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## **HOW THE PRE-ISLAMIC PERSIAN LITERATURE PASSED TO THE ARABS**

### **an Introduction**

The present study is an attempt to examine that portion of the literature which was common to both Arabic and Persian in the first centuries of the Islamic era, having been translated into the Arabic language from the Persian literary heritage, particularly at the beginning of the Abbasid period. We are concerned with that part of this heritage which was so thoroughly assimilated by Arabic literature as to become an integral part of it. The study of the works of this heritage, with respect to Arabic literature, is a study of those Persian tributaries which poured forth, amongst others, into the mainstream; with regard to Persian literature it represents research into some of its origins in pre-Islamic times and the rediscovery of some of its basic texts, most of which were lost thereafter. Such an undertaking may therefore be something of an innovation in the history of both literatures. It is our hope that it may open up new avenues for research and investigation for both students and teachers of literature in both languages since they will have some knowledge of how they interacted with each other over the ages.

The literature of Arabic in the Abbasid period, including the various aspects of its development and its several genres in all fields of poetry and prose, was simply the yield produced by the direct or indirect conjunction of Arab thought with the cultures of other nations and peoples possessed of a tradition in literature, art and thought and other characteristics of civilization. This is a fact firmly attested by all those who have studied this literature whether of old or anew. Since the cultures with which Arabic came into contact were of several different varieties in respect to form and shape, style and tendency, the literature which resulted from this interaction was also diverse and multi-faceted in form, purpose and style. This literature was in fact a collection of literatures pressed into a single mold—the mold of the Arabic language.

This diversity was attested by a group of writers who witnessed this creative intellectual transition and who experienced personally this effusion and comingling of different national cultures. Among them was Ibn-Nadim, who gives us the following testimony in the introduction to his monumental catalogue of all known books and articles in Arabic in his own time: «This is an index of all Arab and non Arab books from all sources presently available in Arabic, arranged according to the various subjects and with biographical data on their authors or compilers...»<sup>(1)</sup> We have further evidence in the remarks of the Arab litterateur Al-Jahiz in his discussion of those cultural traditions which were brought over into Arabic and in his observations on their condition after being transferred: When Indian books, Greek philosophy and Persian literature were translated into Arabic, some were improved immeasurably and others did not lose anything of their original value. While if Arab wisdom were to be translated it would lose that miraculous quality which is the very form of the language itself. Yet in being translated it would become obvious that there was nothing in its content which the Persians had not already mentioned in their own books on the subject of human intelligence, wisdom and life in general. These works have been transmitted from one nation to another, from one century to the next, and from

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1. Fihrist, Introduction

one tongue to the other, until they came finally into our possession as the ultimate heirs.<sup>(1)</sup>

It is thus of great importance in the study of Arabic literature to isolate and examine these intrusive alien trends and to trace those elements which percolated into Arabic throughout the ages, especially during the Abbassid period. It is also necessary to search for their influence and the extent of their development within the fabric of Islamic social life, and try to clarify many of the intellectual and social features of the Islamic milieu whose roots and origins can be traced back to these extraneous factors.

It is impossible to study and understand these historical cultures in isolation-especially those humanistic traditions which overflowed their local and national boundaries and interacted with other cultures subsuming ultimately the legacy of civilization. This legacy is nothing more than the combined result of human efforts to comprehend truth and beauty.

Succeeding cultures form an unbroken chain of indivisible link. The history of every national literature is but the history of the thought and indigenous intellectual efforts exerted by that nation. Thus, the study of the history of the thought and intellectual endeavour of any nation which played a role in the field of science and civilization, cannot be complete without taking account of its ties of culture and civilization which bind it to other nations sharing in this endeavour.

Arabic literature cannot be exempted from the logical consequences of this general principle. This literature, which is represented in its best and most complete form by the Abbassid period, requires, in order to be properly understood, a study of the foreign factors which coloured and enlivened it with variety and significance. We therefore cannot be content with a study of the Arabic element alone, without reference to the others-that is if we wish to do full justice to the study and understanding of this literature, and not deprive ourselves in the process of the many

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1. *Al-Hayawan*, vol. I., P. 38.

resources which may be of considerable help to us in understanding its developments as well as the causes and variety thereof.

