



# KALILA WA DEMNA II. THE TRANSLATION BY ABU'L- MA'ĀLI NAŞR-ALLĀH MONŞI

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## *KALILA WA DEMNA*

### ii. The translation by Abu'l-Ma'āli Naşr-Allāh Monşı

The 6th century *hejri* marks the appearance of a style in Persian prose composition that is called the artistic or ornate prose (*naṭr-e fanni* or *naṭr-e maşnu*). Prior to the development of this style, that is, from the beginning of Persian literature to the middle of the 6th/12th century, Persian prose writers relied on a straightforward manner of expression. Sentences were generally short and to the point, loanwords—except for those of a technical nature—were limited, literary artifice was rare, and insertion of Qor'anic verses, prophetic sayings, dicta, and verses of poetry into prose texts was almost non-existent. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find a single citation of poetry in all of the volumes of Bal'ami's history or the Persian translation of Ṭabari's commentary (*tafsir*) on the Qor'an, both of which were composed by the order of the Samanid king Maşur b. Nuḥ (r. 387-89/997-99) before the development of ornate prose in Persian literature (Bahār, II, pp. 69-70; Şafā, I, pp. 618-20).

From the second half of the 5th/11th century, however, literary artifice begins



to find its way into Persian prose (Širi, pp. 51-80). This change of style was motivated, on the one hand, by the influence of the writing style of chancery authors on literary expression, and on the other, by a conscious imitation of the artistic Arabic prose that had begun some two centuries earlier (Homā'i, I, p. 7; Šafā, II, pp. 880-81; cf. Neẓāmi 'Aruẓi, p. 22). A wealth of grandiloquent Arabic loan words, strings of synonyms, Persian and Arabic dicta, verses from the Qor'an, and lines of poetry found their way into prose. However, it would be incorrect to view the development of this prose style as the outcome of a gradual process. Like so many other changes in Persian literary tradition, it appeared rather abruptly and was largely due to the genius and personal influence of one man, namely, Abu'l-Ma'āli Naṣr-Allāh Monši (d. sometime between 555/1160-582/1187), whose artful Persian translation of the Arabic *Kalila wa Demna* revolutionized Persian prose.

Mojtabā Minovi has estimated that Naṣr-Allāh's translation of the *Kalila* was completed sometime between the years 538/1144 and 540/1146 (ed. Minovi, p. yā). This estimate is supported by Naṣr-Allāh's statement that he was translating the book in the 170th year after the beginning of Ghaznavid rule (ed. Qarib, pp. 12-13; ed. Minovi, p. 13). Assuming that he means 170 years after the ascension of Sebüktegin in 366/977, the time of composition may be placed around 536/1142. Elsewhere in the book, Naṣr-Allāh refers to the "recent" deaths of the caliphs al-Mostaršed (d. 529/1135) and al-Rāšed (d. 530/1136), and states that he "four hundred and odd years" (*čhār šad o and sāl*) after the establishment (*ta'sis*) of the caliphate of al-Manšur (ed. Minovi, p. 23; ed. Qarib, p. 21). Since al-Manšur ascended the throne in 136/754, he must be referring to the year 536/1142 or thereabouts.

Naṣr-Allāh Monši served in the chancery of the Ghaznavid king, Bahrāmšāh (r. 512-47/1118-52), to whom he dedicated his book. He was the scion of an illustrious family of administrators and viziers, all of whom have been praised for their literary skill. His great-great-grandfather, 'Abd-al-Šamad, moved from his native city Shiraz to Khorasan and entered the service of the Samanid governor, Ḥosām-al-Dawla Tāš (d. 377/987 or 378/988; Bosworth, p. 58). Although little is known about his life (Nuriān, pp. 6-7), we know that he was a fine administrator and a capable scribe whose eloquence and skill are said to have been superior to those of the famous Buyid vizier and man of letters Šāheḥ b. al-'Abbād (d. 355/966). 'Abd-al-Šamad's son, Aḥmad (q.v.), was trained by his father in secretarial arts and entered into the service of Abu Sa'id Ātuntāš Kvārazmšāh (d. 423/1032), the Ghaznavid military commander and



governor of K̄vārazm (Chorasmia, q.v.), in whose administration he rose from a secretary to become his vizier. The Ghaznavid historian Moḥammad 'Otbi praises both 'Abd-al-Şamad and his son for their great skill in composing prose and poetry (tr. Jorfādeqāni, pp. 273-75). Moreover, a number of historical and literary sources applaud Aḥmad's political abilities (e.g., Bayhaqī, p. 422; tr., I, p. 441; Gardizi, p. 198). Bayhaqī reports that Sultan Maḥmud was tempted to offer him the office of the grand vizier, but he decided against the idea for fear that, without Aḥmad's administrative finesse, the important frontier province of K̄vārazm might be lost (Bayhaqī, p. 468, tr., II, pp. 7-8). Aḥmad finally was appointed grand vizier during the reign of Sultan Mas'ud I (r. 421-32/1031-41), following whose death he managed to secure the throne for his son, Mawdud (r. 432-41/1041-49), who in turn appointed him as the grand vizier, but soon deposed, jailed, and probably poisoned him in prison ('Aqīli, p. 193; Bosworth, pp. 61-62, 72). Aḥmad's son, 'Abd-al-Ḥamid served the Ghaznavid kings, Sultan Ebrāhim (r. 45-92/1059-99) and Sultan Masu'ud III (r. 492-508/1099-1115) for a total of thirty-eight years ('Aqīli, pp. 195-96; Monşı-ye Kermāni, pp. 46-47) and was eulogized by the poet, Mas'ud-e Sa'd (d. 515/1121), who praised his eloquence, penmanship, and literary skills (pp. 407-9, 902-3).

