



THE EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ABŪ NAṢR FARĀHĪ'S «NİṢĀB AL-ŞIBYĀN» AND ITS COMMENTARY TRADITION: A SOURCE-CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract. *This article examines the evidentiary value of bibliographical accounts and manuscript catalogue records for studying the educational significance and the commentary tradition of Abū Naṣr Farāhī's «Nīṣāb al-ṣibyān». The source corpus comprises a scholarly reference entry and three catalogue records relating to manuscripts held at Oxford and at the British Library. By bibliographical comparison and source criticism the described objects are distinguished as a copy of the main text, a fragment accompanied by commentary, and a separate commentary manuscript. The analysis shows that the catalogue evidence of the preservation and the commenting of the text does not independently establish its regular use in a particular educational institution. The divergence in the reported number of verses is identified as a problem requiring direct textual collation. An analytical scheme is proposed, founded upon the joint study of the structure of the text, the content of the commentary and the traces of use, for investigating the historical educational reception of the work. The findings remain bounded by the compass of catalogue-level evidence and establish neither textual relationships between the manuscripts nor pedagogical effectiveness.*

Keywords: *Abū Naṣr Farāhī, Nīṣāb al-ṣibyān, verse lexicon, Arabic–Persian lexicography, commentary tradition, source criticism, history of education.*

INTRODUCTION

In evaluating the place of «Nīṣāb al-ṣibyān» in historical education it is important to determine the relation between the purpose for which the work was created, its being commented upon, and its practical use. Although these aspects are mutually connected, they are established by different kinds of evidence. The existence of a text intended for instruction does not of itself prove that it was regularly taught in a particular institution, nor does the preservation of a commentary prove what pedagogical method the commentator employed.

The research possibilities of the available sources are likewise not uniform. The article of Mohammad Dabirsiyaqi in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* gives historical and bibliographical information about the author and the work (Dabirsiyaqi, 1999). The *Fihrist* and British Library catalogues, by contrast, record the composition, the date and other descriptive indicators of particular manuscript objects. The joint study of these sources makes it possible to distinguish the general bibliographical description from information proper to a particular copy.

The corpus of the research embraces four sources: the scholarly reference entry upon Farāhī, the catalogue record Wadh.Minasian 713 (*Fihrist*, n.d.), the description of the composite manuscript Add MS 7701 (British Library, n.d.a) and the description of the commentary manuscript Delhi Persian 1571* (British Library, n.d.b). The objects were selected because they differ in composition: they afford the opportunity of comparing the text of the work, a commentary given together with the text, and a separate commentary. The selection is not evaluated as a systematic corpus embracing all the extant copies.

MAIN PART

In the bibliographical comparison, information relating to the type of text, the shelfmark, the extent, the date, the script and the commentary was collated. In source criticism, the descriptive information in the catalogue, the generalization of the author of the source and the interpretation of the researcher were separated from one another. Where a shelfmark or a range of folios is verifiable information taken from the catalogue, a conclusion concerning historical use requires additional evidence to establish it. The report of a colophon given in a catalogue is likewise, for the purposes of this research, not a direct reading of the colophon but a mediated description of it. The original manuscripts or their facsimiles have not been directly examined; verse-by-verse collation, palaeographical expertise and the analysis of the content of the marginal notes have not been carried out. The research is therefore limited to a comparative analysis at the level of catalogue records.

Dabirsiyaqi describes Farāhī as a man of letters who was active in the thirteenth century and who came from the town of Farah in Sīstān. His name occurs in the forms Mas'ūd, Muḥammad and Maḥmūd, and the date of his death is given, upon the authority

of «Kashf al-zunūn», as 640/1242. «Niṣāb al-ṣibyān» is described as an Arabic-Persian work in verse, intended to teach children the Arabic vocabulary and the foundations of prosody, and consisting of forty sections and two hundred verses in various metres (Dabirsiyaqi, 1999). For this reason the source of the historical report is distinguished from the modern reference work that conveys it.

The variants of the author's name are of importance for identifying the manuscripts as well. In compiling a corpus, limitation to a single form of the name may leave certain catalogue records out of consideration. Preserving in a database the name exactly as it stands in the catalogue and linking to it a generalized form for searching makes it possible to search without losing the historical variants. Three different kinds of object are described in the catalogues selected, and their principal indicators are collected in Table 1. The data in the table rest upon the catalogue descriptions and not upon a direct examination of the manuscripts.

Table 1. Comparison of the selected manuscript objects according to the catalogue data

Shelfmark and place of preservation	Object described	Date and extent	Indicator important for the research
Wadh.Minasian 713; Wadham College, Oxford (Fihrist, n.d.)	Text of «Niṣāb al-ṣibyān»	18th century; 58 folios	220 verses; three different hands; marginal notes
Add MS 7701; British Library (British Library, n.d.a)	Fragment, not preserved in full, given with commentary	Composite volume: 1666, Iran; the part containing the work: ff. 1r–37v	Hebrew script; Judaeo-Persian, Judaeo-Arabic and Hebrew linguistic features
Delhi Persian 1571*; British Library (British Library, n.d.b)	The extensive commentary of Mawlawī Muḥammad Sa'd	Colophon description: 20.08.1736; approximately 100 folios	India; nasta'liq script; a separate commentary object

A copy of the main text, a fragment with commentary and a separate commentary are not one and the same unit of research. To reckon them within a single category may confuse the textual transmission of the work with the history of its commentary. For this reason the type of the text and the material unity of the manuscript must be recorded separately in the corpus. The presence of several works in a single composite volume, or the reflection of a single work in different catalogue records, must likewise be taken into account in counting the number of copies.

