



## 'ONŞORI

---

'ONŞORI, Abu'l-Qāsem Ḥasan b. Aḥmad (b. Balkh, ca. 961; d. Ġazna, 1039), celebrated Persian poet of the early Ghaznavid period. He was the poet laureate (*malek-al-šo'arā'*, *amir-al-šo'arā'*) at the court of the Ghaznavid Sultan Maḥmud (r. 998-1030) and has been particularly noted and praised for his panegyric odes (*qaṣidas*), in which his masterful use of rhetorical embellishments and measured diction have been referred to as models of elegant poetical composition (see, e.g., 'Awfi, II, p. 29; Foruzānfar, pp. 113-14; Arberry, pp. 54-55; for different views see below). 'Onşori belonged to the inner circle of the court and, according to Dawlatšāh, other poets had to submit their works to him for approval before they could be presented to the king (Browne, p. 120). 'Onşori's sharp criticism of a poem that the poet Ġazā'eri Rāzi had sent to Ġazna points to the position of the former as the poets' only means of access to Sultan Maḥmud ('Onşori, *Divān*, pp. 179-84; Şafā, 1959, pp. 570-73). His distinction as the preeminent master poet of the time is evident in a *qaṣida* by Manučehri Dām'gāni, who referred to him as the Masters' Master of the age (*ustād-e ustādān-e zamāna*), and more than a century later Kāqāni Šarvāni would compose a poem in praise of himself contrasting his own life of hardships with the comfort and luxury that 'Onşori enjoyed, evidently in response to an associate who had made a remark about 'Onşori's superior poetical skills (Manučehri, p. 72; Kāqāni, pp. 926-27).

Our knowledge of 'Onşori is limited to some sparse references in the works of later authors. We know that he was still alive on the 'Id al-feṭr of 422/21 September 1031, when he received a lavish reward from Sultan Mas'ud I



(Bayhaqi, pp. 359-60). According to Dawlatšāh (p. 18), ‘Onşori was a student of the poet *Abu’l-Faraj Sejzi*, which is unlikely. The story, found in the Persian version of Abu ‘Ali Tanuķi’s *Faraj ba’d al-šadda* and taken at face value by some scholars of Persian literature (e.g. Şafā, 1959, p. 559; Şafaq, p. 152), of how ‘Onşori lost all his fortune as a young man in a robbery during a commercial trip, has no historical merit. The erroneous association of the story to ‘Onşori is based on the misreading of the name ‘Abqasi in the Arabic original for ‘Onşori (see Storey and de Blois, pp. 234-35; Tanuķi, tr., II, pp. 911-15). Likewise, the anecdote about ‘Onşori and two other Ghaznavid poets testing Ferdowsi’s poetical skills (Mostawfi, p. 738; Brown, II, p. 129) is nothing but a fanciful legend. ‘Onşori started as a professional poet in the retinue of Amir Abu’l-Możaffar Naşr, Sultan Maħmud’s brother and the military commander (*sepahsālār*) of Khorasan, who introduced him to the royal court in Ğazna. There his outstanding poetic talent was soon recognized and he received the highest distinction as a poet with the title *malek al-šo’arā* (or *amir al-š’arā*), apparently the first Persian poet to receive such an honorific. He joined the circle of the king’s boon companions (*nadim*), accompanied him on his military expeditions, and immortalized his exploits in poetry, thereby becoming the recipient of lavish royal largesse (for a seemingly exaggerated note about his wealth, see Hedāyat, p. 897; cf. Kāqāni, pp. 926-27; Foruzānfar, p. 118). The story of how ‘Onşori, with an improvised quatrain, was able to cheer up Sultan Maħmud, who had fallen into a very angry mood because, in a drunken stupor, he had cut the hair of his favorite page Ayāz, is a clear indication of ‘Onşori’s favored status at the court. He was rewarded for the quatrain with three mouthfuls of jewelry (Neżāmi ‘Arużi, text, pp. 55-57, comm., pp. 175-76; cf. a similar story in Mostawfi, p. 739). ‘Onşori remained in the service of the Ghaznavids after the death of Sultan Maħmud, at least until September 1031, when he was awarded one thousand dinars for his poem on the occasion of the ‘Id al-fetr celebration under Sultan Mas‘ud I (Bayhaqi, pp. 359-60). His good fortune under the Ghaznavid was matched, according to Moħammad ‘Awfi, (II, p. 69), only by Rudaki and Amir Mo‘ezzi at the Samanid and Saljuq courts, respectively.