In this series of studies we are attempting to deal with one outstanding factor—the most outstanding in our opinion—which influenced Arabic literature; viz. the Persian impact. One of the significant characteristics of the interaction between the Arabic and Persian cultures was its uniqueness; there was nothing like it between Arabic and any other culture and indeed, in our view, no similar occurrence in history between two completely different cultures. One of the distinguishing features of Persian influence vis-a-vis other alien elements in Arabic culture is that the interaction between the two was to a large extent reciprocal. This can be explained by the fact that the relationship between the Arabs and Persians was a direct encounter between two peoples, their languages, their institutions, and their practical ideas, rather than an indirect contact through the medium of translations and theoretical ideas. It was this thorough-going reciprocal interaction which made Sassanid Persian (**Pahlavi**) the strongest and most influential factor in the development of Arabic literature in the early years of the first Abbasid era. This influence on Arabic affected its modes of thought, its various styles and its directions. This interaction also brought to bear on the Persian language a considerable influence from Arabic, once the latter had increased its capacity for expressiveness, accuracy and scientific rigor. This influence in turn occasioned the development of the Middle Persian language (Sassanid Pahlavi) into the Islamic Persian (New Dari).

Naturally Persian influence on Abbasid life and letters was not limited to a single area, but extended as well to other facets of this life and literature. However, our study of this life and literature may not go beyond consideration of the most effective, direct and widespread influence on the literature, namely the field of translation and transformation which took place on a large scale during the first Abbasid period. We must provide some general clarification in this introduction as a preliminary study of these translations and transformed material as well as the conduits through which they were transmitted into Abbasid literature.

Persian literature, which was the first contact for the Arabic language with an alien culture outside the Peninsula, was the Sassanid literature written in a script which has come by general agreement of scholars to be called Pahlavi. They have likewise agreed to call its language Pahlavi, or, Middle Persian, to distinguish it from Islamic Persian written in the Arabic script. However, the ancient sources, whether Arabic or otherwise, made no distinction between the two scripts. Instead they assigned to both of them the name „Persian”; perhaps due to the fact that they perceived very little difference between the two in the process of development from one to another (languages). We have followed the same practice in this study, following the example of the other Arabic books.

The Persian language first encountered by the Arabs was the language of sassanid science and civilization which prevailed throughout the vast empire from Iraq to the borders of Soghdiana and Khwarizm. It comprised various kinds of political and governmental conventions as well as those of education, ethics, correspondence and contracts, oratory and apothegms, history, biography and many other well-known varieties.

From the period of Khusro Anushirvan we see evidence in this language of a comprehensive scientific and literary renaissance aiming at incorporating the literatures of other nations. Therefore, some of the well-known literary books of India were translated into Persian; these books were among the acquisitions made by a special mission despatched by Khusro to India to obtain books on medicine and other subjects. In addition, Greek books on logic and philosophy were translated into Persian and later into Arabic. Thus, Persian was a medium for the transmission of various sciences in pre-Islamic times. A number of books in Syriac were translations from the Persian of that era. Some of these were originally written in other languages such as the **History of Alexander** which was a Persian translation from Greek, **Kalila wa Dimna** Parts of which were translated from Indian and which were then translated into Syriac in pre-Islamic times, and **Sindibad**, the Syriac translation of which was made from Persian in the eighth

century A. D. In fact the Syriac Church in Persia adopted the Persian language as the language of religion and missionary activity. The Nestorians used this language in all the eastern areas as indicated by the Syriac inscriptions in Persian language in the churches of south India. Some scholars reckoned that the date of six of these inscriptions could be traced back to 340 A. D., i. e. they were carved prior to the reformation of the Church and the expulsion of the Nestorians from Byzantine lands. (1)

