



BEH I. THE WORD

i. The Word

Beh, from Mid. Pers. *bēh* or *bīh* (*byh*), also written *bahī* or *behī* (with *ī* from *ik*), cannot be traced further back than Mid. Pers., and an attempt to reconstruct older forms would be futile because too many possibilities are open. The initial consonant being always *b*, the word cannot be equated with New Pers. *beh* (good, better), which is from Mid. Pers. *vēh* and Old Pers. *vahyu*. Nevertheless this has long been a cherished folk-etymology, as shown in the phrase *behī wa hūa kayr* (likewise also in Ṭabarī, I, p. 1049 l. 14) and in a punning half-verse by Jāmī, *andar kaf-e to beh-ī čē nīkū'st*. In contrast, the Arabic word for quince *safarjal* is popularly supposed to be made up of *safar* (journey) and *jalā* (exile) and therefore to be inauspicious (ZDMG 68, 1914, p. 275). In Eastern Turkish, *behī* (in Sart *bahī*) reappears as an obviously borrowed Iranian word (M. Räsänen, *Versuch eines etymologischen Wörterbuches der Türksprachen*, Helsinki, 1969, p. 68a).

The ideogram for Mid. Pers. *byh* given in the *Frahang ī Pahlavik* (4.20, slightly garbled) is Aramaic *sāfargālā*, which corresponds to Talmudic *ispargālā* and Syriac *espergālā* and was taken into Arabic as *safarjal* (I. Löw, *Aramäische Pflanzennamen*, Leipzig, 1881, p. 114 and passim). This word goes back to the middle of the Assyrian period, being attested by Akkadian *supurgillu* (in one text *ša-par-gil-lu*; W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, Wiesbaden, 1959-, p. 1061a), which must have been a borrowing from some foreign language. A place name ^uSu-pur-gi-il-lu (probably referring to local abundance of quinces) occurs in an inscription of Tigletpileasar III (745-27 b.c.). The



undoubtedly late and artificial ideogram for quince is ^{gis}*hašhur/šennur-kur-ra*, i.e., “apple” or “medlar of the highland” or “the foreign land.” The word from its appearance might be Indo-European and specifically Iranian (perhaps *sparg^o* + *al*), but it cannot be traced further back (see Eilers, “Demawend,” *Archív Orientální* 22, 1954, p. 370). The Armenian word for quince *serkewil* sounds vaguely similar.

In addition to *beh* or *bahī* and Arabic *safarjal*, literary texts present another word for quince, namely *ābī* “juicy” (cf. New Pers. *golābī* replacing *amrūd*, the older word for pear). As early as the 5th/11th century *ābī* is given as a synonym for *bahī*, with a citation from Farroḳī, in the *Loḡat-e fors* of Asadī Ṭūsī (ed. ‘A. Eqbāl, Tehran, 1319 Š./1940, p. 520). The Arabic adjective *bahī* and noun *bahā* (brilliance) are derived from New Pers. *āb* (Ancient Indian *ābhā*) in the sense of polish (*ZDMG* 67, 1913, pp. 491f.).

Further words for quince current in the Alborz region are listed by Ḥ. Ṭābetī (*Deraktān-e jangālī-e Īrān*, Tehran, 1326 Š./1947, p. 97): *šaḡālbeh*, sometimes contracted to *šālbeh*, in Māzandarān, Rāmīān, Katūl; *tūč* in Lāhijān, Daylamān, Rūdsar; *sanga* at Rāmsar, Šahsavār; *hīvā* or *āyvā* at Āstārā. The last has been adopted by the Turks as their word for quince, *ayva*. None of these synonyms gives a clue to the etymology of New Pers. *beh*.

Wild quince trees are found in the Caucasus, and the cultivated variety may have originated there. The Greek name “Cydonian apple” indicates that Cydonia in the northwest of Crete was a halfway house in the spread of the quince to Europe. Always and still renowned are the quinces of Isfahan, which are big and juicy and can be eaten raw. In ancient times the quince was valued as an aphrodisiac and customarily given to brides to eat before their weddings. Among the Moslems in the middle ages, the quince was important in fortune-telling and dream-interpretation (for details, see P. Schwarz, *ZDMG* 67, 1913, pp. 491ff.; A. Fischer, *ZDMG* 67, pp. 681ff., and *ZDMG* 68, 1914, pp. 275ff.; I. Eisenberg, *ZDMG* 68, 1914, p. 226). Furthermore quinces and quince seeds (*behdāna*) were used in medicine (Schlimmer, *Terminologie*, p. 175).

Place names in which *beh* demonstrably means quince are rare. According to Razmārā, *Farhang* VI, p. 64, the name of **Behbahān**, a city in southwestern Iran near the ruins of Arrajān, means “tent,” perhaps being a collective plural of **behān* from Mid. Pers. **vidān*.

Behestān (Old. Pers. Bagastāna, Greek τὸ Bagístanon ’óros), today Bīsotūn, the



site of the famous cliff-inscription of Darius, can be interpreted as “quince orchard” but of course originally meant “abode of the god.”

According to Yāqūt (cited by Schwarz, *Iran*, p. 724), there was another Behestān in the district of Qazvīn. Razmārā has entries for villages named Deh-Beh (Quince Village?) near Fīrūzābād (*Farhang* VII), Behdān, and another Behestān in the district of Zanjān (vol. 2), Behak and another Behdān (vol. 9).

In the village names Behābād (*Farhang*, vols. 9 and 10), Behdeh and Behūya (vol. 7), the *beh* component is unlikely to mean quince and almost certainly means good (cf. the numerous toponyms of the Sasanian period with prefixed *vēh*). For other entries in gazetteers no evidence in support of either meaning is available.

The old name Behrūd for the Oxus (Jayhūn, Āmū Daryā) is derived from Mid. Pers. Vēhrōt (Good River) and had nothing to do with quinces.