



ESKANDAR-NĀMA OF NEZĀMĪ

ESKANDAR-NĀMA OF NEZĀMĪ, the poetical version of the life of Alexander by the great 12th century narrative poet Neẓāmī Ganjavī (535-605/1141-1209). It consists of two formally independent works, both in rhymed couplets and in the *motaqāreb* meter (see 'ARŪẒ) of the *Šāh-nāma*. The first part is generally known as *Šaraf-nāma*, the second as *Eqbāl-nāma* or *Ḳerad-nāma*, but there is no strong evidence that the author used these names to distinguish the two parts, and in quite a few manuscripts the name *Šaraf-nāma* is in fact applied to the second of the two poems. In India they are also known as *Eskandar-*(or *Sekandar-*) *nāma-ye barrī* and *baḥrī* respectively. Together they form one of the five constituent parts of the *Ḳamsa*, the posthumous collection of Neẓāmī's major poems, and in most, though not all, of the manuscripts they are the last constituent. There are many manuscripts and printed editions of the *Ḳamsa* and also some manuscripts containing the two parts of the *Eskandar-nāma* on their own, but the first serious attempt at critical editions of the two Alexander poems were published in Baku in 1947 by Ä. Ä. Älizadä (*Šaraf-nāma*) and F. Babayev (*Eqbāl-nāma*). The recent edition of the *Šaraf-nāma* by Behrüz Tarvatīān (n.p., 1368 Š./1989) mainly reproduces the text and apparatus of the Baku edition, but it also contains explanatory notes. The editions by Ḥasan Waḥīd Dastgerdī (Tehran, 1316-17 Š./1937-38 and frequently reprinted) are marred by their uncritical and arbitrary handling of the text and must be used with caution, though Dastgerdī's explanatory notes are not without value. The references below are all to chapter and verse of the Baku editions. There are complete translations of both poems in Russian verse (tr. K. Lipskerov, Baku, 1953 and reprints) and prose (tr. Y. E. Bertel's and A. K. Arends, Baku, 1983)



and a literal, and barely readable translation of the *Šaraf-nāma* in English prose, with copious extracts from Indian commentators, by H. Wilberforce Clarke (*The Sikandar Nāma e Bará*, London, 1881). A fairly free German prose paraphrase of both parts, with omissions in the prologues and epilogues, was prepared by J. Christoph Bürgel (*Das Alexanderbuch*, Zürich, 1991), unfortunately based on Dastgerdī's edition.

As is the case with many of the masterpieces of Persian poetry, the text of the *Eskandar-nāma* has been tampered with, and the basic questions of the date and circumstances of composition of the two poems have been obscured in the hitherto available editions. The present author has attempted to clarify these questions on the basis of the manuscripts. Both poems were clearly composed after Neẓāmī's *Leylī o Majnūn*, which contains verses giving the date of completion as Rajab 584/September-October 1188, and they were probably written before *Haft peykar*, which contains verses indicating that it was completed in Ramaẓān 593 /July-August 1197. In *Šaraf-nāma*, chap. 13, vv. 38-40 Neẓāmī mentions by name his previous compositions *Maḳẓan al-asrār*, *Ḳosrow o Šīrīn*, and *Leylī o Majnūn*; some, but not all, manuscripts then add a verse mentioning also *Haft peykar*. But earlier in the same poem (*Šaraf-nāma*, chap. 9, vv. 49-51) Neẓāmī says that he has already created "three pearls" before undertaking this "new ornament," strengthening the suspicion that the mention of a fourth title in chapter 13 is an interpolation. Moreover, in *Šaraf-nāma*, chap. 41, vv. 3-23, the author laments the death of the Šarvānšāh Aḳsatān (the dedicatee of *Leylī o Majnūn*) and addresses words of advice to his (unnamed) successor. This suggests that Neẓāmī originally planned to dedicate the *Eskandar-nāma*, like *Leylī o Majnūn*, to one of the kings of Šarvān. But that dynasty evidently lost power over Ganja by the time the poems were completed, and in their final form they are dedicated to the *malek* of Ahar, Noṣrat-al-Dīn Bīškīn b. Moḥammad. This ruler is mentioned in the introduction to *Šaraf-nāma*, chap. 10, vv. 11-12, where the poet makes a pun on his name Bīškīn ("whose hatred is more"), though some of the manuscripts have a superscription claiming (wrongly) that the verses evoke Bīškīn's overlord, the atabeg Noṣrat-al-Dīn Abū Bakr.

