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Cover
Mašhad, Kitābkhāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Radawī 300, f. 1v
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 1853, f. 186v

Arabic versions from Middle Persian were quite numerous in the formative period of Arabic philosophy, namely between the second half of the 8th/2nd and the first half of the 10th/4th century. Gerhard Endress lists, in addition to some *specula principium* and the famous *Kalila wa-Dimna,* also works of logic, astronomy, and astrology; on the latter topic further research has been provided more recently by Kevin van Bladel. With this volume by Joep Lameer we are faced with a much later Persian-to-Arabic translation, completed in a span of time between the end of the 13th/7th and the first decades of the 14th/8th century. Now the source language is no longer Middle Persian, rather “New Persian, besides Arabic” (p. 5), and the target language is Middle Arabic, whose typical features as they appear in this translation are described in detail by Lameer (pp. 21-30). The translation was the work of Rukn al-Dīn Muhammad b. ʿAlī b. Muḥammad Ǧurǧānī, who was “alive in 728/1327. About his life, not much is known. We do know that at some point in time, he was a student of the famous Shiʿite theologian al-ʿAllāma al-Hillī (d. 726/1326)” (p. 9). The work translated by Rukn al-Dīn Ḥurǧānī and edited here is Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī’s *Nasirean Ethics, Akhlāq-e Nāṣerī.*

The circumstances of the composition of the *Nasirean Ethics,* described in the Prologue of the work, shed light on its contents:

Persian polymath and statesman Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) wrote his *Akhlāq-e Nāṣerī* at the beginning of a long and distinguished career. It was composed at the request of Naṣīr al-Dīn ʾAbd al-Raḥīm b. Abī Manṣūr (d. 655/1257), Ismaʿili governor of Qehestan in north eastern Iran, and most likely completed in the year 633/1236. While originally, Ṭūsī had been asked to make a Persian translation of Ibn Miskawayh’s (d. 421/1030) treatise on morals, the *Tahḏīb al-akhlāq,* after some reflection he concluded he would never be able to approximate the original Arabic. For this reason, and also because the *Tahḏīb al-akhlāq* did not discuss economics or politics the study of which had fallen into neglect by Ṭūsī’s lifetime, he decided to write a compendium comprising all three divisions of practical philosophy. In this way he was able to render the substance of the *Tahḏīb al-akhlāq* in the Persian language, at the same time resuscitating two other neglected branches of ethics. The resulting work thus contains an all-inclusive treatment of the moral conduct of man, passing from the micro-level of the individual, through the intermediary of the household and comparable social units, to reach its completion at the level of cities, regions, and states (pp. 1-2).

In other words, what the late 13th or early 14th cent. translation by Rukn al-Dīn Ḥurǧānī transmitted to the Arabic-speaking world was a Persian reworking of Miskawayh’s *Tahḏīb al-akhlāq,* implemented with an extensive treatment of economics and politics. In its turn, the *Tahḏīb al-akhlāq* derives from a series of sources that include Graeco-Arabic translations of ethical works dating back to the 9th or early 10th centuries.

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6. Among the works possibly forming the Arabic version of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Lameer (pp. 6-7) lists the Arabic version of the *Nicomachean Ethics,* the *Summa Alexandrinorum* (a compilation of exegetical materials related to the *Nicomachean*
Lameer remarks that although “compilatory in character” the Akhlāq-e Nāṣeri is original in its “comprehensiveness and way of presentation” (p. 2); but even the compilation qua compilation is of great value for those interested in the transmission of philosophical texts, as we shall see below.

Another point of great interest in this volume is the fact that the manuscript through which the translation has come down to us is a unicum:

The present edition is based on the sole copy of Jurjānī’s translation to have surfaced to date, which is MS Leiden Or. 582. This manuscript was originally bought by the Dutch diplomat and man of letters Levinus Warner (d. 1665) during his stay in Istanbul in the years 1664-1665. After Warner’s death, all his manuscripts, including MS Or. 582, were legated to Leiden University, where they are since referred to as the Legatum Warnerianum (…). The manuscript’s purchase coincides roughly with the years during which Ḥājjī Khalīfa (= Kātib Çelebi, d. 1068/1657) compiled his famous bibliographical reference work the Kashf al-zunūn (1045-1068/1635-1657). Interestingly, Ḥājjī Khalīfa (who had the habit of mentioning translations whenever these came to his notice) lists the Akhlāq-e Nāṣeri as a Persian work, which can only mean that he knew of no Arabic translation. Although the Leiden manuscript’s place of purchase is unknown (whether Istanbul, Aleppo, or elsewhere), it is certainly tempting to imagine that Ḥājjī Khalīfa missed it by a hair’s breadth on one of his book-hunting expeditions (pp. 10-11).

