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*An Analytical Survey of Persian Works
on Indian Learned Traditions*

OFFPRINT



PERSO-INDICA.

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is published on line at: www.perso-indica.net
ISSN: 2267-2753

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Baḥr al-asmār

Most likely commissioned during the reign of Zayn al-‘Ābidīn in Kashmir (r. ca. 1418-1470), the *Baḥr al-asmār* was a Persian adaptation of the famous Sanskrit story collection *Kathāsaritsāgara* (Ocean of Streams of Stories). This store-house of tales by the Kashmirian court-poet Somadeva claims to be a retelling of another work, the non-extant *Bṛhatkathā* (Great Tale) composed centuries earlier in an unidentified Middle Indo-Aryan language (see Speyer 1968, pp. 9-44). The *Kathāsaritsāgara* (Somadeva 1915) dates from the second half of the 11th century; the time-span of its composition can be set between 1063 and 1081 (Bühler 1886, p. 558). Comprising 18 sections (*lambaka*) and 124 subsections called ‘waves’ (*tarāṅga*), it has a length of about 20 000 stanzas. In the opening section (*kathāpīṭha*), Śiva is asked by Pārvatī to tell her a charming tale that nobody had ever heard before. This story is picked up by one of Śiva’s attendants (*gaṇa*), Puṣpadanta, who passes it on to his wife. Due to his eavesdropping, Puṣpadanta and his companion Mālyavān who had intervened on his behalf, are cursed by Pārvatī to be reborn as mortals and to stay on earth until they would proclaim the whole tale and write it down to be freed from the curse. The main storyline is interrupted by various tales, some of which can also be encountered in other Indian works (e.g. *itihāsa* and *Purāṇas*).

The Persian rendering under the name of *Baḥr al-asmār* is not extant today, it is known solely through evidence from other sources. A presumptive mention of it occurs in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* by Śrīvara (fl. 1459-1505). The court-poet Śrīvara refers to the commissioning of translations of Sanskrit works into Persian, and vice versa by his patron Zayn al-‘Ābidīn (see Slaje 2005, p. 23), among them a translation of “a digest of the Bṛhatkathā” (*bṛhatkathāsāra*) which may refer to the *Kathāsaritsāgara*.

The second instance of an allusion to a Persian version of Somadeva’s work occurs in a later reworking of it commissioned during the reign of the Mughal ruler

Akbar (r. 1556-1605). This reworking named *Daryā-yi asmār* is attributed to a certain Muṣṭafā ibn Ḥāliqdād al-Hāšimī al-‘Abbāsī, also known as the translator of other works. In the preface, al-‘Abbāsī mentions that he was called upon to rewrite an earlier rendering “of the book *barhatkatā* [...] which the Kashmirian Brahmin Sūmdēvbat [...] had shortened” and which “someone had undertaken during Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s reign”, being fraught with Arabic expressions, in a more readable style.” (Ḥāliqdād ‘Abbāsī 1375š./1997, p. 4). This preface can be found in a manuscript stored in the State Central Library of Hyderabad (ms. 2642), one of the two manuscripts upon which Čand and ‘Ābidī based their edition (Ḥāliqdād ‘Abbāsī 1375š./1997, p. 8).

We find the third reference to a Persian version of Somadeva’s tales in ‘Abd al-Qādir Badā’ūnī’s *Muntaḥab al-tawārīḥ*. Curiously, Badā’ūnī notes that he was assigned the task to translate the last volume (*ḡild-i aḥīr*) of a Persian adaptation of the *Kathāsaritsāgara* from Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s time named *Baḥr al-asmār* and also to rewrite this earlier version in a more readable style. We do not know, however, whether al-‘Abbāsī and Badā’ūnī were aware of their respective efforts as none of them mentions the other (Ḥāliqdād ‘Abbāsī 1375š./1997, pp. 10-11). Both reworkings of the *Baḥr al-asmār* were presumably done after 1590 following the military annexation of Kashmir (Franke 2010, pp. 321-322). It is not sure whether Badā’ūnī’s version has come down to us. The second manuscript of a Persian rendering of the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, namely ms. 2410 in the India Office collection was ascribed to Badā’ūnī by Marshall (Marshall 1985, p. 20) and to Fayzī by Ethé (see Ethé 1980, I, p. 1105). As it lacks the first folios and a colophon, however, the translator cannot be identified.

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Originally published: 13 octobre 2016

How to quote this article:

Martin, Anna, 2016, "Baḥr al-asmār", *Perso-Indica. An Analytical Survey of Persian Works on Indian Learned Traditions*, F. Speziale - C. W. Ernst, eds., available at http://www.perso-indica.net/work/darya-yi_asmar.

ISSN: 2267-2753

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