With the *Eqbāl-nāma* the situation is more complex. One group of manuscripts contains in the prologue (chapter 6) again a dedication to Noṣrat-al-Dīn Bīškīn (his personal name is specifically mentioned twice in vv. 27-28) and praises him for the help which he gave the people of Ganja following an earthquake. These manuscripts then also mention "Malek Noṣrat-al-Dīn" in the epilogue



(see Baku edition, chap. 41, v. 5 footnote) and give the date of completion as Ayyār 590/May 1194 (see chap. 42, v. 61 footnote). These manuscripts seem to contain the authentic form of the prologue and epilogue. A second group of manuscripts replaces the dedication to Noṣrat-al-Dīn (chapter 6) with a dedication to ‘Ezz-al-Dīn Abu’l-Faṭḥ Mas‘ūd b. Nūr-al-Dīn, who was the atabeg of Mosul from 607/1211 to 615/1218. In fact this eulogy is, apart from the names, lifted word for word from the dedication in *Šaraf-nāma*, chaps. 10-11, and is clearly spurious. These manuscripts then replace the name Noṣrat-al-Dīn with ‘Ezz-al-Dīn in the epilogue (chap. 41, v. 5), omit the verse giving the date of composition, and replace it with one mentioning the name Mas‘ūd (printed as chap. 42, v. 62). These changes were evidently made by a copyist who, some years after Neẓāmī’s death, wanted to insert the name of his own patron into the poem. A third group of manuscripts has the (genuine) dedication to Noṣrat-al-Dīn in the prologue, but the (spurious) dedication to ‘Ezz-al-Dīn in the epilogue, evidently combining material from two different master copies. Unfortunately the Baku editor has chosen to give preference to this hybrid version. Some but by no means all of the manuscripts also insert a chapter, printed as chap. 40, referring to the death of Neẓāmī at the age of sixty-three; it is really astonishing that quite a few modern scholars have considered this to be part of Neẓāmī’s text.

The best textual evidence seems thus to indicate that Neẓāmī began work on the *Šaraf-nāma* shortly after the completion of *Leylī o Majnūn* in 584/1188, originally for the successor of the dedicatee of that poem, and completed both parts of the *Eskandar-nāma* probably in 590/1194, dedicating them to the ruler of Ahar. The earthquake mentioned in the prologue to the *Eqbāl-nāma* is probably the one known to have occurred in Rabī‘ I 590 (February or March 1194). *Haft peykar*, completed three years later, is Neẓāmī’s last work. The date of the poet’s death is not reliably recorded, but it was probably not long after 593/1197 (for his supposed tombstone, see Storey-de Blois, V/2, pp. 446-47).

The principal episodes of the legend of Alexander, as known to the Muslim tradition, are elaborated in the *Šaraf-nāma*: the birth of Alexander, his succession to the Macedonian throne, his war against the Negroes who had invaded Egypt, the war with the Persians, ending with the defeat and death of Dārā (see DARIUS III) and Alexander’s marriage to Dārā’s daughter, his pilgrimage to Mecca. Neẓāmī then dwells at some length on Alexander’s stay in the Caucasus and his visit to Queen Nūšāba of Barda‘a (q.v.; in the immediate neighborhood of Neẓāmī’s home town, Ganja) and her court of Amazons; this



lady takes over the role of Candace in earlier versions of the Alexander saga. Alexander then goes to India and China. During his absence the Rūs (i.e., the Russian Vikings) invade the Caucasus and capture Barda'a (as they in fact did some two centuries before Neẓāmī's time) and take Nūšāba prisoner. Alexander's wars with the Rūs, which are depicted at considerable length, end with his victory and his magnanimous treatment of the defeated army. The *Šaraf-nāma* concludes with the account of Alexander's unsuccessful search for the water of immortal life.

In the *Eqbāl-nāma* Alexander, the undisputed ruler of the world, is depicted no longer as a warrior, but as a sage and a prophet. He debates with Greek and Indian philosophers, and a sizeable part of the text is occupied by the discourses in which the seven Greek sages elaborate their ideas about the creation. But we find also a number of extended parables, of only tangential connection with the Alexander story but exceptionally well told. The poet then tells of Alexander's end and adds an account of the circumstances of the death of each of the seven sages. It is at this point that an interpolator has added the already mentioned account of Neẓāmī's own death.

Whereas the *Šaraf-nāma* clearly belongs to the tradition of Persian epic poetry—though Neẓāmī makes no attempt to emulate the style and manner of the *Šāh-nāma*—in the *Eqbāl-nāma* he shows his talents as a didactic poet, an anecdotist and a miniaturist. Some critics have compared the *Eskandar-nāma* unfavorably with Neẓāmī's other two "historical" epics, *Ḳosrow o Šīrīn* and *Haft peykar*. Much of the attraction of the latter works for the modern reader resides doubtless in the fact that their protagonists, the Sasanians Ḳosrow Parvēz and Bahrām Gōr (qq.v), are depicted as essentially positive but flawed heroes. Neẓāmī's Alexander, by contrast, is the ideal king, a philosopher and a prophet to boot, and in virtually every chapter Neẓāmī turns to his patron with advice and admonition, holding up this perfect ruler as a model of wise kingship. But the implied contrast between an ideal past and an imperfect present also creates a kind of tension which in its own way is perhaps as interesting as that between the contradictory aspects of Ḳosrow's character. The *Eskandar-nāma* also has a lot of local color in the episodes set in the Caucasus, which must have appealed to the poet's intended audience, and perhaps the most attractive character in the poem, Queen Nūšāba, belongs to that area, as does the Armenian princess who is the heroine of *Ḳosrow o Šīrīn*. Indeed, a striking feature in all three of the mentioned poems is the prominence of strong female characters.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

The principal editions and translations are listed and assessed in the text. For a detailed discussion, with a list of manuscripts, editions, translations and commentaries see Storey-de Blois, V/2, pp. 438-80, 487-92; V/3, pp. 585-91.