

The Use of 'kabīkaj' in Arabic Manuscripts

by Adam Gacek*

One of the more interesting aspects of Arabic palaeography is the study of notes left in codices by their copyists and former owners. Among those notes there are all kinds of invocations and magical formulae. One of them involves the use of the somewhat mysterious word *kabīkaj*, which can be found inscribed on the first or the last folio of a codex. This word is often prefixed by the particle *yā*, thus personifying it. It is often repeated several times (*yā kabīkaj yā kabīkaj yā kabīkaj*) or appears in the sentence *yā kabīkaj ihfāz al-waraq* (O *kabīkaj*, protect the paper!), and its most commonly encountered epithet is *hāfiḥ* (or *hafīḥ*), i.e. protector (*yā kabīkaj yā hāfiḥ*)¹.

If one consults Wehr's *Dictionary of modern written Arabic*², he will be told that the word means Asiatic crowfoot (*Ranunculus Asiaticus*). Steingass³ defines it as follows: 'A kind of wild parsley, and a deadly poison; the patron angel of reptiles; king of the cockroaches (in India frequently inscribed on the first page of a book, under the superstitious belief that, out of respect for the name of their king, the cockroaches will spare it'. In the light of this definition *kabīkaj* is at the same time a plant, as well as a kind of *jinn*, the invocation of whose name will protect the book from worms (*arad*, *sūs*) and insects (*hasharāt*). Dozy⁴, in turn, informs us that, etymologically, the word is Persian, and Dihkhudā⁵, citing various sources, gives its Arabic equivalents as: *kaff al-subu'* (or *kaff al-asad*, i.e. lion's-leaf), *kaff al-ḍab'*, *shajarat al-ḍafādi'* (frog's tree) and *shaqīq* (or *ward al-hubb*). The Arabic *shaqīq*, also known as *shaqīq nu'mānī* or *shaqīq al-basātīn* (garden ranunculus) has several varieties: *al-tīnī* (fig-like), *al-harīf* (spicy), *al-sharīr* (wicket, also called *zaghīlah*) and *al-buṣaylī* (rhizomic, also called *ḍufay-ḍa'*, i.e. little frog)⁶. According to Mu'in⁷, *kabīkaj* is an arabised form of *kabīkag* (originally *kabīkah*) and has a variant *kabīkanj*. He adds that it was thought that insects would run away from it on account of its smell. One other piece of information is provided by Dihkhudā, who says that it is thought that *kabīkaj*, in Syriac, was a name of a king who had command over insects. The veracity of this statement could not be confirmed at this stage. The Syriac etymology, however, seems unlikely.

According to al-Bīrūnī (d. 440/1048), the word is derived from the Indian (i.e. Sanskrit) *kapī*, meaning a monkey. Two plausible explanations are offered by

him; one is that, since the animal is always restless, whoever comes in contact with the plant also becomes restless. The other is that the monkey liked the plant, therefore the plant was given its name⁸. The word *kaj* means crooked, curved; a description which befits the plant with its thick, fibrous roots and leafy creeping runners.

In Maghribi manuscripts the word appears in its evidently corrupt form, *kaykataj*, and is clearly used as a talisman (*ta'wīdhah*, *taḥwīṭah*)⁹. Bakr al-Ishbīlī (d. 628 or 629/1231-2), in the last chapter of his *Kitāb al-taysīr fī ṣinā'at al-tasfīr*, informs us about the use of the hoopoe (*hudhud*) and its feathers for the preservation of manuscripts, and mentions, after a certain Muḥammad al-Samīrī, that when one writes *yā kaykataj* on the first and last folio of the book, one can be sure that worms will not attack it¹⁰.

The magical use of the word *kabīkaj* is therefore very similar to the role which *budūh* plays, when inscribed on manuscripts and other objects, either in full or in its *abjad* representation (2, 4, 6, 8)¹¹.