Therefore, the Persian literature, with which the Arabic language first came into contact in Iraq, was a varied and fully developed species whose genres extended to every aspect of life and culture. This encounter occurred on a wide scale at the time when the Arabic language was just at the beginning of its development. Thus it was greatly in need of many terms and expressions which it had hitherto lacked. This was the case not only in the fields of administration and government, but also in science and literature, as well as other areas of the broad frame of settled social life. It required all these in order to become the language of a new society—a society enjoying full exposure to the sciences and civilization of the time. It needed these too in order to assimilate a broad gauge, productive and many faceted literature such as that of the golden age of the Abbasids. It was the Persian language at this stage which supplied Arabic with most of the vocabulary it needed to express the new settled made of life. It provided it also with many idiomatic expressions in the fields of administration and civil service, in the art of writing and of official correspondence and in the various branches of science such as astronomy, botany etc. A similar fashion it furnished it with many new terms associated with the new settled life, such as for food, clothing, dishes, utensils, the names of plants, drugs, flowers, precious stones, and like materials, many examples of which can be found in the Arabic dictionaries. The books which were first translated into Arabic from foreign works were Persian books on literature and government. These put the fruit of several centuries of the legacy of a large amount of human experience in

1. Ali Asghar Hikmat, *Naqshi-i Parsi bar Ahdjar-i Hind*, pp. 9-10.

A. C. Burnell, *Pahlavi Inscriptions in South India*, Bangalore 1873.

the art of government and sovereignty, and a variety of sciences and literature which comprised all the learning of the time, at the disposal of Arab rulers and their deputies. These Persian translations were the oldest books found in Arabic on these subjects. Some of these such as *Kalila wa Dimna* and the literary works of Ibn al-Muqaffac are the most ancient books in Arabic still extant other than the Quran.

But, what were the factors which helped produce this translation and interaction on such a broad scale?

These were many factors, the most important of which was that the Arabs were not unfamiliar with Persian even in pre-Islamic times. There were ties between the Arabs of Hira and Yemen and the Persian government. In the official bureaux of this government there were Arab secretaries who ran the affairs of Hira and its environs, such as Adi b. Zayd, Zayd b. Adi and others. There were also other contacts which familiarized the Arabs with Persian life and its characteristic features. This would explain the existence of the many Arabized terms from Pre-Islamic Persian found in the Quran; and the expressions and lexemes of Persian origin which we find in the poetry of al-A'sha and others who had some connection with al-Hira or with the Sasanid court.

Another important factor which contributed to this admixture was the fact that Abbasid literature, the best example of this interaction, developed in a geographic milieu saturated with the essence and spirit of things Persian, Baghdad, which became a centre for the caliphate as well as for this literature, was previously a small village in one of the recreational suburbs of Ctesiphon, capital of the Sasanid state. It was also considered one of the important commercial centers of this state. The Persians used it as an important market site frequented on special occasions by merchants from various parts of the kingdom. It continued to be so into the Islamic period and in A. H. 13 we read about this market being raided and plundered by al-Muthanna. In A. H. 76 we still find mention of this market in the description of the war between Shayb b. Yazid and al-Jazal b. Said.(1) There too there were royal

1. See the first two chapters of the book *Guide to Baghdad*, by Mustafa Jawad and Ahmad Susa, Baghdad 1958.

gardens and palaces. In history we read about the palace of Isa b. cAli, uncle of al Mansur, which was one of the most famous palaces in Baghdad. It was built on the foundation of one of the Sassanid palaces known as the palace of Shapur; in fact in constructing it they made use of building material and furbishings taken from that palace. In addition, the area adjacent to the shrine of al-Kazim on the east side was, prior to the founding of al-Mansur's city a garden used by some of the Sassanid kings. Thereafter al-Mansur made it an (iqtaa') fief for Imara b. Hamza. This indicates that Sassanid life flourished in the environs of Baghdad virtually until the era of al-Mansur. Life continued in Ctesiphon, the Sasanian capital near Baghdad, even after the founding of the new city, although many of its inhabitants started to move gradually to the new capital. Once it became the seat of the Abbasid caliphate, Baghdad, the city of peace, began to grow and flourish. The imperial palaces in Ctesiphon were used as the source of raw material for the building of new palaces in Baghdad, such as the Crown Castle (Qasr al-Ta'j), and others like it. The star of Ctesiphon began to set once its inhabitants deserted it and the artisans and craftsmen had removed to Baghdad, carrying with them, in addition to their technical accomplishments, their corporate social life and folkways as well as those patterns of thinking and acting which were peculiar to themselves. This was undoubtedly the reason why we find that all the words which were absorbed into Arabic during this period—reflecting some aspect of the social life, the professional crafts and artisan trades, were Persian or derived from Persian. So says Abu Hatim in his book « I declare that whatever was not known in the steppe is Arabized Persian, with very few exceptions. Among these are the professions of stonemason, carpenter and professional craftsman». (1)

