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

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Hing-but wa Surh-but

Hing-but wa surh-but (The white idol and the red idol) is a non-extant Persian *maṭnawī* (narrative poem) derived from an Indian story. It was composed by Abū al-Qāsim Ḥasan ‘Unṣurī Balḥī (d. 431/1039), the famous poet laureate at the court of sultan Maḥmūd (r. 999-1030) of Ghazna (Afghanistan) whose fame is indebted to his laudatory poems (*qaṣīda*) for sultan Maḥmūd. In his biographies of Persian poets, the *Lubāb al-albāb*, written in 618/1221, ‘Awfī mentions this *maṭnawī* as part of a group of works named the treasure (*ḥizāna*) of *yamīn al-dawla*, i.e. Maḥmūd’s title (‘Awfī 1335š./1956, p. 269).

Very little is known about the content and form of the original Indian tale. The names “white idol” (*hing-but* or *hing-bud*) and “red idol” (*surh-but* or *surh-bud*) refer to the two giant Buddha statues which have been carved in the mountains of Bamiyan (Afghanistan). Referred to as *ṣamāma* and *salsāl* (or *ṣalṣāl*, see Hidāyat n.d., p. 352) in modern times, they were destroyed by Taliban soldiers in 2001. These statues were made when Buddhism was dominant in this region (see Emmerick 1990). The earliest record seems to occur in the travelogue of the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsiang (d. 664) who visited Bamiyan and referred to its giant statues (Hiuen Tsiang 1884, pp. 50-51).

In the Muslim period, the *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadīm (4th/10th century) includes some accounts about the Indian pilgrims visiting these idols. He calls them *junbukt* and *zunbukt* pointing out the enormous size of the statues. According to Ibn al-Nadīm, pilgrims on their way to Bamiyan had to perform religious rituals as soon as they could see the idols from the distance. In case of negligence, they had to return to the location the idols were out of sight and move towards them once more. As soon as they saw them, they had to perform rituals such as offering sacrifices, fulfilling vows and burning incense (Ibn al-Nadīm 1430/2009, p. 425). Several geographical works composed during the Muslim period describe Bamiyan and mention the statues of

hing-but and *surh-but*. Among them, the *Hudūd al-‘ālam min al-mašriq ilā al-maqrib* (1362š./1983, p. 101), an anonymous Persian work written in 372/982-83, the *Mu‘jam al-buldān* of Yāqūt Ḥamawī (d. 626/1228-29) and the *Ātār al-bilād wa aḥbār al-‘ibād* of al-Qazwīnī (d. 682/1283-84) (see Yāqūt Ḥamawī 1965, vol. 1, p. 481, Qazwīnī 1848, p. 103).

Little is known about the content of the *Hing-but wa surh-but*. According to an anonymous *Iskandar-nāma* in prose written in the 5th/11th century or between the 6th/12th and 8th-14th centuries (see Bahār 1375š/1996, p. 132, Afšār 1343š/1964, pp. 22-23), there were two tombs in the vicinity of the idols. One of them belonged to the son of an Egyptian king while the other belonged to the daughter of a Chinese king. They were in love but they died without joining each other (*Iskandar-nāma* 1343š/1964, pp. 288-289). According to the *Iskandar-nāma* the story “is not pleasant” (*īn qiṣṣa ḥalāwat nadārad*) (*Iskandar-nāma* 1343š/1964, p. 289). According to another account, the greater idol, the red one, was the male lover while the smaller one, the white one, was the female one (Hidāyat n.d., p. 148). ‘Unṣurī came from the city of Balkh (Afghanistan) and most likely he was acquainted with the stories of local people about the idols of Bamiyan. He may also have passed in Bamiyan which is located between Balkh and Ghazna. Moreover, he accompanied Maḥmūd of Ghazna in his invasion of India and he may have heard local accounts about the idols. The story of the idols of Bamiyan seems to have been popular during the author’s period considering that is also rendered into Arabic by another scholar active at the Ghaznavid court (see below).

Only two couplets which can credibly be considered to belong to ‘Unṣurī’s *Hing-but wa surh-but*, have survived. These are mentioned by later texts. The two couplets describe a battle scene with knights galloping their horses and attacking fiercely (*hama nām-i kīnšān ba parḥāš-i mard/dil-i jangjūy u basīj-i nabard/ hamī tūḥtand u hamī tāḥtand/ hamī sūḥtand u hamī sāḥtand*); these are mentioned in the *Tarjumān al-balāḡa*, a work on the figures of speech written by Rādwiyānī (d. 5th/11th century) (Rādwiyānī, 1362š./1983, p. 86; see also ‘Unṣurī Balḥī 1363š./1984, p. 354). The *Luḡat-i furs*, a lexicon compiled by Asadī Tūsī (d. 465/1072-73), quote some couplets from the *maṭnawīs* written by ‘Unṣurī. Is not clear if all quoted couplet in this meter belongs to *Hing-but wa surh-but*. Asadī does not specify the titles of works and ‘Unṣurī has composed another narrative poem in the same meter (*maṭnawī*), the *Wāmiq wa*

‘*Aḍrā*, of which a few couplets also remained (see Šaḡī‘ 1976a, pp. 1-2; Šaḡī‘ 1976b, pp. 31-32).

The title of *Hing-but wa surh-but* may suggest that the text dealt with a romantic tale. Abū Rayḡān Bīrūnī (d. after 440/1048), the well-known scholar of Indian learning who was also attached at the court of sultan Maḡmūd of Ghazna, translated the story of the two idols into Arabic. This version was done before 427/1035-36 and titled *Ḥadīṭ ṣanamay al-Bāmīyān* (The story of the two idols of Bāmīyān). Bīrūnī’s Arabic version is also non-extant. Bīrūnī wrote a list of the books he composed, here the *Ḥadīṭ ṣanamay al-Bāmīyān* is included among a group of texts which comprise other tales, such as the love story of Wāmiq and ‘Aḍrā. Bīrūnī introduces this group of texts as follows: “I also translated books, the contents of which were regarded as unfavorable and dull joking” (Deuraseh 2008, p. 91, see also Bīrūnī 1371š/1993, p. 35). This account could also suggest that the story was a romantic tale.

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