The Medieval Manuscript Tradition of Balʿami’s Version of al-Ṭabari’s History

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In the year 352/963, the Samanid ruler Mansur b. Nuh (d. 365/976) ordered his minister Abu 'Ali Balʿami (d. 363/974) to translate the famous chronicle of world history composed by al-Ṭabari (d. 310/923) earlier the same century, the Taʾrikh al-rasid wa al-muluk, from Arabic into Persian. The vizier was further ordered to simplify the work and to omit the isnads and repetitions that are partly responsible for the great length of the Arabic. The rationale for this was the creation of an accessible version "that the intellects of the populace and authorities might share in reading it and knowledge of it and that it might be easy for anyone who examines it in the words of the introduction. The popularity of the work must have been enormous, for it came to be translated into both Ottoman and Chaghatay Turkic, Urdu, and even back into Arabic twice. The large number of extant Persian manuscripts - over one hundred and sixty - is further testimony to the fact that, at least in the eastern Islamic world, it must have supplanted al-Ṭabari’s original, of which we sadly lack complete manuscripts.

However, just as with the Shahnama of Ferdowsi (d. 411/1020), the preservation of a vast array of textual witnesses has not ensured that we have an unproblematic text - rather, it has served to multiply the difficulties. Our earliest manuscripts of the Persian version date to the late twelfth century, over two hundred years after the translation was commissioned, and these are fragmentary. It is not until the Mongol period is well under way that we find our first complete manuscripts, and the standard published edition by Muḥammad Rawshan is based on a manuscript of the early fourteenth century (RAS Persian 22). It would therefore be nothing short of miraculous if an accurate representation of Balʿami’s text had survived among them.

Yet even the recognition of that depressing fact cannot prepare one for the utter chaos that confronts one on comparing these manuscripts. It is not merely a question of variations of vocabulary and grammar, although these occur in abundance. Rather, passages present in one manuscript are omitted in another, radically abbreviated or extended in others, or their apparent point or moral altered elsewhere. There are even two versions of the introduction, one in Arabic and one in Persian, different not merely in language but also in content. One manuscript

1 Taʾrikhnama, ed. Rawshan, I: 2.
3 These are British Library MS Or. 7324 (miscalculated as Qays al-Anṣārī) and Mashhad Astān-i Quds 129 (7481).
may completely contradict another, or even an earlier passage in itself. Despite the instructions given to Bal'ami, there are numerous repetitions. Yet more confusingly, the manuscripts will frequently comment before a passage or some lines of poetry that this was not to be found in al-Tabari's version, so the scribe had taken it from elsewhere for the sake of completeness, yet a glance at the Arabic will reveal its presence there. In addition, there are numerous quotations in Arabic, not just from the Qur'an but also from poets, only rarely accompanied by a Persian translation. This is hardly what one would expect of a work translated into Persian precisely for the purpose of supplying those who could not understand the original with a readable version of it.

It would indeed be a Herculean task for an editor to cleanse the Augean stables of this manuscript tradition of corruption. It is therefore hardly surprising that all the published editions of the text reflect the failings of the tradition. Nevertheless, I have found a manuscript, which, I believe, allows us to get some idea of what Bal'ami actually wrote. This is an early Arabic translation of Bal'ami (Cambridge University Library Add 836) which is remarkably free of the difficulties I have just outlined. However, before discussing it, I wish to examine ways in which previous scholars have treated the Persian textual tradition, and suggest some of the reasons why these were flawed. I intend finally to use the Cambridge manuscript to elucidate the processes of transmission to which the Persian manuscripts have been subjected.