From the botanical point of view, *kabīkaj* (also known as Persian or turban buttercup) belongs to the family of plants called *ranunculaceae*. The genus *ranunculus* includes approximately 400 species, many of which are highly poisonous¹². The use of fish-glue (*ghirā' al-hūt*), starch-paste (*nashan*) and honey (*'asal*) in Arabic bookmaking most certainly invited all kinds of worms and insects. It was hoped that by putting *kabīkaj* in books, they would be repelled. One sometimes comes across dry leaves in manuscripts, but they are not necessarily those of *kabīkaj*. This and the attribution to *kabīkaj* of some magical powers would prove that the original knowledge of its poisonous properties must have been quickly lost. Besides, it is difficult to say without proper chemical analysis whether *kabīkaj* could really be used as an effective method of paper preservation.

NOTES

¹ See for example R. SELLHEIM, *Materialien zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte*, Teil I (Wiesbaden, 1976), pp. 50 & 355; A. GACEK, *Catalogue of Arabic manuscripts in the library of The Institute of Ismaili Studies* (London, 1984), vol. 1, no. 139R (where the epithet of *kabīkaj* is *mufahhīh*, from

fahḥa = to hiss, of snakes), also no. 28 and p. 80 (illus.). The word is often written as *kabkaj* or *kaykaj*. For other variants see the illustrations Nos. 5 and 6.

² H. WEHR, *A dictionary of modern written Arabic*, ed. by J. M. Cowan (New York, 1976), p. 812.

³ F. STEINGASS, *Persian-English dictionary (Farhang-i Ishtayngās)* (London, 1977), p. 1013.

⁴ R. DOZY, *Supplement aux dictionnaires arabes*, 3^e ed. (Paris, 1967), vol. 2, p. 441; see also *Wörterbuch der klassischen arabischen Sprache*, Band I (Wiesbaden, 1970), p. 542, where references to other medical Arabic works are given.

⁵ 'ALI AKBAR DIHKHUDĀ, *Lughat-nāmāh* (Teheran, 1366-1400 [1946-1979]), vol. [27], p. 331.

⁶ HASSAN KAMAL, *Encyclopaedia of Islamic medicine* (Cairo, 1975), p. 555.

⁷ MUHAMMAD MU'IN, *Farhang-i fārsi-i mutavassīṭ (An intermediate Persian dictionary)* (Teheran, 1398-99 1977-78), vol. 3, p. 2895.

⁸ MUHAMMAD IBN AHMAD AL-BĪRŪNĪ, *Ṣaydanāh*, [translated into Persian by Abū Bakr ibn 'Alī al-Kāsānī] (Teheran, 1977), vol. 2, p. 579. *N.B.* The Latin name *ramunculus* is a diminutive of *rana*, i.e. frog. The derivation of the word *kabikaj* from Sanskrit is interesting, particularly since we know that *kapī* is an epithet of Vishnu! (see J. T. PLATTS, *A dictionary of Urdū, classical Hindī, and English* Oxford,

1982, p. 811). A. DIETRICH in his *Medicinalia Arabica* Göttingen, 1966, p. 41, n. 1) mentions the numerical value of *yā kabikaj* as being the same as Allāh, namely 66!?

⁹ 'ABD AL-HĀDĪ AL-TĀZĪ, *al-Rumūz al-sirriyah fī al-murāsālāt al-maghribiyah 'abra al-ta'rīkh (Les codes secrets des correspondances marocaines à travers l'histoire)* (Rabat, 1983), p. 35.

¹⁰ BAKR IBN IBRĀHĪM AL-ISHBĪLĪ, 'Kitāb al-taysīr fī šinā'at al-tasfīr', ed. by 'Abd Allāh Kannūn, *Revista del Instituto de Estudios Islamicos en Madrid (Shaḥīfat Ma'had al-Dirāsāt al-Islāmīyah fī Madrīd)*, 7-8 (1959-60), p. 40; for the *hudhud* see A. J. Wensinck, *E.I.*², vol. 3, pp. 541-542.

