



ISFAHAN V. LOCAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Isfahan is exceptional in the number and variety of works of local historiography; no other Persian city has attracted nearly as many such works. These works were written predominantly in two periods: the pre-Mongol (and in particular the pre-Saljuq) period and the 19th century; works written in the 20th century will not be dealt with extensively here. Works of local historiography about Isfahan can be classified into two distinct literary genres: the biographical dictionary and the *adab*-oriented local history.

Biographical dictionaries. Biographical dictionaries of local perspective were written for a large number of Persian cities in the pre-Mongol period, but only a fraction of them are extant in either the original Arabic or Persian renderings. Two biographical dictionaries about scholars from Isfahan, both written in Arabic, have come down to us. The earlier of these two, the *Ṭabaqāt al-moḥaddetīn be-Esfahān wa'l-wāredīn 'alayhā*, by Abu'l-Šayḵ 'Abd-Allāh b. Moḥammad (274-369/887-979), was probably written in the 350s/960s, since the latest dates mentioned do not relate to events far beyond 350 (ed. Baluši, IV, p. 230, dated 353). The mention of dates as late as that seems to be exceptional, so they could have been added during the final stages of the



process of completing the work. The second work of this genre is *Dekr akbār Eşfahān* by the Hadith transmitter and historian Abu No‘aym Eşfahāni (q.v.; d. 430/1038). The latest dates in this work suggest that it was completed in the 410s/1020s.

Abu’l-Şayḳ was not necessarily the first author from Isfahan to write a biographical dictionary about the scholars who lived in, or had come to, his hometown. Among the many sources he quotes, the Hanbalite scholar Ebn Manda (d. 301/913-14) is the most prominent. On the basis of this and other later sources, it is almost certain that Ebn Manda wrote such a work. It seems that it was still known in the immediate pre-Mongol period, since the author of an analogous work on the scholars of Qazvin was apparently able to use it then (Rāfe‘i, I, p. 2). Moreover, Abu’l-Şayḳ frequently mentions men who wrote their *maşyaka* (list of teachers with whom they studied Hadith and other Islamic sciences); thus, it would be reasonable to assume that he used a number of these in preparing his work. The transition from writing down one’s own *maşyaka* to compiling a book on the “categories” or “generations” of scholars is likely to have been a relatively smooth one.

Undoubtedly, Abu’l-Şayḳ was, in turn, one of the most important, perhaps even the single most important, source for Abu No‘aym, who referred to him as Abu Moḥammad b. Ḥayyān. Except for a very few, all the scholars included in Abu’l-Şayḳ’s work are also mentioned by Abu No‘aym. Abu No‘aym did not, however, merely write a continuation (*ḍayl*) to Abu’l-Şayḳ’s work; rather, he used most of his material in a slightly abridged or otherwise adapted form; thus, any changes that Abu No‘aym introduced into the text of his source can be taken to be intentional. Other sources of comparable character were identified first by Sven Dederling in the introduction to his edition of Abu No‘aym’s work, and have recently been discussed more comprehensively by Nur-Allāh Kasā’i in the introduction to his Persian translation of the work. Kasā’i also provides a detailed comparison between the respective works of Abu’l-Şayḳ and Abu No‘aym. It is also worth mentioning that an important source for Abu No‘aym was the (apparently lost) *Ketāb Eşfahān* by Ḥamza Eşfahāni (see below).

These two biographical dictionaries are similar in scope, but they offer a number of differences in form: Abu’l-Şayḳ arranged his entries according to the principle of *ṭabaqāt* (categories), whereas Abu No‘aym adhered to alphabetical order (except for the Companions of the Prophet), using the *ṭabaqāt* principle only within larger groups made up of men who bore very



common given names such as Aḥmad (I, pp. 77 ff.).

Both works start with an introductory chapter, that of the earlier work being much more concise. Abu No‘aym places a perceptible stress on the good qualities of the Persians and their merits in contributing to the spread of Islam and the maintenance of its purity. For instance, half of the section on the Companions of the Prophet is devoted to Salmān Fār(e)si (q.v.), and the stories about the Arab conquest of Isfahan provide unfavorable details about how the invaders proceeded. Both works link the early history of Isfahan back to the prophetic cycle of history by claiming that the people of Isfahan were the only ones who did not support Nimrod in his rebellion against God, but supported Abraham instead (Abu’l-Šayḳ, 1989, I, p. 150; 1987-92, I, p. 28, Abu No‘aym, I, pp. 48 ff.).

The biographical parts of both of these works shed some light on institutions of learning and their development. The earlier work describes teaching activity taking place mainly in mosques and in private homes, whereas the later one refers to specialized institutions unknown to the earlier source, such as a “House of learning and transmission,” (*bayt al-‘ilm wa’l-rewāya*) mentioned in relation to someone who died in 363/973, as well as a “House of Hadith and transmission” (*baytal-ḥadiṯ wa’l-rewāya*) (ed. Dederling, I, pp. 156, 221). Other matters for which contemporary scholars have found it useful to resort to using local biographical dictionaries in general, and in particular those written about Isfahan, include the office of the judge (Halm) and the spread of law schools (Melchert; Tsafrir). Scholars have also offered, on the basis of such sources, reconstructions of the rise of Sufism to a respected movement that managed to attract even some of the more prominent religious scholars (Paul, 2000a, using methods developed by Chabbi).

Both books discuss in their introductions the pleasant landscape and climate of Isfahan and its surroundings in a very similar way, thus apparently laying the foundation for further developments of the genre that treats local history and geography as closely related subjects.