Orientalist scholarship and Bal’ami

Interest in Bal’ami among western Orientalists started in the nineteenth century. Before de Goeje’s great edition of the Arabic text was published, it had been generally assumed that al-Tabari’s work was lost in its original form, so Bal’ami’s Persian version offered the best approximation of it available. A translation into French was started by Dubeux in the first half of the century, but it had to wait thirty years for Zotenberg to complete it. Zotenberg realized that Bal’ami presented a complex manuscript tradition, and for his translation he consulted ten manuscripts held in libraries in France, England and Germany. He saw the manuscripts as falling basically into two main groups, which he described as “la rédaction primitive” and “la nouvelle rédaction corrigée.” The latter, according to Zotenberg, is distinguished from the former by being more developed than the earlier “primitive” redaction. However, he also recognized that many of even the fairly limited number of manuscripts at his disposal would not fit these categories exactly. He describes his manuscript D in the following terms: “Quoique le texte de ce manuscrit soit en général rajeuni et corrigé, il s’éloigne cependant de la rédaction primitive plutôt par des suppressions que par des amplifications.”

Zotenberg commented of his manuscript F that “il suit ordinairement la nouvelle rédaction; mais il y a des cas où il réunit l’ancien et le nouveau texte, et il offre parfois des leçons qui ne se trouve pas dans aucun des autres manuscrits.”

Regrettably, I have not yet had the chance to examine Zotenberg’s manuscript A, on which he based his translation. However, the notes to his translation give one a fair idea of its contents and how the French differs from it. It seems that the other manuscripts were used mainly to correct A which he described as being “très-incorrect” with numerous minor lacunae, and a representative of the “primitive” redaction. One would expect those manuscripts he describes as being representatives of the new redaction to give fuller accounts than A. However, this is by no means invariably the case. If we compare Zotenberg’s A with his E, a manuscript in the collection of the Royal Asiatic Society in London (Persian 22) which was also used as the basis of Muhammad Rawshan’s edition of Bal’ami, it is clear that in many places E, although classed as “new redaction”, has important passages missing and abridged versions of others. For example, E entirely omits a vital passage discussing the duration of the world which marks the division between the pre-Islamic and Islamic sections in many other manuscripts, and shortens the account of the conversion of Abu Bakr. Occasionally Zotenberg indicates that a passage is unique to A. So in fact we find that the primitive redaction is sometimes fuller than the new redaction. As the definition of each type of redaction seems mainly to be based on their completeness, this is the opposite to what one would expect to find, and indicates that this method of classifying the manuscripts is wholly inadequate.

The publication of de Goeje’s edition of al-Tabari meant that study of Bal’ami was virtually abandoned as historians had now got “the original.” Fortunately, the Persian translation’s status as one of the oldest works of New Persian prose preserved a modicum of interest in it. However, it was not until 1957 that any further work of importance was done on the subject, when the two Soviet scholars Gryaznevtzov and Boldyrev published an article noting the existence of two main different types of introduction, one in Arabic, and one in Persian, rather different in contents. Although they believed that the Arabic preface was older, which may well be correct, it does not follow that the contents of the manuscripts that have it are more authentic. Indeed, it does not seem possible to group the manuscripts into introductions according to their preface, as Gryaznevtzov and Boldyrev suggested. A manuscript with an Arabic preface may well have

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5 Ibid., I: viii.
7 However, the text of the Persian prefaces often differs greatly: Bodleian Elliott 377 starts “shak ur šavu bihsat-i khulq-u,” while Bodleian Ouseley 359 has “ázin mar khudâyi kângân.”
8 Gryaznevtzov & Boldyrev 1957, 54-5.
9 Ibid., 56.
more in common with one with a Persian one than other Arabic ones, and vice versa. For example, the Bodleian’s Laud Or 323 which has an Arabic beginning has rather more detailed accounts for much of the Islamic section than RAS Persian 22 (which we have already mentioned as Zonenberg’s E), which also has an Arabic preface. In fact, the contents of the latter have more in common with a manuscript like Süleymaniyê Farīth 4281, which has a Persian preface, both having detailed accounts of Gayîmî and Bahram Chubin’s career, which are relatively uncommon.

Elton Daniel is probably the scholar who has done most to improve our understanding of the complex manuscript history of this work. About a decade ago, he suggested grouping the manuscripts into three different redactions: a late redaction, a full redaction, and an abbreviated redaction. Yet if we compare a manuscript from each putative redaction, we will not necessarily find that they diverge as much as one would suppose. Conversely, one faces the perpetual problem that any two manuscripts from one redaction may vary more from each other than from ones supposedly belonging to the other redactions. This problem is so common that it cannot be purely a question of manuscripts having been misclassified. I examined a selection of episodes from the pre-Islamic and Islamic sections in a representative of each redaction. The abbreviated redaction turned out to be more detailed than the full redaction, and the late redaction often offered the most abbreviated accounts. Yet again, the representatives of each redaction failed to cohere to their description.

