The Use of ‘kabīkaj’ in Arabic Manuscripts
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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 ihfā: al-v:araq (O kabīkaj, protect the paper!), and its most commonly encountered epithet is hāfiz (or ḥāfiz), i.e. protector (ya kabrkaj yA hAfi).

If one consults Wehr’s Dictionary of modern written Arabic, he will be told that the word means Asiatic crowfoot (Ranunculus Asiaticus). Steingass 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 kabtkoj 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, sas) and insects (hasharàt). Dozya, in turn, informs us that, etymologically, the word is Persian, and Dihkhudàs, citing various sources, gives its Arabic equivalents as: kaff al-subu’ (or kaff al-asad, i.e. lion’s-leaf), kaff al-dab’, shajarat al-dafā:ī (frog’s tree) and shaqiq (or ward al-hubb). The Arabic shaqiq, also known as shaqiq mu:mâni or shaqiq al-basātīn (garden ranunculus) has several varieties: al-trnt (frg-like), al-hary’ (spicy), al-sharîr (wicket, also called zaghlïlah) and al-busayll (rhizomic, also called du.fat, i.e. little frog). According to Mu’în, kabikaj is an arabised form of kabikag (originally kabikah) and has a variant kabikanj. 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 Dihkhudâ, who says that it is thought that kabikaj, 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-Birûnï (d. 440/1048), the word is derived from the Indian (i.e. Sanskrit) kāpi, 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 name. 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’wilhah, tahy.ïtaá). Bakr al-Ishbîlî (d. 628 or 629 l23l-2), in the last chapter of his Kitâb al-taysîr fi sinâ’at al-tasfîr, informs us about the use of the hoopoe (hudhud) and its feathers for the preservation of manuscripts, and mentions, after a certain Muhammad al-Samîrî, that when one writes yā kaykataj on the first and last folio of the book, one can be sure that worms will not attack it.

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

From the botanical point of view, kabikaj (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 poisonous. The use of fish-glue (ghirâ’ al-hûr), starch-paste (nashon) and honey (’asal) in Arabic bookmaking most certainly invited all kinds of worms and insects. It was hoped that by putting kabikaj in books, they would be repelled. One sometimes comes across dry leaves in manuscripts, but they are not necessarily those of kabikaj. This and the attribution to kabikaj 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 kabikaj 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 kabikaj is musâhhib, from...
The word is often written as kabıkaj or kayıkaj. For other variants see the illustrations Nos. 5 and 6.


6 Hassan Kamal, Encyclopaedia of Islamic medicine (Cairo, 1975), p. 555.


8 Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Biruni, Saydanah, [translated into Persian by Abû Bakr ibn 'Ali al-Kásâ'î] (Teheran, 1977), vol. 2, p. 579. N.B. The Latin name ranunculus is a diminutive of rana, i.e. frog. The derivation of the word kabıkaj from Sanskrit is interesting, particularly since we know that kâpî is an epithet of Vishnu! (see J. T. Platts, A dictionary of Urdu, classical Hindi, and English Oxford, 1982, p. 811). A. Dietrich in his Medicina Arabica Göttin- gen, 1966, p. 41, n. 1) mentions the numerical value of yâ kabıkaj as being the same as Allâh, namely 66!


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 kabıkaj from the Leiden Collection and providing captions for them.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Examples of kabıkaj taken from manuscripts in Leiden University Library

1. kabıkaj. Or. 11.610: Al-Mukhtarât, a handbook on Hanâfite law by 'Ali b. Ahmad al-Jamâ'î (d. 931/1525). Turkey, 18th century.

2. yâ ha'îz yâ kabıkaj. Or. 11.601: Mukhtar al-Sihâh. A shortened version of al-Jawhari's Arabic lexicon. MS dated 935/1529, from Turkey.


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