We can add to all this that whatever pertained to the Abbasid Vizierate and its scribes and secretaries who were of Persian origin and Zoroastrian culture. This had enormous influence in the transmission of the Persian legacy into the domain of government or

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1. al-Ta'c rīf li-Usūl al-Ta'c rīb, p. 61.



organization and state administration. There were also many Sasanian books available on these subjects.

What was the end result of all this?

This literary borrowing led not only to the Arabs being influenced by Sasanian civilization in the realms of literature, social organization and thought patterns, but at times the influence reached the stage of total assimilation. The floor tiles of some of the Abbasid caliphs were a virtual pictorial replica of Sasanian tiling; the ministries and many of the government bureaus even became duplicates of their Sasanian counterparts. When historians take up the study of the subject of cultural transmission from one historical stage to another or from one people to another, the Abbasid caliphate will be reckoned as the heir primarily of the Sasanid state.

We turn now to those many works which were translated to see what became of them and to what extent they played an outstanding role in Arabic literature throughout its history and especially in the Abbasid age. Yet we are suddenly confronted with the fact that these translated works do not number today more than a handful of books and articles. Where then is this legacy whose transmission to Arabic the traditional sources report at great length?

What is lacking in this legacy has been lost in one of two ways: one portion was the victim of political circumstances; the other was so diluted in the melting pot of Arabic that it all but lost its distinctive characteristics—indeed many of these characteristics have been considered purely Arabic. This is a fate similar to that of many other foreign terms which have been absorbed—through borrowing and Arabicization—into Arabic in such a way as to preclude identification of their true origin.

Ibn al-Nadim provides a detailed list of names for those who translated from Persian into Arabic. It would appear that these were professional translators who even acquired a degree of reputation and notoriety for the volume of their work—in this respect they share the same fate as Ibn al-Muqaffa' who translated innumerable books—even though we are unable to cite a single title for

the majority of those mentioned. Typical of this group is Abu al-Abbas al-Dumayri, a third century (Hijra) writer and translator from Persian to Arabic. Though some biographical references credit him with more than fifty works, we are still unable to identify even a single title.

These books and treatises have passed through various stages on their way to total assimilation into Arabic literature, or we might say that their transmission was a multi-phase process. In the preliminary stage they appeared as independent translations, though not entirely free from distortions and changes. The reason for this was that the translators on occasion intentionally revised the texts according to their discretion and in order to render them more compatible with the new milieu—as was the case with Ibn al-Muqaffa's translations. On other occasions they translated only a portion of a given book, or gave a summary or a paraphrase of its content—which was the case with most of the translations of the epic Persian historical work entitled *Khodā-yi Nameh*, known in Arabic as *Siyar al-Mulūk* or *Siyar Mulūk al-Furs*. This was the reason for the proliferation of so-called translatoins of this work during the time of Hamza al-Isfahani, who is said to have had access to more than seven different translations.