According to Dawlatšāh, ‘Onşori’s *divān* (collected poems) comprised some 30,000 verses (Dawlatšāh, p. 53; Hedāyat, II, p. 897), of which only about 12 percent has survived through anthologies and quotations for evidence spread in works such as *Loġat-e Fors* of *Asadi Ŧusi*. The latest edition by Moħammad Dabirsiāqi contains a total of 3,519 verses, including 70 odes (*qaşida*), 76 quatrains (*robā‘i*), and a good number of isolated lines and fragments, besides

two odes, a riddle, and some stray verses that are attributed to him and published at the end of the *Divān* (pp. 371-76).

‘Onşori is also credited by ‘Awfi (II, p. 32) with the composition of three romantic epics, entitled *Šād-baħro‘Ayn-al-ħayāt*, *Wāmeq o ‘Ađrā*, and *Ķeng-bot o Sorķ-bot*. They were all considered lost until portions and isolated verses were found or recovered from a variety of sources. Sa‘id Nafisi collected 141 verses of *Wāmeq o ‘Ađrā* that were used as evidence in Persian dictionaries, and 372 more verses were unexpectedly discovered by Moħammad Šafi‘ in the binding of an old manuscript. It is originally a Greek love story, as clearly indicated by the use of Greek names. It was also translated into Arabic by Abu Rayħān Biruni (Foruzānfar, pp. 115-16; Storey and de Blois, pp. 232-33). ‘Onşori’s version was translated in the 16th century into Turkish by Shaikh Maħmud Lāme‘i at the request of Soltan Solaymān (Gibb, III, pp. 21-22). Of *Ķeng-bot* and *Sorķ-bot*, originally an Indian story about the two giant Buddha statues in *Bāmiān*, we have only two verses that were recovered by Sa‘id Nafisi, and of the *Šād-baħr o ‘Ayn-al-ħayāt* about fifty-seven verses are quoted in Asadi’s *Loġat-e Fors*. Both of the last two stories were translated into Arabic by Biruni (Foruzānfar, pp. 116-17).

‘Onşori was primarily a master craftsman of panegyric odes, in whose poems every single verse is composed with words judiciously selected and adorned with suitable rhetorical devices in almost perfect symmetry and amazing fluency of language, but on the whole devoid of any sign of real feeling or inner artistic experience. His exceptional dexterity is most evident when he makes the transition from a description of nature or a riddle to the panegyric theme of ode (e.g., *Divān*, pp. 24, 32-33), a case of which Arthur J. Arberry has characterized as “a miracle of mesmeric eloquence” (Arberry, p. 55; ‘Onşori, *Divān*, pp. 247-50). He recounted all Maħmud’s military expeditions in an ode of over 150 verses, which is often mentioned as a perfect example of his mastery in combining measured diction with euphonic embellishments, without giving way to verbosity or ambiguous metaphors (*Divān*, pp. 125-43). He was well versed in the works of great Arab poets, particularly Motanabbi, whose influence and occasional adaptation of imagery or direct borrowings from him are discernible in some of his odes (Foruzānfar, p. 113; Šafā, 1959, p. 562; Šafi‘i Kadkani, pp. 421-22). His lyric poetry, however, leaves a good deal to be desired. He himself admitted his shortcomings in this domain, conceding that the lyrics composed by him were not as desirable as those of Rudaki (*Divān*, p. 327). Ķāqāni (p. 926, vv. 4, 8) criticized him for being merely a



panegyrist, and Šafī‘i Kadkani (p. 420) referred to him as a poet who, due to his lack of “poetic vision and emotional experience” (*did-e še’ri wa tajreba-ye ḥessi*), tried with some success to cover his inability to create poetic imagery with craftsmanship (for a harsh criticism of ‘Onşori that occasionally takes the tone of personal attack, see Moşaffā; for a different view, see Foruzānfar, pp. 112-14; Şafā, 1959, p. 562; Arberry, pp. 54-55).