When Muhammad Rawhan came to edit the text, he followed the theory that the Persian and Arabic prefaces represented two different redactions. However, he could not fit our second earliest manuscript, Masihad Astân-i Quds 129 (which is incomplete), into either category, so he posited a third redaction of which it is the sole surviving example. He was nonetheless faced with the usual problems of the manuscripts, which led him to a rather unfortunate conclusion. Confronted by the task of explaining their inconsistencies, he decided that Balʿami was not the actual author. Rather, the vizier had been entrusted with the task of having al-Ṭabarî translated, and so had commissioned a number of scribes to work on it. He compared this to the way in which Rashid al-Din used Qâshânî, and then took the credit for himself. The problem with this is obvious: if one was going to commission such an undertaking to a group of people, surely one would set each one to work on a different part of the text. To have

several translate the same passage at the same time, producing contradictory versions and selecting different parts of the passage to translate would be inexplicable and irrational. Furthermore, to argue that a group of scribes was responsible is not merely highly speculative, it also directly contradicts the evidence of the Arabic and Persian introductions which both use a singular verb to describe the act of translating.

I therefore believe that we have no choice but to assume for the moment that Balʿami was indeed the author, and that we must seek elsewhere the explanation for the present state of the text. I trust I have also demonstrated that attempts to classify the manuscripts according to redaction have been largely unsuccessful, and I shall suggest the reasons for this below. I should note at this point that it is of course possible to find manuscripts which are closely related; however, they tend to be late or unimportant copies, and are of little importance for the textual history of the Tarikhnamâ. Before discussing the difficulties of the manuscript tradition further, I wish now to examine the manuscript which I hope will elucidate the ways in which the others are corrupt.

The Cambridge Arabic Translation

The manuscript, a retranslation of Balʿami into Arabic, was acquired by Cambridge University Library in 1870, and is classmarked Add 836. The first folio is missing, and the last one damaged. It is dated 876/1471, but the colophon tells us that it is a copy of a manuscript dated 627/1229, itself a copy of one dated 442/1050, that is, only ninety years after the original Persian translation was commissioned.16 Regrettably, the provenance of Add 836 is unclear; a note in English on the flyleaf states that it is an "Indian MS", but this seems unlikely, and the presence of the passage about the Alid naqib of Kûfa (see below) would make one suspect that an Iraqi origin is more probable. It is written, like the Persian, in an extremely simple style, and is singularly free of repetitions and contradictions. Unlike other manuscripts, it contains very little poetry, and rarely mentions al-Ṭabarî himself, and hardly at all to state that a passage has been added from elsewhere. Indeed, it is rather what one would have expected Balʿami’s translation to have looked like, albeit in a different language. However, its terminus is surprisingly early, 132 A.H. (the death of Marwân). Only one

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10 Daniel 1990, 299.
11 Cf. the two accounts of the Prophet’s ancestry in the British Library MSS IO Id. 2669 (Esth 2), f. 155b ff and IO Id. 1983 (Esth 9), f. 313a ff, which is considerably more detailed in the latter although both are meant to be representative of the late redaction.
12 Tarikhnamâ, ed. Rawhan, 1: Muqaddima: 42.
13 Ibid., 1: Muqaddima: 47. Rawhan was unaware of the antiquity of British Library Or. 7324.
14 It should be noted in this connection that Morgan rejects the idea that Qâshânî had nearly as important a rôle as he claimed: Morgan 1986: 21.
15 E.g. the contents of Süleymaniyê Aya Sofya 3030 are virtually identical to those of Aya Sofya 3031. However, as the copyist was a brother working from the same original, this close relationship between the manuscripts they produced is unsurprising.
16 Daniel 1990, 283 states that this is a copy of the Arabic translation by Khîdî b. Khîdî al-ʿAmîdî. However, this translation, of which only the second half appears to be extant, was started in 935/1528 and completed in 947/1540 (see Leiden University Library Or. 140: f. 1b, f. 958b). al-ʿAmîdî’s translation differs substantially in language and contents from Add. 836, and must be considered a completely unrelated work.
other Persian manuscript ends at this point, the Mashhad one, but it is our earliest manuscript covering the Islamic period.17 Hence two questions must be addressed: firstly, how accurate a translation of Ba‘amis is it? And secondly, to what extent is the ninth century A.H. copy an accurate rendering of the fifth century original?