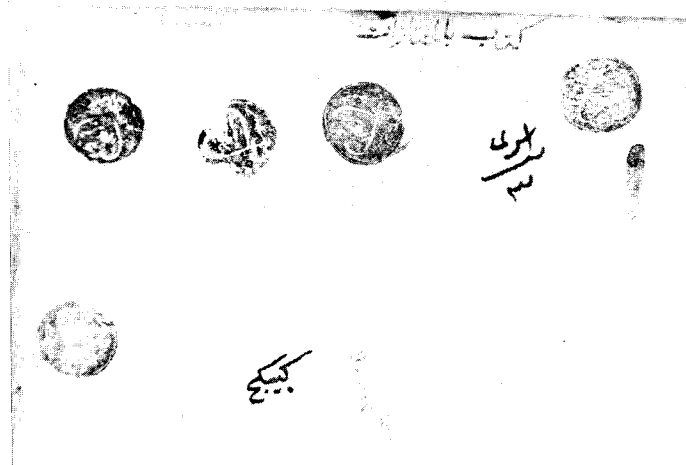
¹¹ D. B. MACDONALD, 'Budūh', *E.I.*², Suppl., fasc. 3-4, pp. 153-154; see also the same in Arabic translation (*Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-Islāmīyah*, vol. 6, pp. 496-504) and Silvestre de Sacy, *Chrestomathie arabe*, 2^e ed. (Paris, 1826-27), vol. 3, pp. 364-366.

¹² See for example F. STARY, *Poisonous plants* (London, Hamlyn, 1983), p. 170.

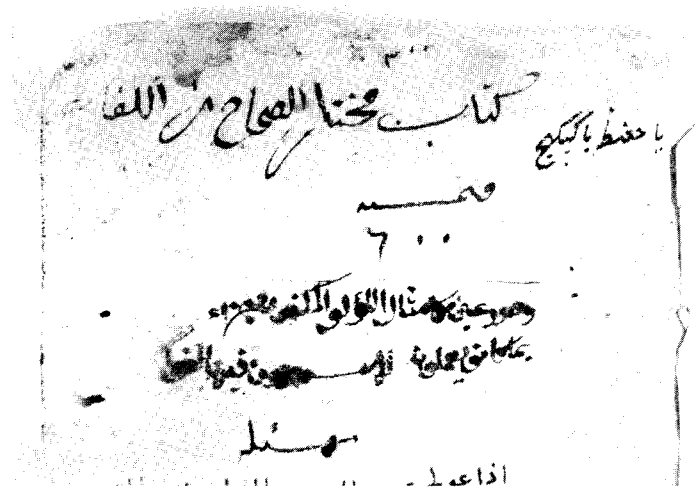
* I am grateful to Dr. F. Keshavarz, who assisted me with the Persian texts, as well as Dr. J. J. Witkam, for selecting specimens of *kabikaj* from the Leiden Collection and providing captions for them.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Examples of *kabikaj* taken from manuscripts in Leiden University Library



1. *kabikaj*. Or. 11.610: *Al-Mukhtārāt*, a handbook on Hanafite law by 'Alī b. Aḥmad al-Jamālī (d. 931/1525). Turkey, 18th century.



2. *yā ḥafīz yā kabikaj*. Or. 11.601: *Mukhtār al-Ṣiḥāh*. A shortened version of al-Jawharī's Arabic lexicon. MS dated 935/1529, from Turkey.

قد تمكلاه حافظ
عبد بن حنيفة
قوازي
١٢٩٤

يا كايح يا حافظ

3. *yā kabīkaj yā ḥafīz*. Or.11.564: *Muṭqin al-Riwāyah fī 'Ulūm al-Qirā'ah wa-al-Dawāyah* [?], by Ibn al-Kattānī (18th-19th century). Manuscript dated Istanbul 1229/1814.

