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THE SCHOLARLY, EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ABŪ NAṢR FARĀHĪ'S «NĪṢĀB AL-ṢIBYĀN»

Abstract. *This article analyses the scholarly, educational and cultural significance of «Nīṣāb al-ṣibyān» from the point of view of historical lexicography, of the verse text used in instruction, and of the subsequent reception of the work. The research rests upon a comparison of the data of a scholarly reference entry, of a recent study and of institutional manuscript catalogues. The presentation of Arabic-Persian equivalents in verse form links the lexicographical and the educational functions of the work to one another. The comparison of the interpretations of different sources concerning prosody shows the necessity of distinguishing the original authorial purpose from the later educational use of the work. Commentary manuscripts, the acknowledgment of Farāhī in a later verse lexicon, and the catalogue descriptions of the copies preserved in Uzbekistan furnish a foundation for studying the history of the cultural reception of the work. As a result the scholarly significance is explained by the organization of the lexical material, the educational significance by the historical instructional function, and the cultural significance by the copying and the commenting of the text and by its acceptance as a model by later authors. The conclusions remain bounded by the evidentiary possibilities of the sources; no direct textual collation and no experimental verification of pedagogical effectiveness is claimed to have been carried out.*

Keywords: *Abū Naṣr Farāhī, Nīṣāb al-ṣibyān, Arabic–Persian lexicography, verse lexicon, historical language education, cultural reception, manuscript heritage.*

INTRODUCTION

Abū Naṣr Farāhī's «Nīṣāb al-ṣibyān» is a historical educational text in which lexical content and verse form are united. Mohammad Dabirsiyaqi describes it as a verse

lexicon embracing Arabic units and their Persian translations and serving the study of the Arabic language by children (Dabirsiyaqi, 1999). In determining the significance of the work it is necessary to consider together the lexical information, the form in which it is presented, and the subsequent historical circulation of the text.

The celebrity of the work, the preservation of a great number of its copies and its effectiveness in instruction are not to be taken as one and the same indicator. The scholarly contribution of the research consists in connecting the bibliographical accounts of the work with information proper to particular copies and in explaining the divergence between the sources concerning its educational function. This approach serves to express the historical significance of the work upon the basis of verifiable evidence rather than of general evaluations given in advance.

Yusuf Öz's study of 2025 considers the tradition of verse lexicography from «Nişāb al-şibyān» to the «Tuhfe-i Şâhidî». The author discusses the function of this tradition in language teaching and the renewals in the structure and the content of the later lexicons (Öz, 2025:201-202). This direction makes it possible to evaluate Farāhî's work not as an isolated lexical monument but in its relation to later educational texts. A similar verse form does not, however, always constitute direct evidence of influence.

MAIN PART

The material of the research consists of the article in the Encyclopaedia Iranica, the study of Yusuf Öz, the catalogues of Fihrist, of the British Library and of Princeton University Library, two records of the state register «Manbalar», and the catalogue description in the project of the University of St Andrews. They furnish evidence of various kinds: a lexical and didactic description, the existence of manuscripts and commentaries, and the acknowledgment of Farāhî by a later author. The corpus is not presented as a list embracing all the copies of the work or all the scholarly literature upon it.

By bibliographical comparison the accounts given in the sources concerning the genre, the audience, the educational function and the extent of the text were collated. Upon the basis of source criticism the interpretation of the authorial purpose, the catalogue description and the evidence of later use were distinguished from one another. Historical and functional analysis was then applied in order to connect this

information with the directions of scholarly, educational and cultural significance. The original manuscripts were not directly examined in this research; information relating to colophons, to margins or to textual variants is adduced as catalogue description. This mediated character is preserved even where the contemporary study relies upon another source.

