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ʿOTBI, ABU NAṢR MOḤAMMED

ʿOTBI, Abu Naṣr Moḥammad b. ʿAbd-al-Jabbār (ca. 961?-1036 or 1040), secretary, courtier, and author of the Arabic *Al-Kitāb al-Yamini*, an important dynastic history of the Ghaznavids.

Life. The primary sources for his life are the *Yamini* and a short biography in ʿAbd-al-Malek b. Moḥammad Ṯaʿālebi's *Yatimat al-dahr*. ʿOtbi was probably born around the year 961 in the city of Ray, a site of contention between the Buyids in the west and the Samanids (and subsequently the Ghaznavids) in the east throughout much of the 10th and the early 11th centuries. ʿOtbi appears as a man of ambition and shrewdness from early in his life. He gained entry into the Samanid administration through his uncle, and rose to the level of Head Postmaster of Nišāpur. During the political upheavals that accompanied the disintegration of the Samanid dynasty, ʿOtbi changed masters in rapid succession and eventually worked for the emir Sebüktigin (d. 977), the founder of the Ghaznavid dynasty.

After Sebüktigin's death, when two of his sons fought over the succession, ʿOtbi found himself in a precarious position in Ḡazni serving the eventual loser, Esmāʿil (d. 997). The memory of this involvement may have placed him under some suspicion when the emir Maḥmud (r. 998-1030) ascended the throne, for ʿOtbi felt the need to insert himself into the text of his history as having tried to convince Esmāʿil to yield peaceably to his brother (Manini, I, p. 276; ed. Ṯameri, p. 155; Jorfāḏeqāni, p. 160). By 999 ʿOtbi was apparently enjoying the good graces of Maḥmud and traveled as his envoy to the ruler of Ḡarčestān (Manini, II, pp. 135-39; ed. Ṯameri, pp. 337-39; Jorfāḏeqāni, pp. 324-27). From

this point on, however, until the strange affairs that surrounded the composition of his literary masterpiece twenty years later, the events of ʿOtbi's life are shrouded in mystery.

It was sometime after 1020 that he composed a history of the reign of Maḥmud of Ḡazna, called the *Yamini* after Maḥmud's title *Yamin-al-dawla* or "the right hand of the [Abbasid] state." To the main body of the text, a long section is appended by ʿOtbi cataloguing the bizarre occurrences that befell him following the dedication of the book (Manini, II, p. 356-419; ed. Ṯameri, pp. 448-485; Jorfāḏeqāni, pp. 443-95). He writes that he presented his book to the vizier Ḥasan Meymandi, who rewarded him for his accomplishment by appointing him as chief of post in Ganj Rostāq near Bāḏḡis in today's Afghanistan. ʿOtbi, who had served as secretary and ambassador to kings and emirs, was granted as reward for his achievement the same position from which he had started his career over two decades earlier, and this, in a city far less significant or glamorous than Nišāpur. Thus, the need to advance his fortunes may well have served as a motive for writing the history. In his new post however, ʿOtbi gained himself an enemy in the person of the local governor, and after matters were referred to the vizier, ʿOtbi was dismissed. The governor then contrived to murder him, but ʿOtbi was saved by the emir Masʿud (r. 1031-40).

Indeed, a close reading of the *Yamini* shows that the text is always brimming over with such tensions from the author's life. On the one hand it is a panegyric on Maḥmud's reign. But muffled criticism is never far from the surface. The book's exuberant language often hides subtle and ironic jabs at various personages, including, at times, the sultan himself. The *Yamini* begins *in medias res* with the account of the rise of Sebüktigin in Ḡazna following the death of Alptigin (d. 963). The narrative then relates the gradual upsurge of the Ghaznavids culminating in their victory over their Indian enemies. This plot is submerged abruptly, and ʿOtbi reverts back to the year 976 when the 13 year-old Nuḥ b. Manṣur (r. 976-997) ascended the Samanid throne in Bukhara. The story from this point forth is one of progressive unrest and disorder. The chamberlain Tāš (d. 988), as well as the Simjurid family, began undermining the power of the Samanid house in Khorasan (Ḵorāsān). Simultaneously, the Ilak Ḵānid ruler Boḡrā Khān (d. 992) invaded from the north and captured the city of Bukhara, withdrawing, however, after succumbing to a severe illness that soon took his life. As matters grew dire, the Ghaznavids were called in for help. However, the Samanids' turn was up. Authority in Khorasan was

inherited by Maḥmud, challenged at first by his brother Esmāʿil, who was soon defeated. Following the secure establishment of Maḥmud, the Abbasid caliph al-Qāder be-llāh (r. 991-1031), sent a diploma of investiture to the new Ghaznavid ruler. Maḥmud at this point took a vow to lead substantial raids eastwards into India, looting temples, smashing idols, and spreading the banner of Islam far and wide. The account of these invasions is interrupted by several reports recounting the affairs of Sistān, Gorgān, and Iraq. The book closes with disparate anecdotes such as the arrival of a Fatimid envoy from Egypt, the reign of terror held in the city of Nišāpur by the Karramite leader Abu Bakr (fl. 11th century), and the death of Maḥmud's brother Naṣr. To all this is appended the biographical details about ʿOtbi's life at the time of the composition of his history.