With regard to the translation’s accuracy, I took the account of ‘Abdallah b. Kurayz b. ‘Amir’s punitive expedition to Khurāsān during ‘Uthmān’s reign. This is virtually identical to the Persian manuscripts, with only a few minor differences of grammar and vocabulary, so it offers a rare case where we may be reasonably sure that it resembles Ba‘amis’s original. On comparing the Arabic with it, it was clear that the Cambridge manuscript presented an accurate translation into idiomatic Arabic. I then compared a few other passages the authenticity of which seems probable as their textual tradition is relatively stable, such as the reign of Jamshid, and they confirmed the general accuracy of the Arabic. As the Cambridge manuscript does not explicitly mention the Persian version or Ba‘amis, the closeness of Add 836’s text to the Persian also served to confirm that it was indeed a translation from Persian into Arabic, not an abridgement of al-Tabari made directly from the original. Further evidence of this is the extremely simple style of both the Cambridge manuscript and the Persian, whereas one would expect an abridgement from the original to preserve at least some of the phrasology and obscurities of al-Tabari. Furthermore, its treatment of certain episodes, such as Bahram Chibin, contains information found only in some of the Persian versions, not in al-Tabari.18 We may therefore be confident that the Cambridge manuscript accurately reflects the Persian.

The question of the accuracy of the ninth century A.H. copy is rather more difficult to prove conclusively. It is clear that one of the later copyists was ill-acquainted with Persian, so he writes Barwin for Parviz. Occasionally, when a Persian etymology is given (for Jamshid’s name, for example), he mangles the text into incoherence – but so do many of the Persian manuscripts. These are, however, minor matters. On the plus side, sectarian tendencies do not seem to have intervened at all. This is surprising, because it appears that the copyst was a Shi‘ite. On the last folio of the manuscript, sadly damaged, we find an account of the genealogy of the nazibs of Kufa,19 under whose tutelage it was presumably written, and curses on Mu‘awiyya. Yet the text itself shows no signs of Shi‘ite leanings, in keeping with Ba‘amis’s staunchly Sunni views.

I therefore believe that this manuscript presents us with something approximating Ba‘amis’s original. Above all, it presents a coherent, consistent narrative in simple language, just what Ba‘amis set out to do, yet which the Persian manuscripts fail to represent. We may now compare it with these manuscripts to elucidate their textual history.

Interpolation and corruption in the Persian manuscript tradition

Even the most cursory examination reveals some interpolations in the manuscripts – many of them continue up to the reign of al-Qā‘im (d. 467/1075) or al-Mustazhir (d. 512/1118), who acceded long after Ba‘amis’s death. In others, the terminus varies considerably. Accounts are often confusing, repetitive and contradictory, and it is hard to believe a sane author could have wanted to present them in this way. Also, as I mentioned earlier, we have the perplexing fact that the manuscripts often claim they have added something not to be found in al-Tabari when it is actually there. If these passages are genuine, it would either mean Ba‘amis was lying (for no obvious reason) or that al-Tabari’s text was unrecognizably different in the tenth century. While I accept that al-Tabari’s History is not perfectly preserved, I do not believe that it was so radically different.