Some of ‘Onşori’s poems have been translated into Western languages, for instance, a partial rendering of an ode in praise of Maḥmud’s brother, Amir Naşr (Browne, pp. 121-23, Pers. text in *Divān*, pp. 7-9) and the Italian and French translations of selected poems (Lazard et al., pp. 89-92; Bargili, ed., tr. and Pers. texts).

For editions and manuscripts, see Storey and de Blois.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

Arthur John Arberry, *Classical Persian Literature*, London, 1958, pp. 54-56; tr. P. Asad-Allāh Āzād as *Adabiyāt-e kelāsik-e Irān*, Mashad, 1992, p. 86.

Moḥammad ‘Awfi, *Lobāb al-albāb*, ed. Edward G. Browne and Moḥammad Qazvini, 2 vols., London, 1906, I, pp. 28-33; ed. Sażid Nafisi, Tehran, 1956, p. 301.

Rita Bargili, ed., *Ricciolī in ‘Unşurī e Farruḥī*, Quaderni del Seminario di iranistica, uralo-altaistica e caucasologia dell’Università degli studi di Venezia 21/2, Venice, 1983 (Italian tr. of selected poems).

Abu’l-Fażl Bayhaqi, *Tāriḳ-e mas‘udi*, ed. ‘Ali-Akbar Fayyāż, Mashad, 1971, pp. 360, 372, 496, 924.

Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia II*, Cambridge, repr. 1956, pp. 121-23.

‘Abd-al-‘Ali Datġayb, “Onşori šā‘er-e qaşidapardāz,” *Payām-e novin*, 6/10, 1965, pp. 1-17.

Dawlatšāh Samarqandi, *Tađkerat al-šo‘arā*, ed. Moġammad ‘Abbāsi, Tehran, 1958, pp. 18, 44, 50, 53.

Zāheda Efteġār, *‘Onşori wa maqām-e udar adabiyāt-e fārsi*, Islamabad, 1999, pp. 2-5, 16-19, 50-68, 75-80, 98, 109-116.

Nasr-Allāh Falsafi, *Haštmaqāla-ye tāriġi wa adabi*, Tehran, 1951, p. 165.

Badi‘-al-Zamān Foruzānfar, *Soġan wa soġanvarān*, Tehran, 1971, pp. 112-20.

E. J. W. Gibb, *A History of Ottoman Poetry*, 5 vols., London, 1963-67, III, pp. 21-22.

Rezāqoli Khan Hedāyat, *Majma‘ al-foşahā*, ed. Mazāher Moşaffā, 6 vols., Tehran, II, pp. 897-920 (includes a good number of his poems).

Parviz Nātel Ķānlari, “Wāmeq o ‘Ađrā-ye ‘Onşori wa Šāh-nāma-ye Ferdowsi,” *Soġan* 21, 1971, pp. 433-41.

Zahrā Ķānlari, *Farhang-e adabiyāt-e fārsi*, Tehran, 1987, pp. 352-53.

Afzal-al-Din Badil Ķāqāni Šarvāni, *Divān*, ed. Žiā‘-al-Din Sajjādi, Tehran, 1995, pp. 926-27.

Gilbert Lazard (see Şafā, 1960-61). Shaikh Maġmud b. ‘Otmān Lāme‘i, tr., *Wāmeq u ‘Ađrā*, tr. Joseph Hammer-Purgstall as *Wamik und Asra: das ist, Der Glühende und die Blühende. Das älteste persische romantische Gedicht*, Vienna, 1833 (a rather free tr. of the Turk. version).