'Abd-al-Ḥamid's son, Moḥammad, is the fourth important member of this illustrious family (Nuriān, p. 13). Eulogies addressed to him are found in the *divāns* of Sanā'i and Sayyed Ḥasan Ġznavi, both of whom applaud his skill in *adab* (q.v.) and learning (Ḥasan Ġznavi, pp.125-126, 147-49, 256-61, esp. p. 409; Sanā'i, p. 606). Moḥammad's son, Naşr-Allāh, a descendant of this line of highly skillful learned administrators, is the author of the Persian version of the *Kalila o Demna* and the originator of the ornate style of prose in Persian literature. As such, it is not surprising that his prose should be highly influenced by the secretarial style of expression with all the floridity and self-conscious artifice that he must have absorbed while growing up in the cultural milieu of such a learned family. In fact, he explicitly refers to the home of "his master" (*kāna-ye kvāja-ye man*) being a gathering place of the literati of his time, from whom, as a youth, he learned much (ed. Minovi, pp. 15-17; ed. Qarib, pp. 14-15). 'Abd-al-'Azim Qarib Garakāni and Mojtabā Minovi interpret the expression *kvāja-ye man* to mean either an elder brother or a vizier with whom Naşr-Allāh was associated (ed. Minovi, p. 6; ed. Qarib, p. 14), but Nuriān (p. 15) understands it to mean the author's father. Naşr-Allāh served as a secretary in the chancery of the Ghaznavids. He was promoted to the rank of vizier under K̄osrow-Malek (r. 555-82/1160-86), but, for reasons unknown, he eventually lost the sultan's favor and was killed while in prison (Şafā, II, pp.



948-49, quoting two quatrains composed by him in prison).

Naṣr-Allāh's Persian version of the *Kalila wa Dimna* is not a translation in the strict sense of the term, but a literary creation in its own right. Its author, descended from a long line of learned scribes and administrators equally at home in Persian and Arabic, created a literary language that did not exist before him. In a real sense, this language may be viewed as a literary creole, the vocabulary of which was adopted from those of its parent languages, namely literary Arabic and literary Persian. Its grammar remained Persian, but its artistic rhetorical embellishments were borrowed from the florid style of literary Arabic. Before Naṣr-Allāh presented this linguistic medium upon the literary scene, it gestated for a long time in the bilingual chanceries of the Ghaznavid and Transoxianan courts. What should be stressed, however, is that the prose style of the Persian *Kalila wa Demna* did not evolve gradually from some earlier form of prose. Rather, it was invented by Naṣr-Allāh, who, drawing on his own family and administrative backgrounds, created it. The idea that all literary innovations must evolve over time, a relic of 19th-century habits of thought, underestimates the profound impact that an individual may have upon one or more aspects of his society. Naṣr-Allāh was such an individual. His innovative prose style soon dominated the literary scene and profoundly influenced every significant literary work that appeared in Persian for nearly four centuries. Minovi provides in his edition of *Kalila wa Demna* a list of some thirty-eight such books (pp. *yb-yj*). Naṣr-Allāh's own statement implies that his prose style was something new and unusual for a literary work (ed. Minovi, p. 421).

The considerable difference between the texts of the various Arabic versions of the *Kalila wa Dimna* and its Persian rendering by Naṣr-Allāh has led some authorities to fault him for being a sloppy translator (e.g., Farzān, pp. 9-15), but others have risen to his defense and have justified his deviations (ed. Qarib, pp. *lt-md*; ed. Minovi, Introd, p. *h*). It appears that two factors contributed to the discrepancies between the Arabic tradition of the book and Naṣr-Allāh's Persian rendition of it. First, in all likelihood, Naṣr-Allāh worked from an exemplar that belonged to a lost stemma of the Arabic original (Ĝfrāni, 1971, pp. 60-62, 72). Indeed, he explicitly points out that he translated a copy of the *Kalila* that was given to him by a friend, in spite of the fact that he already had several other copies in his library (ed. Minovi, p. 18; ed. Qarib, p. 16). The fact that he chose this particular codex as his exemplar implies that its text may have been different and, at least from Naṣr-Allāh's point of view, superior to



the texts of his personal copies. What is more, Naṣr-Allāh did not only translate, but rewrote and recreated, the Arabic original by elaborating upon and expanding its content (ed. Minovi, p. 25; ed. Qarib, pp. 23-24).

The best evidence in favor of the fact that Naṣr-Allāh's work was seen as an original literary contribution is that it was translated from Persian back into Arabic less than a century after its author's death. A manuscript of the Arabic translation, copied in Ša'bān 727/July 1327 for one of the descendants of Šalāḥ-al-Din Ayyubi (Saladin), has come to light (Ġofrāni, 1971, pp. 64-65). Naturally, if Naṣr-Allāh's Persian text was considered to be a mere "translation" of the *Kalila wa Dimna*, then it would have been absurd to commission a translation of it back into the Arabic, especially at a time when copies of the original Arabic were widely available. Therefore, the Persian text must have been viewed as an independent literary creation that was valuable in its own right because of the originality of its artistic deviations from its Arabic exemplar. Interestingly enough, the Arabic translation of the Persian text is also somewhat different from the texts of the existing manuscript tradition of Naṣr-Allāh's original (Ġofrāni, 1971, pp. 67-68). These differences indicate that Naṣr-Allāh may have prepared several redactions of his translation (ed. Minovi, p. *yā*), or at the very least, he may have revised his translation several times; and that the Arabic translation of his text may have been made from a redaction of his work that is no longer extant.

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