The description of Add MS 7701 shows the importance of distinguishing the writing system and the language. That the text was recorded in a different scriptorial

environment raises a research question concerning the history of its transmission; yet this circumstance alone does not determine the educational programme or the method of teaching of a particular community (British Library, n.d.a). Delhi Persian 1571*, by contrast, makes it possible to set apart the commentary as an independent object of research, and the date of the commentary is not to be identified with the date of the creation of the principal work (British Library, n.d.b).

In the scholarly reference work two hundred verses are given, while in the description of Wadh.Minasian 713 two hundred and twenty verses are indicated. The Fihrist record emphasizes separately that the number of verses is recorded differently in the sources (Dabirsiyaqi, 1999; Fihrist, n.d.). This divergence shows the necessity of examining the composition of the text, but its cause cannot be determined by the catalogue data alone. The criterion of counting, the boundary of the text, the inclusion of the introductory and the concluding verses, and the possibility of additional layers must be examined by direct comparison. In such an examination the beginning and the ending of the copies, the order of the sections and the corresponding verses are determined, and the differences are recorded with folio and line references. Only thereafter is it possible to evaluate whether the divergence pertains to the method of counting or to a textual change.

The separation of the educational purpose, the historical use and the learning outcome from one another is the fundamental condition of the analysis. A bibliographical description may explain what the work was intended to teach. To determine that it was used in a particular school or madrasa, however, requires notes relating to instruction, marks of ownership or endowment connected with an institution, and margins whose content has been examined. For a conclusion concerning the learning outcome, evidence of yet another kind is needed.

The rhythm and the rhyme of the verse form may be interpreted as a means of ordering repetition. Such an interpretation does not, however, prove that teaching by means of the work was more effective than by a prose lexicon. The present corpus permits the discussion of the historical educational purpose; it does not furnish sufficient information for measuring pedagogical effectiveness. The Arabic units and their Persian equivalents also make the work significant for the study of historical translation and lexicographical practice. In such an analysis the compass of meaning of each unit, its

translation equivalent, its relation to the metre and its explanation in the commentary must be examined directly from the text. Since lexical and semantic examples are not analysed in this article, no generalized conclusion is drawn concerning translation strategies.

The preservation of a commentary is catalogue evidence confirming that the text was explained. To determine the function of the explanations, however, requires the study of the content of the commentary. The disclosure of a lexical meaning, the explanation of a grammatical form, the commenting upon the metre or the discussion of a variant reading are categories of analysis that may be examined. They are proposed not as results established in the selected commentaries, but as criteria for further research. In the systematic study of a commentary it is expedient to record the verse or lemma being explained, the type of explanation, the source of the evidence and the relation to the principal text. When several commentaries are compared upon these criteria, the units repeatedly explained and the changes in the methods of explanation may be determined. For this it is necessary to pass from recording the name of the commentary in the catalogue to analysing its internal content.

Proceeding from the results of the analysis, a research scheme is proposed that connects three directions: the composition of the text, the explanatory devices of the commentary and the traces of the use of the copy. The first direction embraces the verses, the sections and the variants; the second the content of the explanations; the third the notes relating to ownership, to lessons and to reading. The scheme serves for passing from the catalogue description directly to the investigation of the manuscript.

The existence of a marginal note is not sufficient for designating it the writing of a student. The note may be a correction by the copyist, the explanation of a later reader or a mark made for some other purpose; its position, the hand, the ink and the content must be examined together. In the same way the present place of preservation of a manuscript, the region in which it was copied and the environment in which it was used are distinct concepts. The limit of the application of the proposed scheme is determined by the available evidence: three catalogue records are not sufficient to prove the diffusion of the work in all regions or the continuity of its educational use. The article is therefore directed not at reconstructing the complete history of the commentary tradition, but at clarifying the evidentiary criteria for studying it.

CONCLUSION

The selected sources make it possible to study the educational direction of «Niṣāb al-ṣibyān» through bibliographical descriptions and its transmission together with commentary through separate catalogue objects. In the comparative analysis the main text, the fragment with commentary and the independent commentary were distinguished. This distinction shows the necessity of defining the unit of research precisely in compiling a manuscript corpus and in studying the history of the commentary tradition. The preservation of the work, its being commented upon and its use in a particular educational institution require evidence of different degrees. The divergence in the number of verses is likewise not a ready textological conclusion, but a question to be examined by direct collation. Catalogue descriptions serve for identifying manuscripts and for forming research questions; they cannot be identified with an analysis of the original text (Fihrist, n.d.; British Library, n.d.a; British Library, n.d.b).

The joint examination of the structure of the text, the content of the commentary and the traces of use makes it possible to support with evidence the conclusions concerning the place of the work in historical education. In further research it is necessary to develop these directions by means of the direct description of the manuscripts and their textual comparison.

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