At other times they selected a treatise, or a book, or a collection of these Persian writings and added thereto matters adapted or extracted from other books, in order to compile a new book bearing a new form and a different title. This was precisely what Miskawayh did in compiling his work **The Literature of the Arabs and the Persians**, which he based on a Sassanid Persian book called *Jāvidān Kherad* (Immortal Wisdom). To this base he added other Persian and non-Persian elements; some being attributed to Indian, Greek and Arab origins, which he felt corresponded suitably to the general theme of the book. These varied extracts were joined together in a new Miscellany which he called **The Literature of the Arabs and the Persians**. It is probable that among this type of book was one attributed by Ibn al-Nadim to ʿAlī b. Rabban al-Nasrani on literature and proverbial wisdom according to the conventions of the Persians, Greek and Arabs. (1)

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1. *Fihrist*, p. 439

The translation or adaptation may well have differed from the foregoing picture, in the sense that the author may have brought together both Persian and Arab elements in such a way as to make it impossible to distinguish one from another. This is what Ibn 'Abd Rabbih did in his book *Al-'Iqd al-Farid*; he devoted a special chapter entitled „The Wisdom of Aktham b. Sayfi and Bozorgmehr”(1) to proverbial sayings, without distinguishing which were attributed to each man. This is contrary to the technique employed in the work of Ibn Miskawayh, where the various elements remain detached from each other.

One could say that this procedure of combining Persian and Arabic materials was in a sense closer to blending or conflation. The author would take a Persian book as a base for a new work and would add to it similar information from a variety of sources. He would do so not in the form of independent sections, but by blending them together in a unified and coherent whole. An example of this type of work in the field of literature is *Kitāb al-Ṭaj fi Akhlāq al-Mulūk*, ascribed to al-Jahiz; the reader may find diverse information about the author in this book.

We can attest similar practices among the historians writing in Arabic in translating and transmitting Persian histories. We see them mentioning in detail Persian history of the pre-Islamic period followed by the history of the Arabs and Islam all in one book, without any distinction between what was taken from Persian histories and what was copied from Arab Islamic sources. Thus Arab Islamic history was considered a natural progression following on Persian history, observation made by the orientalist Caetani in his study of the historical opus, *Tajārib al-Umam*, by Ibn Miskawayh. He pointed out that this was the case not only in this history, but in a majority of the historical compositions by Arab writers as well. Foremost amongst these works was that of al-Tabari (*Kitāb al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk*) where we see that he places pre-Islamic history in general within the framework of Persian history.

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1. *Al-'Iqd al-Farid*, I, 331

the same practice is also observable in the historical works of al-Dinawari, al-Ya'qubi, al-Mas'udi, and others.

There is another level of borrowing and adaptation, or another form thereof, which is difficult to detect and disclose without accurate in-depth study as well as comprehensive knowledge of and conversance with the field. This is when authors adduce either sayings or subjects borrowed from Persian sources without mentioning those sources themselves. They even introduce changes in the text and alter its distinctive features in order to render it more compatible with the Arab-Islamic milieu and more consonant with the thought patterns of their readers. These translations would then appear far removed from their Persian original and would take on the guise of a pure Islamic character. An example of this type of total transformation is when we read in *Kitāb al-Tāj fi Akhlāq al-Mulūk* detailed descriptions of how the Sasanid kings received in audience both nobles and commoners, or full accounts of peoples' complaints against the king before the Zoroastrian High Priest (al-mu'badh al-Kabir), his deputy (al-dabirbadh) and the chief custodian of the fire temples (ra's sadanat buyut al-nar); then we see that the author of *Mahasin al-Mulūk* has rendered all the details presented in *Kitāb al-Tāj* by a single word, i. e. the expressions „high priest”, „deputy priest” and „chief custodian of the fire temples” have all been transformed into the single word 'judge' (al-qādi). He thus eliminates all trace of the original Persian account and the allusions it contains to Persian traditions and replaces it with a purely Islamic idiom.

The same process has affected the accounts transmitted by many other writers purporting to contain quotations attributed to one or another Persian king or savant. An example is the story told about Anushirwan and the two men who brought a dispute to him for settlement. The one had bought some land from the other and found a cache of treasure on it. The story explains how Anushirwan passed judgement in the case. It is a famous story in the *adab* literature and is told in full by the Imam Muhammad al-Ghazali in his book *Nasihāt al-Mulūk*, a work composed in Persian for Sultan Sanjar, where he attributes the leading role to

\*Anushirwan. It is likewise ascribed to him in another work entitled *Kitāb ʿIqd al-ʿUla*. Later on we see the same story in the History of Ibn ʿAsakir composed after al-Ghazali's work attributed to Alexander the Great (Dhu al-Qarnayn), and even with the vague identification in a certain city. Similar changes have effaced the names of other kings and sages who were the principals in various tales and anecdotes, and replaced them with a single word or expression such as „one of the kings” or „one of the savants”. There are countless examples of this process in works of literature and history where the original texts and sources have been obscured.