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
الحمد لله الذي جعل في كل صلاة
ذكره وتحملاه وتذكره
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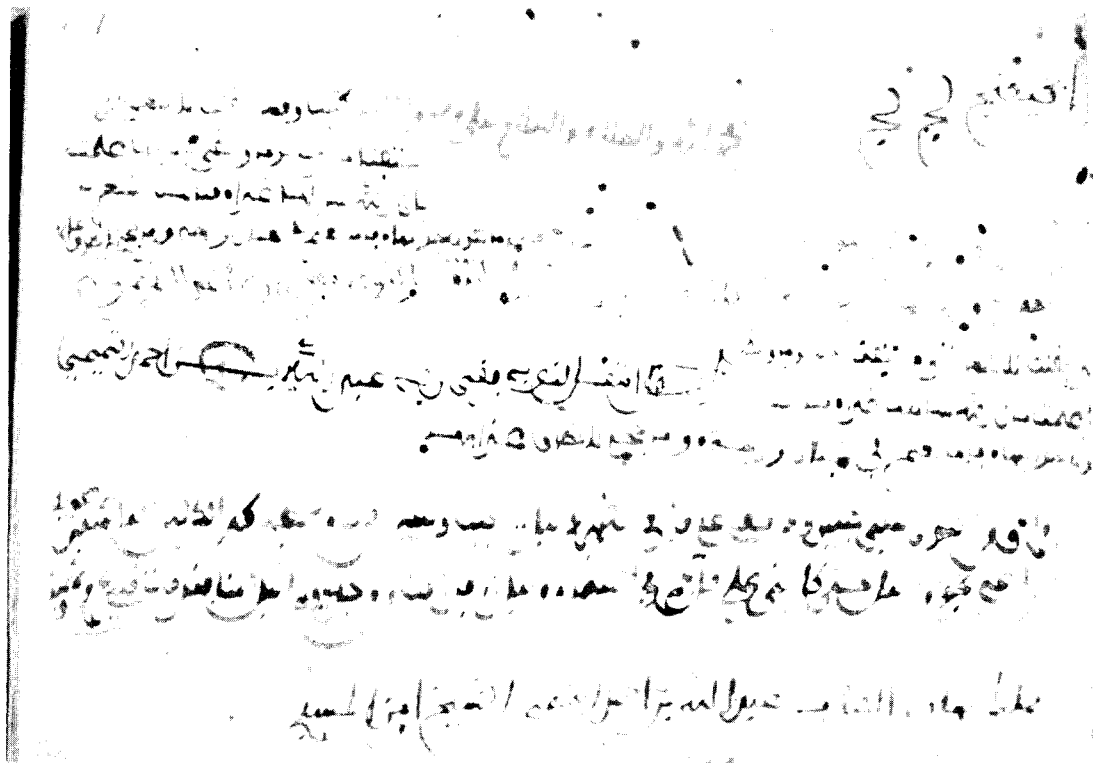
يا كايح حافظ