It is all very well to recognize the existence of interpolations, but identifying them precisely is rarely easy. Occasionally we may have a situation as in RAS Persian 22’s account of Dāhāk, where the narrative is interrupted by a fairly irrelevant passage, clear evidence of interpolation.20 But more commonly we have a situation like this: RAS Persian 22 presents Nebuchadnezzar as a powerful general. After describing his suppression of the Israelites, it then says that Nebuchadnezzar was a poor man from Babel, and gives a second very different account of his rise to power, ending with him challenging God.21 Now we will probably have suspicions that something is wrong, but it is hard to tell what: has a link passage saying that Ba‘amis wants to give a second account which is more or less reliable than the first dropped out? Or is one of the accounts an interpolation? If so which one? It is only by using Add 836 that we can see that it is in fact the second account which has been added.

I shall consider three examples, one to demonstrate each type of interpolation. The first type is when passages have been added from Persian sources, perhaps the most common type. These are often indicated by words to the effect of “Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari did not recount this in full in his book, but I found it complete in such-and-such a work, and have taken the account from there.” The sources, when they can be identified, are usually fairly early ones.22

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17 It is, however, questionable whether this represents the real terminus of As‘āni Quds 129, as a note after the colophon indicates a second volume covering abhibār al-Mubayyada al-la‘ālima khanshi fa al-Sharī‘a wa al-Jarir wa al-‘Alladhi bi al-Saffah will follow.
18 E.g. Bahram’s encounter with the daughter of the Fairy: Fārākhānā, ed. Rawshan, II: 776-781; Add. 836, f. 68a.
19 These are mentioned in Ibn ‘Iṣaḥab, ʿUmādat al-Tāḥīb, ed. Aḥ al-Taqīqanī, 311-338.
20 The account of the origin of the Kureh – see Tārīkhānāma, ed. Rawshan, I: 103.
21 Ibid., I: 471-472.
22 E.g. Abū ‘Abd Allāh: Kūṭī-bi Iṣlāhāt-i Bishāh (4th c. A.H.) which is mentioned in ibid., I: 82.
to which Bal’ami may well have had access; it is often surmised that he is therefore responsible. However, such passages are more than usually subject to omission or presentation in a different format. RAS Persian 22, for example, has an extremely detailed account of the career of Bahram Chubin, which is attributed to information from a work called Kitāb al-Akhbār-i ‘Ajam.23 Bodelian Ouseley 206 (ff. 180a-184b) and British Library Add 7622 (ff. 152a-153b) have a much shorter version, which is not attributed to any other source, and Bodelian Laud Or 323 entirely omits the account. Add 836 offers a version with rather more detail than Ouseley 206, but considerably shorter than Persian 22. The latter manuscript has therefore presumably supplemented Bal’ami’s (not al-Tabari’s) version with information from the Akhbār-i ‘Ajam, whereas Ouseley 206 and Add 7622 have reduced it.

Furthermore, we should note that the attribution of accounts to authors other than al-Tabari is extremely rare in Add 836, even when a passage clearly differs from that in al-Tabari. If, as seems likely, Bal’ami was using and adapting al-Tabari to promote a certain sectarian or political agenda, to legitimize a Samānīd version of history by basing his work on such an authoritative source as the Ta’rikh al-rusul wa al-mustafik, it would be bizarre for him to question al-Tabari’s accuracy openly, for surely that would undermine his own translation’s reliability.24 Add 836 contains plenty of additions and omissions when compared with al-Tabari, but they are almost invariably glossed over in silence, which is precisely the treatment one would expect if the preceding analysis of Bal’ami’s motives is correct. This provides us with further good reason to doubt the authenticity of these interpolations which are advertised as such.

The second type of interpolation is where two versions of an account are given. The two accounts of Nebuchaneezar I have already discussed are an example of this. Only the first is given in the Cambridge manuscript and some of the other Persian ones. So how was the second one added? If we turn to the text of al-Tabari, we find it is present there, so some scribe must have translated it into Persian, omitting the isnād, and added to his manuscript.

This use of al-Tabari’s text is most strongly demonstrated in a third type of interpolation which occurs in our earliest manuscripts, the translation of al-Tabari preserving the different versions given in the original. Usually the full isnād is omitted, but each account is indicated with a phrase such as be-digar risāvatī. This is used in particular in Bodelian Laud Or 323, and in the Mashhad manuscript.25 As well as the fact that these never occur in the Cambridge manuscript, their difference in style from the rest of the text clearly indicates that they are not original.