This view into the history of the circulation of written documents adds a special charm to the reconstruction of the circulation of ideas, to which the volume under review contributes substantially. What we have here thanks to Rukn al-Dīn Ğurḡānī, Levinus Warner, and Joep Lameer, is the translation into Arabic of a Persian work which was in its turn based on another work – Miskawayh’s Tahḏīb al-ahlāq – rooted in the Graeco-Arabic translations of an earlier date. One may summarise the journey of texts and ideas as follows: Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics and other sources of different philosophical origins were translated into Arabic in 9th-century Baghdad; then, the texts themselves or the ideas conveyed by them travelled to Persia, where they were compiled by Miskawayh between the end of the 10th/4th and the first decades of the 11th/5th cent.; then again, around 1236/633, this work formed the basis of the Persian Akhlāq-e Nāṣeri, “the most celebrated ethical compendium” to have been written in the history of Islam, which over the centuries “stimulated an outpouring of summaries, commentaries, popular imitations and adaptations” (p. 2); eventually, a century later, the Akhlāq-e Nāṣeri was translated by Rukn al-Dīn Ğurḡānī. The latter’s discipleship with al-Allāma al-Ḥillī – himself a pupil of Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī and a commentator of his works⁷ – places him in the area of Twelver Šīʿa, and his literary output is in Arabic,⁸ thus, one may imagine that the intended readership was that of the school of Hilla. Both the intricacies of mixed traditions and Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī’s purpose to endorse and expand Miskawayh’s Tahḏīb al-ahlāq make Lameer’s edition a great opportunity to learn.

A table of contents was put by Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī at the beginning of his work, and features also in the Arabic version: it occupies pp. viii-ix in Lameer’s edition. The Nasirean Ethics falls into three main Discourses (Maqālāt), respectively on ethics, economics, and politics. The first Discourse is subdivided into two main parts, one devoted to the principles of ethical science, and the other to the ends sought in it. The other two branches, economics and politics, do not feature such a subdivision. That the Nasirean Ethics is closely dependent upon Miskawayh’s Tahḏīb al-ahlāq is not only declared by Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī himself, but also evident on comparison

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Ethics whose Greek original is lost and whose Arabic version is only fragmentarily extant, but which is available to us in an Arabic-to-Latin version of the 13th cent.; a “Stoicized paraphrase of Book One (and perhaps also Book Two) of Aristotle’s Politics” – on which more later – the so-called De Virtute, namely a Neoplatonic text on the grades of virtue embedded in Miskawayh’s Tahḏīb al-ahlāq; some ethical works by Galen and the latter’s summaries of Plato’s Republic, Laws, and Statesman; finally, Bryson’s On Man’s Management of his Estate, which is lost in Greek, but extant in Arabic.


⁸ The literary output of Rukn al-Dīn Ğurḡānī amounts to “more than thirty titles”, as we learn from Lameer, pp. 9-10: the information comes from an inventory of his writings in his own hand”. As Rukn al-Dīn Ğurḡānī declares in the Prologue of the translation of the Nasirean Ethics, he translated into Arabic also other works by Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī.
of the sequence of the chapters in both works. The comparison shows also that Tūsī regularly expands upon topics dealt with in a more synthetic way by Miskawayh.

The Tahḏīb al-ablāq is subdivided into six Discourses. The first deals with the principles of ethics (Mabādī’ al-ablāq), and occupies some 30 pages in Zurayq’s edition, most of them devoted to the definition of the soul; it is echoed in the first section On Principles (Fi Mabādī) of the first Discourse in the Arabic Nasirean Ethics, where it occupies some 90 pages of Lameer’s edition. The quantitative comparison is of course not a fair one, because the size of both page and script is different in Zurayq’s and Lameer’s editions, and much space in the latter is taken by the annotation at the bottom of the page; but, inaccurate as it might be, the different extension suggests that Tūsī has expanded his treatment with respect to his source. As for Miskawayh’s second Discourse, on “character” (خُلَق), upon comparison it appears that in the first part Tūsī describes “character” and its education, as well as virtues and their grades, in the same way as Miskawayh. After this point, however, he parts company with the latter. In Miskawayh we find here an excursus entitled “A section on the education of the young, and of boys in particular, most of which I have copied from the work of Bryson”, followed by another section on the “benefits of the education of the young”. These topics have been moved by Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī to his own treatment of Economics. When Miskawayh, still within the context of his second Discourse, resumes his main purpose after the quotation from Bryson’s Oikonomikos, he turns to a description of the hierarchy of degrees of sociability from wild beasts to man, from man to his communities, and from these to the city and its rulers. Tūsī devotes a specific treatment to these points, and does this in his own section on Politics, namely the third part of his work. In other words, after the initial two sections the order of the subjects dealt with in the Nasirean Ethics does no longer follow that of Miskawayh, even though the latter – as is apparent from Lameer’s annotation – remains the main source of Tūsī in the whole treatise.
An example taken from the beginning of both works, where they run parallel, will give an idea of Ṭūsī’s way of expanding upon a topic he finds in Miskawayh, and by the same token will also suggest the kind of additional sources that he might have consulted.