Cod. Or. 8513

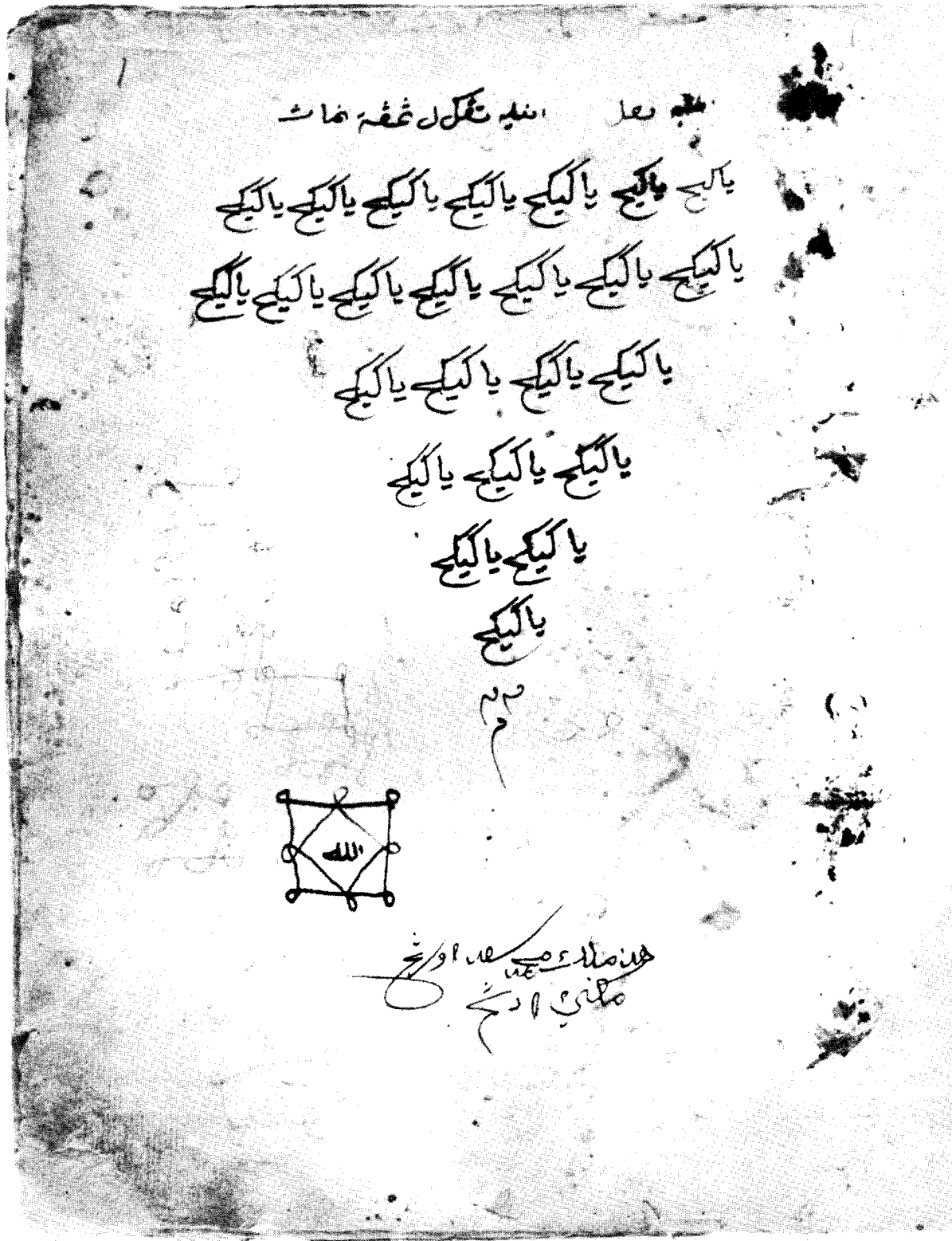
4. *yā kabīkaj ihfaz*. Or. 8513: *Khulāṣat al-I'rāb*, by Ḥājji Bābā, being a commentary on al-Bayḍāwī's *Miṣbāḥ*. Turkey 18th century.



5. *yā kanīnkaj*. Or. 14.257, f. 229b: *Sharḥ Lubḥ al-Albāb fī 'Ilm al-I'rāb*, by Nuḡrakār. Turkey or possibly Iran. 17th-18th century.



6. *akīkanj kaj kaj*. Or. 11.684: *Zubdat al-Bayān fī Ḥirfat 'Uyūn al-A'yān*, being a commentary on a compendium by Abū Zayd 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Akhdarī on Islamic theology. Manuscript dated 1187/1773, the Maghrib.



7. *yā kih* and *yā kīkah*. Or. 14.316: Frontpage of a collection with four texts on Arabic grammar, from Aceh, Indonesia, 19th century.