23 Ibid., II: 764.
24 For more on the political motives for the translation see Meisami 1999, 23-37.

It is certainly surprising to find that scribes were using al-Tabari’s Arabic as a source. This implies that at least up to the Mongol invasion, al-Tabari was fairly well-known and accessible in the eastern Islamic world. At one point the Mashhad manuscript explicitly states that the copyist had access to al-Tabari’s version, contrasting it with Bal’ami’s.26 After the fourteenth century we find few new interpolations which can be firmly pinned down to the use of the original. By the end of the fifteenth century, collaboration between Persian manuscripts is clearly still happening, but few interpolations from outside the manuscript tradition are being introduced.27 Yet there must have been some use of al-Tabari’s Arabic even later. MS Or 5343 in the British Library dates from the fourteenth century. However, its initial 31 folios were damaged, and replaced in around the sixteenth century. It presents the unusual phenomenon of two prefaces, one Arabic and one Persian. However, the Arabic preface is different from those in other manuscripts: instead of starting al-bāmd ināb al-‘alī al-a-nāb al-walad al-a-rd, it starts, al-bāmd ināb al-a-nāb gibr kalt a-vpol, that is, an abridged version of the eulogy al-Tabari actually used. Thus on repairing the manuscript, the scribe must have realized that it differed from al-Tabari, and took it upon himself to provide the correct version.

Possibly the most perplexing problem is not that of interpolation, but of those passages which manuscripts falsely state to be absent from al-Tabari.28 It is possible that the Arabic manuscripts at the scribes’ disposal were inadequate, but if that was the case they seem to have been inadequate with amazing frequency. One manuscript even alleges that al-Tabari omitted such major events as Abu Bakr’s conversion and the battle of Badr.29 It seems much more likely that al-Tabari’s omissions are actually lacunae in Persian manuscripts the scribe was collating, which we have already noted are subject to great textual instability. Scribes would therefore correct these lacunae from other manuscripts at their disposal. Admittedly, it is confusing that al-Tabari rather than Bal’ami is blamed for the omission, but I do not believe they made a strict distinction between the Arabic and Persian texts, as their use of al-Tabari to supplement the Persian indicates. Indeed, many manuscripts with the Arabic preface start “Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari said in the khutba of his book...” and proceed to give praise of God in completely different terms from those in the Arabic original, followed by a preface written by Bal’ami in the first person. At any rate, it seems unlikely that a vizier of the most powerful Muslim state of the day, working on a project by order of the ruler, would have to cope with inadequate manuscripts of al-Tabari a mere forty years after the author’s death.

26 Ibid., 388.
27 This may be a consequence of the movement to establish more reliable texts which Bāhir has described: 1369, 537-8.
28 This question has already been discussed in Daniel 2003, 166-67.
29 According to Zotenberg’s A – see Zotenberg 1869: II: 479.
A theoretical approach to the textual tradition

In light of the above discussion, we may now address the reasons why previous scholars’ attempts to classify manuscripts by redaction have been unsuccessful. Classification according to redaction presupposes vertical transmission within that group—the manuscripts are descended from a common parent, hence will have similar omissions and interpolations. I shall leave aside the question of language, which would confuse the question further, as copyists would often “modernize” it to suit the tastes of their day. However, as I have indicated, such similarities do not occur in early manuscripts with sufficient frequency for any such pattern to be established. Rather, we have a case of horizontal transmission, where copyists would consult a number of manuscripts, and collate their account from them. Clear evidence for this is to be found in RAS Persian 22, where in the account of Jeremiah the prophet’s name is written inconsistently as both ‘Uzayr and Amniyá. In the same manuscript (and the printed edition) Faridun’s son is referred to as both Túj and Túr within the space of a couple of lines. These are clearly not simple scribal slips, but rather the result of consulting different manuscripts for the same story in a way reminiscent of the practice of collation.