The Yamini. ʿOtbi wrote one of the earliest dynastic histories (Rosenthal; Robinson). The *Yamini*'s value for a study of the early Ghaznavids cannot be overstated, especially as it is often the only contemporary source for much of the events that it describes. For this purpose, it can be complemented with the *Zayn-al-Aḵbār* of Gardizi (11th century), and to a large extent, the poems of Farroḵi Sistāni (d. 1037-38). When read along with the compositions of Ṯaʿālebi (d. 1037-38) or Biruni (973-after 1050), ʿOtbi's text will reveal much about the cultural life of Khorasan in this period.

In sum, as a historical document, defined broadly, the *Yamini* pulses with the ideals and perceptions of notables in the east at the turn of the first millennium. As a monument of style, it displays the most formidable linguistic virtuosity. Structurally, it never loses the polyphonic nature of earlier Arabic historical writing, giving voice to various sources, be they oral reports by fellow literati or victory-proclamations from India. In some respects it bears testimony to the "rationalist" attitude of the historians of that period towards truth and accuracy, shared among others by Masʿudi (before 893-956), Biruni, Abu'l-Faẓl Bayhaqi (995-1077), and Meskavayh (d. 1030?). In other respects the *Yamini* contains the most fantastic passages, full of adventures and marvels, magic springs, great river-crossings, immense riches hoarded in temples, and idols that levitate midair without support. But there are also horrific descriptions of famine and cannibalism, political terror and witch-hunts, riots and bloody persecution. All these various strands flow together to produce the gripping effects of the *Yamini*.

The Persian Translation. The book grew in popularity, and between 1206 and 1207, a minor official in western Iran by the name of Abu'l-Šaraf Nāṣeḥ b.

Ẓafar Monši Jorfāḏeqani (i.e. from the city of Golpāyegān) translated it into Persian prose. Jorfāḏeqāni had initially planned to write an original history for Jamāl-al-Din Ay Aba (fl. 12th-13th centuries), a post-Seljuk petty ruler who used to come to the environs of Golpāyagān for hunting expeditions. He does not specifically say that this text was meant to be in Persian. However, from the comments of the vizier who instead commissioned him to translate ʿOtbi's *Yamini*, it is apparent that knowledge of Arabic did not extend very much beyond the rank of the secretaries. "Render ʿOtbi into Persian with phrases that are easy to comprehend, and both Turk and Tajik may be able to grasp" (Jorfāḏeqāni, p. 8); the vizier's words imply that if indeed Jorfāḏeqāni expected the king to have understood his book, he better write it in Persian.

The author heeded the vizier's advice and embarked on the translation of the *Yamini*. Yet, at some point in the process, Jorfāḏeqāni had experienced a sense of failure, of a certain awkward shortcoming. This he blamed on the Persian language, "I got busy rendering this book from Arabic into Persian in Rabiʿ II 603 [5 Nov.-3 Dec. 1206]; but men of knowledge and understanding know well that in Persian one cannot manifest much elegance" (Jorfāḏeqāni, p. 10). This was a strange complaint to make. For the vizier had specifically told him to keep the translation simple, "Go no further than the style of the original," he had warned, "avoid affectation and pomposity. Do not attach repugnant expressions unto it, nor any obscure words either. Be contented with that which comes naturally to your memory and which your disposition freely grants" (Jorfāḏeqāni, p. 8). But clearly Jorfāḏeqāni had other aspirations when he undertook the translation. It seems that he had tried to dissent from the particulars of his commission by the vizier in order to recreate in Persian the same effects that ʿOtbi's *Yamini* had made on the Arabic language. Jorfāḏeqāni was not Persianizing the *Yamini*; quite the opposite—he was stretching the limits of literary Persian to Arabicize it. And in this endeavor, he thought he had failed. Or rather, he believed that his native language had failed him. Perhaps this was what led him to keep some parts of the original in Arabic.

Jorfāḏeqāni's other peculiarities are in part related to a preference for amplified and more embellished sense of style than his Arabic model, but they also evince his understanding of Ghaznavid history as an idealized past into which he might insert a number of present concerns (Meisami, pp. 259-63). Finally, the author added a resumé of contemporary events to the end of the translation, and with this the text is terminated. Over the years, Jorfāḏeqāni's version of the *Yamini* came to replace the Arabic original in South Asia,

Transoxiana, Iran, and Anatolia. His version of the reign of the Ghaznavids found its way to many of the universal histories of the 14th to 16th centuries. It was translated into Turkish (Rieu) during the reign of the Ottoman sultans Selim II (r. 1566-74) and Murad III (r. 1574-95), summarized in French in the 18th century (A. I. Silvestre de Sacy, see Storey, I, 2, p. 251), and inaccurately rendered into English in the 19th century (James Reynolds). Its critical edition appeared in Iran in 1966 (Jaʿfar Šeʿār).

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