What added to the difficulty of tracing these elements was the fact that the Sassanid Persian originals were lost in the course of time and with changing conditions and circumstances, as a consequence of the disorders and disturbances and other influential factors, such as the replacement of the Pahlavi writing system by the Arabic script, and the Zoroastrian religion by the Islamic, and the confident acceptance by cultured Iranian writers and litterateurs of Arabic as the language of study, research and composition throughout the first two centuries (of the Islamic era). All these factors helped to create a climate of indifference vis-à-vis the preservation of the Persian originals. There was simply no need to copy them out, relate them orally or to preserve them according to the prevailing methods for the preservation and perpetuation of books in these times. Most of this negligence was due to zeal for the Islamic faith, which impelled some people and sometimes including those who could have been expected to safeguard these works to damage or destroy them deliberately. The Persian writer Dawlatshah Samarqandi tells a story in his book *Tadhkirat al-Sbu ʿarā*, which runs in part as follows: It is said that ʿAbd Allah b. Tahir, the Amir of Khurasan in the days of the Abbasid caliphs, was seated one day in his administrative head-quarters in Nishapur when a man came to him and presented him with a book (which he placed in his hands) as a gift. When asked about the book the man replied, „It's a book of elegant stories and anecdotes entitled *Al-wāmiq wa al-ʿAdhrā*, composed by the savants for Khusro Anushirwan.” To this news the Amir replied, „We are people who read the Qur'an; we do not wish to have any reading matter other

than the Qur'an and the Prophet's tradition. We have no use for this book; this is one of those Zoroastrian creations which is forbidden to us." Then he ordered the book to be thrown into the water and decreed the burning of all Persian and Mogian books to be found throughout the province.

All these factors have made it difficult for students of Arabic literature even in the deepest and most comprehensive sense to discover these Persian elements; this also explains the appearance of conflicting views about a number of these elements and the estimation of their historical value and the extent of their influence on Arabic literature; all of which goes to prove the obscurity of this aspect of Arabic literature, and (the fact) that the relationship of Arabic literature to Persian and their mutual interaction, is a subject which continues to need increased study and clarification even a change in the methods (and procedures) which have characterized discussion of this subject up to the present time. Instead of producing opinions and speculations founded for the most part on personal taste, and sometimes even on the emotions, we should get down to the business of single subject studies of these elements themselves, and the ways in which these percolated into Arabic,-a study based on firm scientific premises. We should also make use of the research methods which scholars have applied in the study of other world literatures, and benefit as well from the progress achieved by studies in the history and civilization of this Arabo-Persian area in the ages prior to Islam.

There can be no doubt that the first step we must take in this enterprise is to clarify the landmarks and chief routes whereby the two languages were directly connected, i. e. the vehicles of translation and transmission, and that involves a (discussion) investigation of both what remains and what might be discovered in the way of textual materials translated from Persian and scattered about in the bowels of Arabic sources especially in the great works (*magna opera*) of the third and fourth centuries. This will enable us initially to study its several varieties and subject matter, as well as the issues and purposes which surrounded it (them). Then we will follow its pathways till we come to what resembles it in Arabic from those

things cast after its manner. Thereafter we might even be able to produce for the first time a precise and correct view of its influence and the nature of its interaction with Arabic literature. I say this even while not unmindful of the tremendous difficulties which afflict the researcher in this field, especially after having seen the results of the influence of the factors which we have mentioned in developing these features and routes, but it is a stage which we must pass through in this field of activity in any event. Is there any obscure area of history in pursuit of the clarification of which the researcher will not find problems and difficulties? \*

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\* Translated from Arabic by Dr. W. Millward professor of the American University of Cairo.