Mu‘adda or muqāmá, as collation is called in Arabic, had been encouraged — indeed was often obligatory — for hadith, and it seems to have spread from there into secular fields. The best known early example is that of the great translator Hunayn b. Ishaq who tells us that he collated the available manuscripts of Galen before rendering it into Arabic. Scribes occasionally allude directly to the practice of collation. Just before the colophon of Bodleian Ouseley 206-8, the scribe notes that he has seen in other manuscripts versions different from the one he has given: in some manuscripts, the account of the Qaramita is omitted, and some only go up to the time of al-Mu’tasim. However, the aim of collation was generally to check that one had made an accurate copy from one or more manuscripts. In the case of Bal‘ami’s Tarikhnama it seems to have taken on a rather more extreme form, serving to supplement the text with alternative or additional versions of passages. The omission or inclusion of certain episodes appears to have been a matter of the copyist’s personal judgment. For example, most manuscripts have a section on ‘Uthmán’s lineage, wives, and number of children, following the account of his murder. However, the scribe of RAS Persian 22, who is clearly very hostile to the Caliph and interpolates negative comments about him,33 entirely omits this section. However, we must not assume that his hostility (or rather his concentration), and occasionally a nafaka Alláh ‘anhu slips in after ‘Uthmán’s name, copied automatically from whatever manuscript he was using. In other cases it is harder to establish such an obvious cause for alterations, but we may surmise that the political circumstances under which the manuscript was written may frequently have been influential.34

Horizontal transmission is therefore the reason for the impossibility of establishing any of even the vague groupings of manuscripts proposed hitherto, let alone anything that would resemble a conventional stemma. Yet it fails to explain the most serious problem, of why the differences between the manuscripts are so great. If all the manuscripts were conventionally derived from one archetype, horizontal transmission would lead one to expect contamination of some spellings or grammatical points, and maybe an occasional interpolation. Yet the differences between the manuscripts may be so great as to cause one occasionally to wonder if one is actually looking at the same work.35

The explanation for this state of affairs, as I have suggested above, lies in the use of other works for “collation” as we may loosely describe it. It seems likely that al-Tabari’s Arabic was the original cause of what we would now consider to be a rather cavalier attitude to the text. At an early stage scribes would check the Persian against the Arabic, and find many lacunae, sometimes caused by Bal‘ami’s own omissions, sometimes due to previous scribes’ treatment of the Persian. Yet the translation must have rapidly acquired considerable popularity and a degree of prestige having been commissioned by a famously pious and cultivated dynasty from a translator of a noble and learned family. Above all, its concision made it, as intended, much more accessible than the Arabic. Therefore the easiest option for scribes was to add any details they felt important from al-Tabari’s text, probably according to the interests and concerns of their patrons. For example, a cultivated patron might be pleased and flattered by the inclusion of more Arabic poetry. Eventually, the habit spread to plundering other works, especially traditional Persian sources, to fill in the gaps. In a sense, it was the universal appeal of Bal‘ami’s Tarikhnama which is responsible for the chaotic state of the text today.

To conclude, I believe that the case of al-Tabari and Bal‘ami shows us exceptionally clearly the futility of attempting to establish stemmata in the case of many Islamic textual traditions. Not only were distinctions between original and

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30 I have adapted these concepts of vertical and horizontal transmission from Reynolds & Wilson 1991, 214-216.
32 Ouseley 208, F. 552a.
33 See for example the comments on Wali‘ b. ‘Uqba’s father (Tarikhnama, ed. Rawshan, III: 576) which I have not seen in any other MS, and combined with the omission of the conventional lineage passage, make one suspect the scribe of promoting a certain religious agendum.
34 An interesting parallel to the activities of the medieval scribes may be seen in Zotenberg’s translation. The translators adopted exactly their approach in jetisoning parts of A, his base manuscript, and supplementing it from other manuscripts at other times.
35 E.g. see Daniel 1990, 295 on Masbhad Aṣṣān-i Qudà 129.
translation considerably more fluid in the Middle Ages than now, but even those between translator, scribe and author were blurred. We are uniquely fortunate with this text that we have an extremely early version which demonstrates the extent of corruption the others have suffered and allows us to consider, at last, how Bal’ami actually treated al-Tabari. Yet it also serves as a salutary reminder of the dangers of studying texts which only survive in late manuscripts, and of the perils of producing editions based on such manuscripts.

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