Published: December 15, 1989
Last Updated: December 7, 2016

BOSTĀN AL-SĪĀḤA

BOSTĀN AL-**SĪĀḤA,** a descriptive geography book by a mystic writer of the early 13th/19th century, Mast-ʿAlīšāh, Ḥājī Zayn-al-ʿĀbedīn b. Mollā Eskandar Šīrvānī, who used the pen name Tamkīn.

Zayn-al-ʿĀbedīn was born in mid-Šaʿbān, 1194/1780, at Šamāḵī in the district of Šīrvān (west of Bākū). When he was five years old, his parents migrated to Iraq and settled at Karbalāʾ as a neighbor (*mojāwer*) of the shrine of Imam Ḥosayn. He went to Baghdad when he was seventeen years old and then set out on travels which took him to ʿErāq-e ʿAjam (Media), Gīlān, Šīrvān, the Moḡān steppe, Ṭāleš, Azarbaijan, Khorasan, Herat, Kabul, and Zābol, to most of India, to Central Asia (Ṭoḵārestān, Tūrān, and Badaḵšān) through Khorasan and ʿErāq-e ʿAjam to Fārs and the islands of the Sea of ʿOmān and thence to the ports of the Yemen, then after a tour of the Ḥejāz to Egypt, Syria, Rūm (Turkey), and several Mediterranean islands, and finally through Azarbaijan, Tehran, Hamadān, Isfahan, and Kermān to Shiraz (*Bostān al-sīāḥa*, pp. 318-19). He got married in Fārs in 1235/1819-20 and made his home there, working as a spiritual guide. He died while on pilgrimage to Mecca in 1253/1837-38 (Modarres, *Rayḥānat al-adab* III, p. 336). He belonged to the Šāh-Neʿmatallāhī dervish order and was a disciple of Majḏūb-ʿAlīšāh (*Bostān al-sīāḥa*, p. 319; Maʿṣūm Šīrāzī, II, p. 333). He recorded what he had seen and heard in three books, *Ḥadīqat al-sīāḥa*, *Rīāż al-sīāḥa*, and *Bostān al-sīāḥa*.

In the preface of *Bostān al-sīāḥa* Šīrvānī states (in a chronogram) that he finished the book in 1248/1832-33 and revised and enlarged it in 1250/1834-35. It was edited by Sayyed ʿAbd-Allāh Mostawfī and lithographed in Tehran in

1315/1897-98. An offset reprint was published in the 1360s Š./1980s (Tehran, n.d.). The references in this article are to pages in the reprint.

Though meant to be an account of "places and persons" seen by the author's thirty-six (lunar) years of travel, *Bostān al-sīāḥa* touches on many other subjects. In between the descriptions of countries and their leading men, the author has much to say about religions, tribes, peculiarities of religious communities and sects, reports and stories which had been told to him, stages of advance in Sufism and paths to be followed by mystics, interpretations of dreams, his debates with mystics, *faqīh*s, and governors, etc. Thus the book as it emerged has almost the character of a contemporary encyclopedia.

Šīrvānī was a Shiʿite and a Sufi but free from the fanaticism prevalent in his time. He got on well with the shaikhs of other sects and persuasions and even quotes their most anti-Shiʿite pronouncements (e.g., p. 285). Being himself a devoted mystic (p. 319), most of the leading men he speaks of were Sufis or mystics. His work is distinguished by the absence of any of the usual flattery found in most contemporary works, the frank references to injustice in contemporary Iran as contrasted with high praise of religious tolerance in India (pp. 162, 297, 469), and the author's indifference toward people in powerful positions (e.g., p. 413) and at times strong critical remarks about them (e.g., p. 355). Thus he devotes seven pages to his spiritual mentor Shaikh Moḥammad-Jaʿfar Majḏūb-ʿAlīšāh and only one page to the then reigning Fatḥ-ʿAlī Shah (pp. 413, 416ff.).

Having formed a desire to study medicine, he went to see a physician at Delhi, who told him that his duty was to read something about every branch of knowledge and he should acquire knowledge of both the *ʿaqlī* and *naqlī* sciences (pp. 290-91). He followed this advice and as a result turned his travel book into a readable miscellany of useful, though often irrelevant, information. Among these are such diverse topics as the spiritual "taste" (or "intuition") of divinely inspired persons (*ḏawq al-motaʾallehīn*; pp. 74-77), peculiarities of the letters of the alphabet (p. 141), the origin of music and the question whether it is licit or illicit (p. 473), the eras of Indian, Roman, and Jewish-Hebrew dates (p. 185), the *selsela*s (chains of transmission of spiritual authority) of the Sufis (pp. 345-51), the stages of the mystic path (pp. 236-73), the unity of being (p. 327), the good looks of a certain ʿAbd-Allāh Āqā at Qara Ḥeṣār in Turkey (p. 426), and a description of a youth named Mīrzā Asad-Allāh (p. 134).

The countries and places of which the author speaks are presented in alphabetical order, and those which he had personally visited, particularly large cities, are described in detail. After discussing their names and sketching their history, he gives the number of houses, the principal crops and products, the water supply, the race and skin color of the inhabitants, their moral characteristics, their employments, their religion and language, and finally the careers of eminent men who came from the place or lived there at the time of his visit.

The first-hand information in these passages, derived from what he personally saw and experienced, is often interesting (e.g., the descriptions of Persepolis, pp. 93-94; Naqš-e Rostam, p. 94; Isfahan, p. 80; Balḵ, p. 153; Jaynagar, p. 208; Rašt, p. 295). At times he mixes without distinction information found in earlier sources (e.g., *Nozhat al-qolūb*) with his own personal knowledge (e.g., p. 326). He is also not free from making errors (as when he described Shiraz as a humid city) or making sweeping judgments (e.g., pp. 326-27).

With regard to the places which he did not personally visit, he states explicitly that he obtained his data either from natives of those places and friends and relatives who had made journeys to them (e.g., Ceylon, Antioch, Petersburg) or from books by earlier writers.

Among others he cites the *Tārīḵ-egozīda* (p. 81), *Moʿjam al-boldān* (pp. 131, 312), *Tārīḵ-ejahānārā* (p. 291), *Toḥfat al-ʿālam* (p. 385), *Zīnat al-majāles* (p. 326), *Fārs-nāma* (p. 93), and *Rawżat al-ṣafā* (p. 291).

Bostān al-sīāḥa is not free from myth and marvel, particularly in stories about founders of cities (e.g., pp. 80, 325-26) and sometimes also in accounts of popular notions (e.g., pp. 628ff.). Sometimes he disconcerts the reader with startling statements about places he has not visited (e.g., Saqsīn = Saxony, p. 309) or by applying the same description to places in different regions simply because they have an identical or similar-sounding name (e.g., Zūrābād in Kurdistan and Khorasan, p. 303).

Šīrvānī's prose, unlike that of most contemporary writers, is generally clear and unencumbered. Were it not for occasional lapses into rhymed prose, his *Bostān al-sīāḥa* would be a model of straightforward writing in the Qajar Period.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Moḥammad Maʿṣūm Šīrāzī, *Ṭarāʾeq at-ḥaqāʾeq*, ed. M.-J. Maḥjūb, 2nd ed., Tehran, 1345 Š./1966.

M.-ʿA. Modarres, *Rayḥānat al-adab*, 2nd ed., Tabrīz, n.d.

Search terms:

□□□□□□ □□□□□□ bostan al siyah boustan al seyah bostaan al seyah