The scholarly significance of the work may be approached from its Arabic-Persian lexicographical function. The catalogue description of Wadh.Minasian 713 records that the Persian meanings of the Arabic words are given by means of verses (Fihrist, n.d.). This form binds the units of the two languages within a particular composition. For this reason, in investigating the work, the function of the translation equivalent within the verse must be taken into account along with its precision. This approach makes it possible to study the historical lexical material in at least three directions: the Persian equivalent of the Arabic unit, the method of expressing the meaning concisely, and the adaptation of the lexical unit to the poetic structure. These are not results established in the article by means of direct lexical examples, but research possibilities arising from the lexical and verse nature of the work. To draw a conclusion concerning the narrowing or the widening of meaning requires the comparison of a particular verse with the corresponding commentary.

The verse form binds lexicographical information to an aesthetic order. Yet the existence of a metre is not a ground for explaining the choice of every word by the metre alone: lexical necessity, the tradition of translation and compositional constraints must be examined separately. The scholarly value of the work is manifested in the possibility of studying these mutual relations upon the basis of historical material.

Information concerning the extent of the text likewise requires that the general description be distinguished from the description proper to a particular copy. The *Encyclopaedia Iranica* describes the work as two hundred verses in forty sections, while in the record of Wadh.Minasian 713 two hundred and twenty verses are indicated (Dabirsiyaqi, 1999; Fihrist, n.d.). This divergence raises an important question for the direct collation of the copies. The difference in the figures does not of itself, however, establish an addition by a copyist or the loss of verses: the criterion of counting and the boundary of the principal text must likewise be examined.

The educational significance of the work is bound up with its audience and with its method of presenting knowledge. In Dabirsiyaqi's description the Arabic vocabulary,

the foundations of prosody and elementary general knowledge are mentioned together (Dabirsiyaqi, 1999). This description gives an account of an educational function wider than the compass of a lexicon. In order to distinguish the original authorial purpose from the later educational use, however, comparison with other sources is necessary.

Relying upon the preface of the work and upon earlier studies, Yusuf Öz emphasizes that in the original structure the teaching of prosody is not indicated as a separate purpose. According to his analysis, verses indicating the metre and marks relating to prosody were added in certain later copies and editions (Öz, 2025:203-204). This account, rather than denying the general description given in the reference work, makes it possible to determine its historical stage: the teaching of Arabic words may have been the original function, while the use of the work for prosody may be a function that developed in the course of its later reception. This interpretation rests upon Öz's conclusion; it is not claimed to have been independently confirmed through the manuscripts.

The compass of the content of the knowledge must be evaluated with the same caution. In Öz's analysis material relating to the names of the months, to the prophets, to the planets and to the measures of weight is mentioned (Öz, 2025:204). This information shows the connection between the learning of vocabulary and the assimilation of general knowledge; to determine whether this composition is the same in all the copies, however, requires a textological examination. The verse structure creates a foundation for repeating words in a fixed rhythmical sequence. It may be interpreted as a form suited to memorization, yet no result concerning modern experimental effectiveness is to be drawn from a historical form. The degree of retention of a particular group of learners, or its comparative advantage over another method, has not been measured in this corpus. Educational significance is here evaluated through the historical instructional function and the form of presenting knowledge.

The existence of commentaries illuminates the history of the cultural reception of the work. Delhi Persian 1571* in the British Library is described as the extensive commentary written upon «Nişāb al-şibyān» by Mawlawī Muḥammad Sa'd. The catalogue gives the date of completion in the colophon as 12 Rabī' al-Thānī 1149 AH / 20 August 1736; the extent is recorded as approximately one hundred folios, the script as nasta'liq and the origin as India (British Library, n.d.). This catalogue evidence shows that the work was an object of commentary activity. The particular method of

instruction, or the standing of the commentary within a curriculum, requires a separate study of its content and of the notes of use.

In the matter of influence, an author's acknowledgment of an earlier work is stronger evidence than a general formal resemblance. In the description of Serez 3670 in the project of the University of St Andrews it is recorded, upon the basis of the preface of Ḥamīd Angūrī's «Silk al-Jawāhir», that the work was created in imitation of the works of Farāhī and of Ḥusām al-Dīn al-Khū'ī (University of St Andrews, n.d.). This account furnishes a ground for discussing the fact that Farāhī's work served as a model for a later verse lexicon. To determine precisely which lexical units, sections or structural principles were taken, however, requires a direct comparison of the two texts.

