



KALHOR, MIRZĀ MOHAMMAD-REŽĀ

KALHOR, Mirzā Mohammad-Reżā (b. 1245/1829; d. Tehran, 25 Moḥarram 1310/3 August 1892, [Figure 1](#)), one of the most prominent 19th-century Persian calligraphers, often compared to such great masters of *nasta'liq* as Mir 'Ali Heravi and Mir 'Emād Sayfi Qazvini.

He was born into the Kalhor tribe of Kermanšāh in western Persia. In the traditional training of tribal youths, particularly in the footsteps of his father, Moḥammad-Rahiám Beg, who was the head of a group of Kalhor cavalry, Moḥammad-Reżā spent his early years mastering horsemanship and sharpshooting (Mostawfi, pp. 244-45; Eqbāl, pp. 39, 56). He, however, developed a keen interest in calligraphy as a young man and started training under Mirzā Moḥammad K̄vānsari in Tehran, but he soon realized that to excel significantly he had to model himself on the foremost master of *nasta'liq* (see *EIr.* IV/7, pp. 696 ff.). Mir 'Emād Ḥasani (q.v.). Thus, he set off for Qazvin and Isfahan, where he could devote his undivided attention to copying the original works and epigraphic friezes of the great master, particularly the inscription on the tomb of Abu'l-Qāsem Mir Fendereski, which he kept copying repeatedly (Eqbāl, pp. 39-40).

Kalhor's widespread fame as a master calligrapher soon attracted the attention of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah (r. 1848-96), who invited Kalhor to train him and later offered him a position in the Bureau of Publications (Edāra-ye



entebā'āt) under Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan E'temād-al-Salṭana. He declined the offer despite his limited financial resources, and instead decided to earn his livelihood by private practice, volunteering his services to the bureau only on an occasional basis (E'temād-al-Salṭana, I, p. 275; Mostawfi, p. 239, repr. in Eqbāl, p. 48). This left him ample time to perfect his skills and train young calligraphers. In 1883, he was invited to join the royal entourage on a journey to Khorasan. Kalhor, a devout Shi'ite, saw the trip as an opportunity to visit the holy shrine in Mashhad. On this trip, which extended from June to October 1883, he transcribed in beautiful *nasta'liq* twelve issues of the royal journal, called *Ordu-ye homāyun* (11 Ša'bān-12 Du'l-ḥejja 1300/17 June-14 September 1883; repr. Tehran, 1984), which was printed and distributed free among the royal entourage. They are considered among the finest examples of his masterful production (Eqbāl, pp. 40-41, see also a front page repr. on p. 44). Kalhor also produced a large number of unsigned exercise or *siāh-mašq* pages and only a couple of finished calligraphic specimens. His passion for the excellence of his art drove him to spend countless hours, and sometimes-sleepless nights, practicing (*mašq*). His *siāh-mašq* pages were known to be so heavily worked that the original color of paper was often entirely concealed (Mostawfi, pp. 241, 245; Eqbāl, pp. 50-51).

Kalhor died during the cholera epidemic in Tehran on 25 Moḥarram 1310/3 August 1892 at the age of sixty-five and was buried in Ḥasanābād cemetery, which has long disappeared and turned into a residential-commercial quarter in the center of Tehran. He sired nine children, six of which died during his lifetime (Kalhor, p. 50). He trained many devoted pupils of whom the most notable were Mirzā Zayn-al-'Ābedin Qazvini (Malek al-Ḳaṭṭāṭin), Āqā Morṭazā Najmābādi, Morṭazā Baraḡāni, and the renowned historian of Qajar period 'Abd-Allāh Mostawfi. Many of his pupils were instrumental in preserving his legacy and disseminating his new style within the community of calligraphers (Mostawfi, pp. 240, 243; Eqbāl, pp. 41-42, 49, 54; Bayāni, p. 732).

Without his lithographic works, we would know little about his genius. The corpus of these works includes: Select sections in the issues of the newspaper *Šaraf*; Twelve issues of the newspaper, *Ordu-ye homāyun*; the journal of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's second trip to Khorasan (facs. ed., Tehran, 1982); *Maḳzan al-enšā'*, a selection from the anthology of epistolary pieces (Tehran, 1285/1868); *Fayz al-domu'* of Mirzā Ebrāhim Nawwāb Tehrani (facs. ed., Tehran, 1984; MS at the former Royal Library); *Montaḳab al-solṭān*, an anthology of poetry by Ḥāfez and Sa'di, selected by Nāṣer-al-Din Shah; *Resāla-ye ḡadiriya*; *Divān* of



Foruḡi Bestāmi (Tehran, 1872, repr., 1979); portions of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's journal during his trip to Karbalā' and Najaf (Tehran, 1870, repr. as *Safar-nāma-ye Nāṣer-al-Din Šāh: Karbalā wa Najaf*, Tehran, 1983); the journal of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's second European tour (publ. as *Safar-nāma-ye Farangestān: safar-e dovvom*, Tehran, 1984); *Naṣāyeh al-moluk; Monājāt-nāma* (a collection of extempore prayers) of K̄vāja 'Abd-Allāh Anṣāri; Portions of the lithograph copy of the *Divān* of Mirzā Ḥabib Qā'āni (Eqbāl, p. 42; Bayāni, pp. 734-35).

Kalhor was an innovator. As a calligrapher of the lithographic press, he introduced a variety of new conventions that had a major impact on the aesthetics of the *nasta'liq* script in the latter half of the 19th century. One was the compacting (*jam'-nevisi*) and stacking of words, which altered their traditional layout on the line. Others included: the reduction of the size of the letters and dots (*kučak-nevisi* or *riz-nevisi*) and the thickening of the shafts and curvatures of the letters (*čāq-nevisi*), thereby creating a new set of proportions better suited to the lithographic process. Kalhor also introduced alternate ways of sharpening the reed pen in order to facilitate the ease and speed of writing with print ink, and he invented a pen based on the French metal prototype (*qalam-e Farānsa*) that could be used successfully to transcribe text in *nasta'liq* and *šekasta nasta'liq*. Another contribution of him of different kind was to reduce the number of years required for training toward mastership (Anjoman-e Košnevisān-e Irān, Introduction, un-numbered pages).

Kalhor's contributions to the later Persian calligraphy serve as a testament to the innovative spirit of 19th-century Persian calligraphers who, while working within the parameters of the canon, often took liberties in introducing innovations with long-lasting effects.

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