Moġammad-Ja‘far Maġjub, *Sabk-e Ķorāsāni dar še‘r-e fārsi*, Tehran, 1966, p. 181.

Idem, “Wāmeq o ‘Ađrā-ye ‘Onşori,” *Soġān* 18, 1968, pp. 43-52, 131-42.

Manučehri Dām‘gāni, *Divān*, ed. Moġammad Dabirsiāqi, Tehran, 1984, pp. 70-78.

Mazāher Moşaffā, *Pāsdārān-e soġan*, Tehran, 1956, pp. 92-158 (includes substantial samples of ‘Onşori’s poetry and some statistic information).



Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfi, *Tāriḳ-e gozida*, ed. ‘Abd-al-Ḥosayn Navā’i, Tehran, 1960, pp. 738-39.

Neẓāmi ‘Aruzi Samarqandi, *Čahār maqāla*, ed. Moḥammad Qazvini, rev. ed. with commentaries by Moḥammad Mo’in, Tehran, 1954, text, pp. 56-57.

Abu’l-Qāsem Ḥasan Onşori, *Divān*, ed. Yaḥyā Qarib, Tehran, 1963; ed. Moḥammad Dabirsiāqi, Tehran, 1984 (with notes, commentaries, and poet’s biography).

Idem, *Wāmeq o ‘Adrā*, ed. Mawlawi Moḥammad Šafi’, Lahor, 1967, pp. 2-9 (Turk. tr. by Lāme’i).

M. N. Osmanov, *Chastotniŭ slovar Unsuri*, Moscow, 1970 (glossary of ‘Onşori’s poetry based on Dabirsiāqi’s 1st ed.) reviewed by Šāyesta Adab, “Vāža-nāma-ye basāmadi-e *Divān-e ‘Onşori*,” *MDAT* 18/3, 1971, pp. 153-61.

Moḥammad b. ‘Omar Rāduyāni, *Tarjomān al-balāga*, ed. Ahmed Ateş, Istanbul, 1949.

Jan Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*, Dordrecht, 1968, pp. 172-74.

Ḍabiḥ-Allāh Šafā, *Tāriḳ-e adabiyāt-e dar Irān I*, Tehran, 1959, pp. 559-67.

Idem, *Ganj-e soḳan: šā’erān-e bozorg-e pārsiguy wa montaḳab-e aš’ār-e ānān*, 3 vols., Tehran, 1960-61, I, pp. 114-23; tr. Gilbert Lazard, Roger Lescot, and Henri Massé, trs., *Anthologie de la poésie persane xi -xx siècle*, Paris, 1964.

Šādeq Reżāzāda Šafaq, *Tāriḳ-e adabiyāt-e Irān*, Tehran, 1973, pp. 152-57.

Moḥammad-Rezā Šafi’i Kadkani, *Şowar-e kiāl dar še’r-e fārsi*, Tehran, 1971, pp. 420-31.

Moḥammad Šibli No’māni, *Še’r al-‘Ajam*, tr. Moḥammad-Taqi Faḳr Dā’i Gilāni, 4 vols., Tehran, 1956, I, pp. 47-56.

C. A. Storey and François de Blois, *Persian Literature; a Bio-bibliographical Survey V/1*, London, 1999, pp. 232-37.

Abu ‘Ali Moḥassen Tanuḳi, *Faraj ba’d al-šadda*, tr. As’ad Dehestāni as *Faraj-e ba’d az šaddat*, ed. Esmā’il Ḥākemi, 2 vols., Tehran, n.d.

Bo Utas, “Did ‘Adhrā Remain a Virgin?,” *Orientalia Suecana* 33-35, 1984-86, pp. 429-44.

‘Abd-al-Ḥosayn Zarrinkub, *Sayr-i dar še’r-e fārsi*, Tehran, 1984, pp. 20-21.