Cultural significance, accordingly, is not to be measured by the number of copies alone. The copying of a text illuminates its preservation, the commenting of it the need to explain it, and an author's acknowledgment of Farāhī its reception as a model. These processes are mutually connected, but each of them requires evidence of a different kind. To reconstruct the historical life of the work while preserving these distinctions renders the conclusions concerning cultural influence more precise.

In record 7903 of the state register «Manbalar» a copy of «Niṣāb al-ṣibyān» preserved in the Abū Rayḥān Bīrūnī Institute of Oriental Studies is recorded under inventory number 1881. It belongs to the nineteenth century, consists of ninety-four folios and is copied in nasta'liq script; its languages are designated in the catalogue as Arabic and Tajik (State Register of Ancient Written Sources, n.d.a). This record furnishes a precise inventory foundation for the manuscript corpus in Uzbekistan. That it was copied in the territory of Uzbekistan itself, or used in a particular madrasa, does not follow from this information.

In record 7904 of the same register the work «Sharḥ Niṣāb al-ṣibyān» of Muḥammad b. Jalīl b. Sulaymān al-Kūhistānī is recorded under inventory number 1969/I. The manuscript, belonging to the nineteenth century, consists of one hundred and fifty-eight folios, and the description connects the explanations with a textbook of the higher school (State Register of Ancient Written Sources, n.d.b). This account gives the catalogue interpretation of the educational function of the commentary; the possibility of verifying it by the name of an institution, by a timetable of lessons or by notes of use remains open for further research. The copy Garrett no. 445L in the catalogue of Princeton

University Library is dated to the years between 1850 and 1899 and is described as a rhymed Arabic-Persian lexicon intended to teach Arabic to Persian speakers (Princeton University Library, n.d.). This description identifies a further manuscript witness of the work belonging to the nineteenth century. The present place of preservation cannot be accepted as the region of historical use.

The joint consideration of local and international records makes it possible to connect the manuscript heritage within a single field of research. In this, the shelfmark, the date of the copy, the place of copying, the present place of preservation and the type of the text must be recorded in separate fields. This order preserves the distinction between introducing dated manuscript witnesses into scholarly circulation and reconstructing the history of their use.

The analysis shows that the three kinds of significance of the work arise from the different relations of a single text. In the scholarly direction the lexical unit and the translation equivalent are the principal unit of research; in the educational direction the instructional purpose and the form of presenting knowledge come to the centre; and in the cultural direction the historical relation of the text to other authors, commentators and copyists is studied. The most important question of interpretation is not to equate the verse form automatically with the purpose of teaching prosody. The text may have been created upon the basis of a metre; at the same time there is a probability that the designation of the metre as a special object of instruction depends upon later additions and commentaries. Comparison between the sources turns this probability into a well-founded research question, but does not give a final answer for all the copies.

CONCLUSION

The scholarly significance of «Niṣāb al-ṣibyān» is manifested in the possibility of studying historical lexicography and linguistic mediation through the organization of Arabic-Persian lexical material in verse form. To turn this possibility into a particular semantic result requires the direct analysis of the verses and the commentaries. The educational significance is bound up with the direction of the work towards teaching the Arabic vocabulary; the divergence between the sources concerning the function of prosody shows that the original purpose and the later educational use must be examined separately. The historical instructional function of the verse form does not mean that its modern pedagogical effectiveness has been confirmed by experiment.

The cultural significance is disclosed in such processes as commenting, copying and acceptance as a model by a later author. The copies with precise inventory numbers preserved in Uzbekistan, together with the international catalogue evidence, create a foundation for investigating the manuscript heritage of the work; the place of preservation, however, is not to be identified with the region of historical use. The further stage in establishing the threefold significance of the work more deeply is the joint examination of the composition of the text, the content of the commentary and the traces of use. In this way it is possible to pass from the general bibliographical description to conclusions founded upon evidence concerning historical education and cultural reception.

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