

THE CALLIGRAPHERS OF ŠĪRĀZ AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF NASTA'LIQ SCRIPT [1]

The name of the calligrapher 'Alī b. Ḥasan of Tabrīz, whose career spanned the years of the late 14th and early 15th centuries, has long been associated with the development of the Persian script *nasta'liq*. In his treatise on calligraphy, completed in 920/1514, Sulṭān 'Alī Mašhadī states that Ḥājwā Mīr 'Alī of Tabrīz was the “original inventor” of *nasta'liq* and the person who “laid down the rules” of the new script [2]. However, an analysis of the scripts used in 14th-century Persian manuscripts disputes certain aspects of

these claims. From the evidence of the manuscripts themselves, it appears that *nasta'liq* in fact evolved gradually, over a period of several decades. 'Alī b. Ḥasan may indeed have played a role in the formation of *nasta'liq* by developing a canon of proportions for the script, but it is a contribution that came only at the end of a long period of development, several decades, in fact, after fully-developed examples of the new script had appeared.

Persian hanging scripts

The Arabic and Persian word *ta'liq* translates as “hanging” or “suspended” and *ta'liq* is a cursive script in which letters and words tend to be written with an upper right to lower left slant, and thus appear to hang, as though suspended from a single invisible point above [3]. In other cursive scripts, such as *nash*, one perceives definite vertical and horizontal axes, created by the adherence to a baseline and the very straight, tall uprights of letters such as *alif* and *kāf*. In *ta'liq*, the sensation of letters and words being hung or suspended obliquely from above is enhanced by certain, but not all, of the unusual ligatures that are a characteristic feature of the script [4]. *Nasta'liq*, as its name implies, is likewise a cursive script with a characteristic hanging quality, but it only rarely employs the unusual ligatures of *ta'liq*.

Ta'liq was the earliest of the hanging scripts to emerge in Iran after the adoption of the Arabic alphabet and script, and B. Moritz credits its development to the impact of the script used for the old Persian language, Pahlawī, a script that tended to slant from upper right to lower left. This ancient script continued in use in Iran after the Arab conquest and was used, for example, on coins issued by the Arab governors of Ṭabaristān in 140/757–8. Even after it fell

into disuse, some learned individuals retained knowledge of it [5]. The early history of *ta'liq* is rather confused. However, Francis Richard's account of its history establishes that *ta'liq* — or at least a form of it — was in use in the 13th century, and a document in scroll form issued by the Jalāyirid Sulṭān Aḥmad in 773/1372 proves that by the late 14th century the script was fully developed [6].

Thus the appearance in the 14th century of the hanging script *nasta'liq* was not in itself innovative. What was innovative was its function, for *ta'liq* was a chancery script, used primarily for official letters and other documents: because of the abundance of unusual ligatures that characterize *ta'liq*, it can be written quickly and is difficult to read — and hence difficult to copy. *Nasta'liq*, however, evolved in the sphere of, and quickly became the predominant script for, the copying of poetry manuscripts. Moreover, it did not evolve from a simple combining of *nash* and *ta'liq*, as Sulṭān 'Alī Mašhadī and others throughout the centuries have often said [7]. Rather the visual evidence of the manuscripts themselves indicates that *nasta'liq* is primarily an evolution of *nash* — a hanging version of *nash*, as its original name *nash-i ta'liq* (“hanging *nash*”) indicates.

The distinguishing traits of *nash* and *nasta'liq*

During the course of research into manuscript production in Iran in the 14th and 15th centuries, a group of manuscripts of particular interest on a number of counts was identified. These manuscripts were produced mainly in the 1360s, and one of the most notable features of several of them is the type of used calligraphy [8]. This initial observation lead to the

analysis of the calligraphy of a much broader group of manuscripts, produced mainly in Šīrāz, Tabrīz and Baġdād over a period of almost two centuries, from the early 13th century to the early 15th. Most are decorated manuscripts, mainly copies of poetry texts, but also included are copies of *Kalīla wa Dimna*, as well as scientific,