
TEXTS AND MANUSCRIPTS: DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH

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AN INDIAN COLLECTION OF PERSIAN FOLK TALES

Manuscript B 256 in the holdings of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies is today known to the scholarly world only through three reference publications. The first is *Mélanges Asiatiques*, vol. X, p. 290, which contains a register of the Asiatic Museum's acquisitions appended to the 1880 annual report by its chief keeper, K. Salemann. Entry number 8 in the register is *Majmū'a-i hikāyāt*, and indicates the size of the manuscript and the sender of the package in which it arrived. The second, more detailed, mention is contained in the short alphabetical catalogue of Persian and Tadjik manuscripts in the collection of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies under No. 3921 [1]. The manuscript contains a collection of Persian folk tales, fifty-six works in all. O. F. Akimushkin, the author of the entry, enumerated the headings of all the tales in the manuscript and indicated a series of correspondences with tales noted in the most authoritative European and Asian catalogues. The third mention comes in the description of the collection of folklore manuscripts, where each of the tales is treated as a separate work and supplied with annotations and a bibliography [2]. In my work on the last of the enumerated publications, I was able to make a series of important observations about manuscript B 256, which go beyond the narrow limits of formal description.

Most important is that B 256 is in many ways unique in the collection of Persian folk tales, which are in the holdings of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies. Moreover, it is a rare copy in terms of its formal characteristics, structure and the role it played in the Persian-language manuscript tradition in Iran during the rule of the Great Moghūls. It could be of interest to modern Orientalists — specialists in literature, folklore, sociology, etc. It is surprising that during the hundred years it spent in the collection of the Asiatic Museum, and after that in the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, this manuscript did not attract the special attention of Russian scholars. The task of the present article is to fill this gap in the most concise fashion possible. It is no doubt that the manuscript's notable features make it one of the most valuable literary monuments of the Great Moghūl period.

Unlike the overwhelming majority of manuscripts brought from Central Asia to form the basis of the collection of Persian folk tales, preserved in the St. Petersburg

Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, B 256 came down to us by a different route. It was copied in India and then made its way to England, from where it was sent to Petersburg through the offices of the famous London bookseller Bernard Quaritch.

The palaeographic data clearly show B 256's Indian origin. It is of small format (11.2 × 22.0 cm.; text dimensions are 6.5 × 14.0 cm.) and great volume (810 folios). The Oriental paper is damaged by book-worms. The text is written in Indian ink; the headings and initial phrase of the tales are written in cinnabar. The text is written in *nasta'liq*.

Manuscript B 256 was restored in England. The frayed and torn edges of the folios were glued back together and trimmed by more than 5 mm. The thick volume was divided in two volumes. Each of the two relatively equal parts was stitched into a booklet and bound in the fashion then common in Europe — pasteboard with glued-on glossy, spotted paper in black-grey hues and black leather backings with impressed gold letters which read "Persian tales" and indicate the volume number.

Unfortunately, B 256 does not contain the name of the copyist or the date of the copy. On the bases of palaeographic data one may conclude that it was produced in the eighteenth century. At the beginning of this century, two outstanding Orientalists, H. Ethé and E. Blochet, dated manuscripts, which share a number of characteristics with B 256, to the eighteenth century. Already in 1903, Ethé gave a detailed description of a collection of folk tales in the India Office Library (under No. 797), noting the limit dates in the manuscript — 1616—1639 [3]. Now we can state that manuscript No. 797 in the India Office belongs to the group of possible prototypes for our B 256.

After studying the "Tale of Arshad, Rashīd and Ashraf", which is contained in manuscript No. 2069 in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Blochet came to the conclusion that both that version of the "Tale of Arshad, Rashīd and Ashraf" and the rest of the tales in this manuscript were written down at the end of the seventeenth century [4]. We find the same version of this "Tale" in manuscript B 256 as well, which makes us conclude that either B 256 is contemporary to Paris manuscript No. 2069 or was copied later.

At first glance, B 256 is notable by the diversity of genres it represents. On further examination, this view turns out to be not quite correct. Formally, B 256 contains 5 anec-