



## ḤASAB O NASAB

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**ḤASAB O NASAB**, a compound term adopted from Arabic, and used in both Arabic and New Persian literature to express complementary aspects of the concept of nobility. In Persian literature, the phrase *gowhar o honar* is also used to express the same concept. The second element, *nasab*, denotes genealogy or lineage, and is often used in Persian as a near-synonym for the Persian *nežād* (descent, stock). The first element, *ḥasab*, properly refers to the store of inherited merit to which an individual might lay claim on account of the illustrious deeds and fine qualities ascribed to his ancestors, a store which he was obliged to strive to maintain by brave and magnanimous behavior and excellence of character on his own part. By extension, especially in Persian, *ḥasab* came to be used more loosely to suggest criteria for nobility that might be acquired by personal endeavor, such as wealth, knowledge, or even the practice of a respected occupation, while *nasab* was strictly defined by heredity. The terms *ḥasab* and *nasab* appear already in a proto-Perso-Islamic context in the Arabic writings of Ebn al-Moqaffa' (d. 756 or later). In Persian literature, they appear either together as a compound or closely linked in many places, including in the writings of Abu'l-Faẓl Bayhaqī (d. 1077), Nāṣer-e Ẕosrow (d. 1072), and Ne-zāmi Ganjavi (d. ca. 1217). Ferdowsi (d. 1020), as might be expected, prefers the Persian *nežād* for his depictions of Persian royal and heroic characters, but employs *nasab* for his presentations of Bahrām Čōbin (q.v.) and of Sultan Maḥmud of Ġazna (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. and tr. Mohl, VI, p. 576, VII, p. 502).

The concept of *ḥasab o nasab* occupies an important position in the history of



Islamic Persia. Both before and after the arrival of Islam, the Persian tradition placed great emphasis on the significance of heredity in determining the ideal social order, and on the prestige and privileges attendant on nobility of birth. In the *Nāma-ye Tansar*, for example, failure on the king's part to pay adequate attention to the matter of *ḥasab o nasab* is presented as a prime cause of social chaos and sickness (*Nāma-ye Tansar*, pp. 13-14, tr. p. 39; cf. Neẓām-al-Molk, p. 190, tr., pp. 143-44). Yet Persian conceptions of nobility differed from Arab understandings in that they were less rooted in a precisely detailed knowledge of genealogy, and this difference was perceived by the Arab tribesmen who settled in Persian areas in the aftermath of the Muslim conquests as a mark of cultural inferiority (see Ebn 'Abd-al-Barr, p. 43; Aḥmad Nowayri, II, p. 276; cf. Mottahedeh, 1976). At the same time, Persians and others who converted to Islam were obliged to affiliate themselves to Arab tribes through the institution of clientage, and it was only later that *mawāli* responded with genealogies of their own (Kister and Plessner, pp. 50 ff.).

While mainstream Persian culture has often been characterized by a high regard for noble birth, however defined, a long-standing and repeated attraction to egalitarianism constitutes a significant secondary theme (see Crone, pp. 447-62). This attraction has at times found support in the teachings of Mazdak, and it has also drawn inspiration from the egalitarian ethic embedded in the Islamic religious tradition. Persians may well have been among those early Muslims who seem to have questioned the social implications of the new faith, which asserted forcefully the equality of all believers before God. It is possible that the second caliph, 'Omar b. al-Ḳaṭṭāb, undertook some initiatives to actualize the moral egalitarianism of the new religion on the social plane, but by the end of the first civil war at the latest it was evident that the new polity was not to provide an occasion for a general experiment in social egalitarianism. That this development was accompanied by continuing competition for precedence is suggested by a large body of literary fragments (some of which probably articulate pre-classical sentiments) in which the importance of genealogy is rejected. For example, 'Omar is said to have pronounced: "The believer's nobility is his piety, his inherited merit is his religion, and his manliness is his good character" (Mālek, II, p. 463) a slogan that also lent itself to *šo'ubi* purposes. A particular abundance of similar sayings, many of them anti-materialist in character, is ascribed to Imam 'Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb. According to a prophetic Hadith, on the Day of Judgment God will establish his own *nasab*, and it will be on the basis of piety (Ṭabarāni, I, p. 230). Many of these materials allude to and explicate



Koranic passages, especially the verse “Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is [he who is] the most righteous of you” (49:13), in which nobility is equated with piety. Also noteworthy is the combination of the Koranic nobility-piety equation with esteem for wealth, for example in the Prophetic Hadith that runs: *al-ḥasab al-māl wa’l-karam al-taqwā* (“ḥasab is wealth and generosity is religious piety”; Termedi, V, p. 65; Ebn Māja, II, p. 1410). This Hadith was frequently invoked in discussions of marriage equality (*kafā’a*), for which, according to some authorities, genealogy was a primary factor. Both Shi’ites and Kharijites appropriated the term *nasab* in order to subordinate it to Islamic credentials (in sayings such as “my lineage is Islam” and “I am the son of Islam”; for sources see Marlow, pp. 24-34).

As Persian culture grew confident in its Islamic forms, the significance of heredity and noble birth was reaffirmed, and respect for them was able to co-exist more or less comfortably with the Islamic ethos. For instance, Afzal-al-Din Aḥmad Kermāni (d. ca. 1218) places men of *ḥasab o nasab* in the highest social category, on a par with princes (p. 58). Like other Muslims, many Persian thinkers came to believe that the Islamic egalitarian truth applied only in the next world, whereas in this world hierarchies based largely on heredity were real, necessary, and desirable. Indeed, some Persian writers argued that God had ordained socio-economic inequalities in this world as part of the divine plan (Rāḡeb Eṣfahāni, pp. 111-14; Marlow, pp. 148-51).

At the same time, Persians themselves adopted the science of genealogy for their own needs. In particular, they devoted their attention to the genealogies of the Prophet and Imams. A lengthy section is devoted to genealogy in the Persian encyclopedia *Nafā’es al-fonun* (comp. 1334) of Šams-al-Din Āmoli, who still considered a sophisticated knowledge of the science of genealogy and its branches desirable (II, pp. 287 ff.; see also Bahā’-al-Din Āmoli, pp. 46 ff.).

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