Ward of the march of Daylam” instead of adopting the simple (and here appropriate!) “Margrave of Daylam” (not to mention the mistaken “ward” for “warden/warder”; p. 4); and what is the reader to make of the enigmatic “gil of Gilān”? A word of explanation à propos Jīl-[e] Jīlān, the traditional title of the lord of Gilan, would have been in order. Moreover, NKh’s quotation of this titulature in its official Arabic would seem to call for retaining the wording—and phonetic form—in English as well. The name of the

2 Al-Mahdī, however, is introduced as “the first Fatimid caliph”.

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