Adab-oriented local historiography. Works of local historiography written in the pre-Mongol period mostly belong to the genre of biographical dictionaries. The only extant work of this genre about Isfahan is Māfarruḳi’s *Maḥāsen Eṣfahān* in Arabic, which was written probably some time between 464/1072 and 484/1092 (Bulliet), when Isfahan had become the capital of the Great Saljuq empire. Māfarruḳi includes quotes from *Ketāb Eṣfahān*, the lost work of



Ḥamza Eşfahāni; thus it seems that in Isfahan there was something like a tradition of writing local history in both genres. It is, however, impossible to venture a reconstruction of Ḥamza's work based on the rather short references in Abu No'aym and Māfarruḳi, but it seems likely that it had a part similar to a biographical dictionary (including not only scholars, but also men of letters) and another one on antiquities (Paul, 2000b). Another such work on "the glories of Isfahan" (*fī mafāḳer Eşfahān*) may have existed in the form of 'Ali b. Ḥamza b. 'Omāra's *Qalā'ed al šaraf*, which is mentioned by Mā-farruḳi (p. 27) and Yāqut (V. pp. 200 f.) but seems to be lost. Nevertheless, it is probable that there was a tradition of writing *adab*-oriented local histories of Isfahan as well as biographical dictionaries of scholars.

Māfarruḳi's work was translated into Persian in the 14th century by Ḥosayn b. Moḥammad b. Abi'l-Reżā Āvi, who rearranged it by dividing the text into eight chapters and added further material in several places, in many cases poetry, as well as praise of the Il-khanid vizier who governed Isfahan in his time. Māfarruḳi's work is a pleasantly arranged assortment of stories, including some about storytelling itself. It was written from the vantage point of the secretarial class that focuses on the rules of good governance, which are sometimes linked to the pre-Islamic past. This is history as a means of conveying contemporary messages; the rules are set first in a distant past, and later cases are used to illustrate that they are still valid. In its historical parts, the text certainly does not aim to recount history "as it really happened," but tells stories of a historical nature as *exempla* to illustrate general rules that mostly pertain to good governance. Since these rules are grounded in a common cultural code shared by the author and his audience (and, in fact, later generations as well), the work is permeated with the values that were characteristic of the author's time and social background. This work's overall message is that experience (*tajreba*) has shown time and again that successful rulers are those who heed the advice of secretaries, viziers, and even the ordinary public. It is irrelevant that some of the stories told to convey this point of view may be fictitious.

Works written in the later 19th century. No local history of Isfahan seems to have been written under the Safavids or in the period immediately following their downfall. Local historiography resumed only in the second half of the 19th century, particularly as a response to Nāşer-al-Din Shah's project for a general description of the regions of Persia called *Mer'āt al-boldān*. Thus geography, in particular historical geography, is the focus of interest in some



of these works, which are a source of information about city quarters and even about individual buildings. One of the works written for Nāṣer-al-Din Shah was *Neṣf al-jahān fī taʿrīf al-Eṣfahān* (in classical Arabic, the name of the city did not bear the definite article) by Moḥammad-Mahdi b. Moḥammad-Rezā Eṣfahāni. The earliest extant manuscript of this work is dated 1287/1870, but additions and revisions were made, apparently, until 1303/1885. It continued the tradition of *adab*-oriented historiography from the earlier periods in that it also presented a mix of history and geography, as indeed would have been what the king wanted. The historical part takes up almost half of the text, highlighting two periods. In the section dealing with early history (pp. 139-69), the author tried to link his understanding of the results of modern (Western) scholarship (archaeology and research on cuneiform texts) to the Persian (*Šāh-nāma*) tradition. After the legendary kings of Persia and Babylon, most of ancient and medieval history is given short shrift; but the author still manages to quote Māfarruḳi a couple of times and refers to Jean Chardin (q.v.) and Engelbert Kaempfer as witnesses to the prosperity of the country under the Safavids (pp. 178-79). The second period focuses on the conquest of Persia by the Afghans and the ensuing period of upheaval, which he pursues as far as the reign of Faṭḥ-ʿAli Shah Qājār (q.v.; pp. 180 ff.). In this part, he frequently refers to European writers, among whom Sir John Malcolm’s *History of Persia* (1829) holds a prominent place (the references to Chardin and Kaempfer are probably also taken from here). Whenever the author has to decide whether the chronicle written by Mirzā Mahdi Khan Estrābādi (certainly the *Tāriḳ-e nāderi* is intended) or the English work is more reliable, he opts for the latter work.

Ḥājj Mirzā Ḥasan Khan Jāberi Anṣāri (1870-1957) wrote a history of Isfahan, which is called *Tāriḳ-e Eṣfahān* in the latest edition. (An earlier version, shorn of the third volume, which is a collection of biographies, is known as *Tāriḳ-e Eṣfahān wa-Ray wa hama-ye jahān*; the first version, called *Tāriḳ-e neṣf-e jahān wa hama-ye jahān*, was published in lithograph edition in Isfahan in 1914.) This is also a combination of both geography and history, and it seems particularly valuable for its detailed description of the Zāyandarud river and the system through which its waters were distributed (Lambton). In a section consisting of biographies, dates as late as 1350/1931 are given, thus reaching far into the 20th century. The author was one of the main proponents of the constitutional movement in Isfahan, and so his perspective is also partisan. He was well informed about questions of governance and administration, since he held posts in the provincial administration under Masʿud Mirzā Zēll-al-



Soltān for long periods, so it is not surprising that his main categories are 'emārat (flourishing parts) and virāni/karābi (ruinous state).

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