The Prologue of the Tabāṭīb al-ahlāq opens with the assessment of the scope (ġarad) of the treatise: the attainment of a character leading to sound actions and virtuous behaviour. For virtue to be established as a permanent habit in the soul, an art is needed:

غرضنا في هذا الكتاب أن نحصل لأنفسنا خلقاً تصدر به عنا الأفعال كاهماً جميلة، وتكون مع ذلك سهولة علينا لا كلفة فيها ولا مشقة، ويوخ ذلك بصناعة وعلى ترتيب تعليمي.

Our object in this book is to acquire for ourselves such a character that all our actions issuing therefrom may be good and, at the same time, may be performed by us easily, without any constraint or difficulty. This object we intend to achieve according to an art, and in a didactic order (ed. and trans. Zurayq).

Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī expands on this topic as follows:

مّا كان من الطلب في هذا الكتاب جزءًا من أجزاء احكمة وجب شرح معنى احكمة وقسمتها إلى أقسامها فنقول: احكمة في عُرف أهل امعرفة معرفة اأشياء كما ينبغي على قدر امكاني لتصل النفس اإنسانية إلى كماات مكدوسها لها.

Since our goal in this book is one of the parts of wisdom, an account of the meaning of ‘wisdom’ and of its subdivision into its subdivisions is necessary. Thus we say: ‘wisdom’, in the sense in which the scholars take the term, is the knowledge of the things as far as it is possible according to the measure of the capacity that the human soul has to attain the perfection which is within its reach.

While Miskawayh limited himself to alluding to the “art, šinā’a”, that is required to ensure the theoretical foundations of virtue, Ṭūsī defines it as “wisdom, ḥikma” and provides its definition. To this end he has recourse to the first of the definitions of philosophy that had become canonical in Greek late Antiquity and that, as detailed in Christel Hein’s fundamental work, were adopted in the formative period of Arabic-Islamic philosophy. In David’s Prolegomena it runs: ϕιλοσοφία ἐστὶ γνῶσις τῶν ὄντων ᾗ ὄντα ἐστίν (p. 28.22-23 Busse); in the Arabic rendering, as echoed by al-Kindī in his First Philosophy, the šīnā’ at al-falsafa is the “science of the things in their truth according to the measure of the human capacity, ʿilm al-ašyāʾ bi-haqāʾiqihā bi-qadr ṭaqat l-insān” (p. 97.8-10 Abū Rīda = p. 9.8-9 Rashed-Jolivet). This example shows that in his endeavour to complete Miskawayh’s exposition Ṭūsī had recourse to sources that made him acquainted, be it directly or indirectly, with Graeco-Arabic philosophical literature.

On this ground, it is only natural to think that he might have had access in some form to Aristotle’s Politics: first, at variance with Miskawayh’s Tahḏīb al-aḫlāq there is a section devoted specifically to politics in his work; second, the Aristotelian definition of man as φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον is quoted there.

However, a note of caution is necessary here. The Aristotelian tenet of man as a political animal resurfaces here and there in Ṭūsī’s work, both as a direct and an indirect influence, as noted above. 

