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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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Bilawhar wa Būdāsaf (Turfan fragment)

A fragmented Early New Persian versification of the popular tale of Bilawhar and Būdāsaf in Manichaean script. Of the entire manuscript one damaged bifolio sheet has been preserved; three fragments glassed together, namely M 581, M 613 and M 9010 (Boyce 1960, pp. 41, 42 and 138), contain parts of 27 stanzas (*bayt*), none of which complete. It is one of the specimens of Early New Persian texts in Manichaean script from the Turfan collection in Berlin (on New Persian in Manichaean script see Sundermann 2003, Provasi 2011).

The fragments were edited and translated by Henning (Henning 1962). Henning assumed that they could not be dated earlier than the first half of the tenth century A.D. The dating Henning proposed was based on the assumption that the cursive variety was a late form of the Manichaean script. Benkato has shown, however, that there are different shapes of the cursive variant and that it is “not possible to decide on a date for the fragments on a paleographical basis alone” (Benkato 2016, pp. 216-217).

Due to the included protagonists’ names, *bylwhr* und *bwdysf* (Henning 1957, p. 306), the fragments could be attributed to the widespread tale telling about the ascetic prince Būdāsaf and his teacher Bilawhar being an Islamized adaptation of parts of the legend of Buddha’s life as conveyed in various Indian sources. One part of the fragment contains an end of a dialogue and the beginning of a second one which starts with a question Būdāsaf asks his teacher Bilawhar about his age.

The form of the protagonist’s name as transmitted in the fragment in Early New Persian language derives from a Middle Iranian variant of the Sanskrit word *bodhisattva* used for the future Buddha in legends dealing with his previous lives. The form *bwdysf* entered Early New Persian presumably via an Arabic borrowing from Middle Persian (Blois - Sims-Williams 2006, p. 101, s.v. *bwdysf/bū ēsaf*). Asmussen presumed a Sogdian influence (Asmussen 1966, p. 17). Whereas Sundermann assumed that the Sogdian forms for *bodhisattva* were borrowed from Parthian (Sundermann 1982, pp.

106-107), Yoshida supports the idea of a direct borrowing from Sanskrit (Yoshida 2008, p. 353).

Henning initially hypothesized that this legend has Manichaean origin; however, he also supposed that a poem written by a Muslim author could have been adopted by Manichaeans and then converted from Arabic into Manichaean script. He first assumed that either the Persian poet Rūdakī (d. 329/941) or a contemporary imitator could have been the author. Henning later withdrew his assumption regarding Rūdakī's authorship due to stylistic flaws of the preserved verses (Henning 1962, p. 93).

Asmussen presupposed a clear Manichaean tinge of the story of Bilawhar and Būdāsaf which he saw still reflected in the Arabic versions despite their "superficial islamization". He thus came to the conclusion that Manichaean compilers collected and rearranged originally dispersed legends dealing with the Buddha's life such as Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita* (Asmussen 1966, p. 17-18). The Persian fragments edited by Henning can, according to Asmussen, with the aid of the Arabic versions of the story of Bilawhar and Būdāsaf, be assigned to the same specific tradition, to which the story as transmitted by Ibn Bābawayh (d. 381/991-992) belongs. The Shiite author Ibn Bābawayh incorporated a short recension of the story of Bilawhar and Būdāsaf in his work *Kitāb ikmāl al-dīn wa itmām an-ni'ma fī itbāt al-ḡayba wa kaṣf al-ḥayra* dating from the second half of the 10th century.

Recently, François de Blois has again raised the question regarding a possible literary model of the fragmentary Persian version of the tale of Bilawhar and Būdāsaf and came to a similar conclusion. According to de Blois, the Early New Persian versification in Manichaean script can be traced back to a short recension of the Arabic Islamized long recension. The Arabic recensions "dating from the second half of the 8th century onwards" (Lang 1957, p. 390) are all presumably based on Iranian originals. Apparently there existed a Sassanian Middle Persian version translated from an Indian language, which was later translated into Arabic supposedly by Ibn al-Muqaffa'; this version is not extant, however (Blois 2009, p. 26). Based on this version, another Arabic work was prepared by a Muslim editor who added material from other Arabic literary sources. This "long recension" (Blois 2009, pp. 7-9) was published in Bombay in 1889 and was translated and reedited by Daniel Gimaret in 1971 and 1972, respectively.

Based upon this long recension, a shortened Arabic version containing seven interpolated stories was recast. The recension itself is not extant; it is incorporated in

the above-mentioned work *Kitāb ikmāl al-dīn wa itmām an-ni‘ma fī ṭibāt al-ḡayba wa kašf al-ḥayra* by Ibn Bābawayh dating from the second half of the 10th century. Later Persian reworkings such as *Bilawhar wa Buyūdasf* by the Timurid author ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad Nizām Tabrīzī (fl. late 14th century CE) or the Safavid-period Persian reworking by Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d. 1111/1699), *‘Ayn al-ḥayāt*, were also based on it, maybe influenced by the work of Ibn Bābawayh. De Blois identified one of these interpolated stories in the Early New Persian version in Manichaean script, which led him to the conclusion that the Persian poetical version preserved in the fragments kept in the Turfan collection was based on the Arabic short recension, too (Blois 2009).

Manuscript: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, M 581, M 613, M 9010, **vii)** M 581, M 613 and M 9010 are “fragments from the same page of a MS”, Boyce 1960, p. 41, **viii)** Boyce 1960, p. 41 (M 581), p. 42 (M 613), p. 138 (M 9010).

Legend: i) Place of copying; ii) Period of copying; iii) Copyist; iv) Commissioner; v) Information on colophon; vi) Description of miniatures/illustrations; vii) Other remarks; viii) Information on catalogue(s)

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Originally published: 03 décembre 2018

How to quote this article:

Martin, Anna, 2018, "Bilawhar wa Būdīsaf (Turfan fragment)", *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/bilawhar_wa_budisaf_%28turfan_fragment%29.

ISSN: 2267-2753

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