18 The Arabic Nasirean Ethics, p. 78.2-5 Lameer.
19 The transmission to the Arabic-speaking world of the late Antique definitions and subdivisions of philosophy is examined by Ch. Hein, Definition und Einteilung der Philosophie. Von der spätantiken Einleitungsliteratur zur arabischen Enzyklopädie, P. Lang, Frankfurt - Bern - New York 1985 (Europäische Hochschulschriften, Reihe XX, Philosophie, Bd. 177), pp. 86-130.
20 At p. 89.5-7 Lameer, Ṭūsī claims that in his exposition of practical wisdom (al-hikma al-ʿamaliyya) he will rely on the tenets of the ancient and contemporary philosophers (mīn al-ḥukamāʾ al-mutaqaddimīn wa-l-mutaʾḫḫirīn).
21 The allusion mentioned above, n. 6, to a “Stoicized paraphrase of Book One (and perhaps also Book Two) of Aristotle’s Politics” is resumed at p. 400, n. 2. Here, as a commentary to Ṭūsī’s tenet al-insān madanīyy bi-l-talab, Lameer refers to his previous mention of this paraphrase: “The statement that man is [a] political [animal] by nature, may be found in Aristotle, Politics I 1253 a 2-3. As stated in the Introduction, section 2, there was a summary of Book I and maybe also of Book II of Aristotle’s Politics available in Arabic in the 4th/10th century.”
there in philosophical Arabic literature, but this and some other isolated reference to the Politics does not elicit the claim that the work itself or a work based on it were available in Arabic. Sh. Pines advanced in 1975 the hypothesis that a paraphrase of Books I and II of the Politics was composed at some point between the Hellenistic and Imperial ages; such a hypothetical work, that would have incorporated the Stoic refusal of slavery by nature, was in Pines’ eyes apt to explain some features of al-Fārābī’s political doctrine.22 Pines’ hypothesis has been gradually transformed into a reality; but there is a testimony by Averroes that, despite appearances, suggests that the Politics remained unknown to the Arab readership. To Averroes it remained in any case sadly precluded – et nondum pervenit ad nos qui sumus in hac insula, he says. Averroes also expresses his hope that elsewhere in the Islamic world an exemplar existed, and refers to al-Farābī as to one who might have had access to it.23 Apparently, this is a testimony in favour of the existence of an Arabic translation of Aristotle’s Politics: Averroes seems to testify that al-Fārābī was indeed acquainted with it; but, as Rémi Brague aptly remarks, that passage shows rather that “l’absence de la Politique dans les bibliothèques du monde musulman, n’a pas été sans laisser des regrets. La Politique a été recherchée. Elle a même été trouvée, en un sens, mais sous les espèces trompeuses de l’ouvrage apocryphe Le secret des secrets, qui porte parfois le titre de La Politique d’Aristote”.24

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22 S. Pines, “Aristotle’s Politics in Arabic Philosophy”, Israel Oriental Studies 5 (1975), pp. 150-60 (repr. in The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines, II, Studies in Arabic Versions of Greek Texts and in Medieval Science, The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University - Brill, Jerusalem - Leiden 1986, pp. 146-56, here pp. 155-6 [of the reprint]: “One possibility is that these passages are derived from a text composed by Aristotle himself or, close to his time, by an adherent of his school; this text may have been a recension or paraphrase or an abridgment of Book One or Books One and Two of the Politics. (…) Another possibility is that the Arabic passages related to Aristotle’s Politics are derived from a paraphrase of Book One and perhaps also of Book Two of this work composed in the Hellenistic or Roman period; this paraphrase may have been influenced by Stoic teaching. This could account for the criticism of slavery and for al-Fārābī’s conception of a world state (…). On the whole the last one [i.e. possibility] according to which the Arab is a paraphrase or abridgment of a part of the Politics composed in the Hellenistic or Roman period appears to be the most probable”.

23 R. Brague, “Note sur la traduction arabe de la Politique, derechef, qu’elle n’existe pas”, in P. Aubenque (ed.), Aristote politique, PUF, Paris 1993, pp. 423-33, quotes in extenso this important passage from Averroes’ Middle Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics (extant in Latin and in Hebrew, only fragmentarily attested in Arabic), p. 429: “Et hic explicit sermo in hac parte scientiae; et est ea quae habet se in scientia civilis habitudine notitiae, quid est sanitas et aegritudo in arte medicinae; et illa quam promisit est pars quae habet se in hac scientia habitudine effectivae sanitatis et destructivae aegritudinis in medicina. Et est in libro eius qui nominatur liber de regimine vitae; et nondum pervenit ad nos, qui sumus in hac insula (…). Et fortassis erit aliquis amicorum qui adducat librum in quo erit complementum huius scientiae, si Deus voluerit. Apparet autem ex sermone Abyin arrim Alfarabi quod inventus est in illis villis. Si vero hoc non contigerit, et Deus contulerit inducas vitae, perscrutabimur de hac intentione iuxta mensura nostri posse”. This statement is repeated also in the Prologue of Averroes’ commentary on Plato’s Republic (lost in Arabic, extant in Hebrew and Latin): cf. E.R. Rosenthal, Averroes’ Commentary on Plato’s Republic, Cambridge 1969, p. 112: “The first and second part of this science <of Politics> stand in the same relationship to each other as do the books of Health and Illness and the Preservation of Health and the Removal of Illness in Medicine. The first part of this art <of Politics> is contained in Aristotle’s book known as Nicomachea, and the second part in his book known as Politica, and in Plato’s book upon which we intend to comment. For Aristotle’s Politica has not yet come into our hands”.