COMMENTARIES ON AL-‘UTBI’S TA‘IRIKH AL-YAMINI

PROF. A. PEACOCK
(United Kingdom)

One of the most famous works of Islamic historical writing is the Ta‘irikh al-Yamini by Abū Nasr al-‘Utbi. It was composed in the early eleventh century AD, probably shortly after 1021, and purports to have been composed in honour of the ruler of the Ghaznavid Empire that then stretched across much of eastern Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan and even into northern India. Mahmūd of Ghazna. Sultan Mahmūd had been granted the title of Yamīn al-Dawla ("Right Arm of the State") by the ‘Abbāsid Caliph, and it is from his laqāb that the book takes its name. In reality, rather less than half of the Yamīnī is devoted to the exploits of Mahmūd, although ‘Utbi has nonetheless become known to western historians as Mahmūd’s court historian, somewhat inaccurately as I shall suggest later in my paper.

‘Utbi’s work swiftly became extremely popular in the Islamic world, a popularity that orientalists have generally dismissed as deriving from its extremely elaborate style. Nonetheless, it was occasionally used as a source by later historians, most notably Ibn al-Athīr in his al-Kāmil fi ‘l-Tārikh. Such writers tended to simplify the complex and difficult style in which the Yamīnī is written, for throughout his book, ‘Utbi uses rhymed prose – saj’ – and the work is full of extravagant metaphors and obscure vocabulary which has led to general criticism of ‘Utbi by western scholars frustrated at the difficulty of extracting information about the Ghaznavid state, for which the Yamīnī remains one of our most important sources. It is the earliest surviving work of Islamic historiography to use a style based on saj’, although this subsequently became popular in Persian and is also found in a relatively small number of mediaeval Arabic histories, most notably ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Isfahānī’s two famous works on his master Salāḥ al-Dīn, al-Barq al-Shāmī and al-Fath al-Qasī.
Despite western scholars’ negative judgements about ‘Uthbi’s style, it was precisely its literary merits that won the work its fame in the Islamic world. Its popularity is attested by the large number of manuscripts in which it survives, its translation into Persian in the early thirteenth century which was also widely copied and incorporated into the works of later historians such as Rashid al-Din’s Jami’ al-Tawarikh, and the fact that it was the subject of no fewer than eight commentaries (sharh). This is very unusual indeed for a historical work, and even ‘Imad al-Din Isfahani’s works did not attract commentators. I believe this is an important point for our understanding of the Yamini, and I shall return to it later. Furthermore, in contrast to ‘Uthbi’s Yamini, other Arabic historical works in saj’ tend to survive only in very few manuscripts or in later abridgements.

The best known commentary is that by the Syrian scholar Mannini entitled al-Fath al-Wahbi, composed in the eighteenth century. The fame of this work today principally derives from the fact that the edition of the Yamini most commonly used by scholars today is printed on its margins when the two works were published together in Cairo in 1869. However, Mannini’s commentary was solidly based on the works of earlier commentators, none of which have attracted any scholarly attention to date. In part, this is because they remain unpublished, and in part because few scholars have done much work on the Yamini, of which even today we lack a critical edition. Furthermore, none of the other commentaries can readily be found, even in manuscript form, in libraries in Europe, although abundant copies exist in Istanbul libraries of one other commentary.

The popularity of the Yamini in the eighteenth century is attested by a further commentary preserved in a unique manuscript in Manchester, John Rylands Arabic 289, which is written in the margins of a rather older text. It is attributed to a certain Mas’udi Effendi, and may well have been composed in Syria where it was purchased. It is, however, of little interest in terms of its contents, for it consists entirely of extracts from the commentaries of Mannini and his predecessor Najafi of Nishapur.

Najafi’s commentary, entitled the Basatin al-Fudala, was composed in the early fourteenth century AH, and remained widely read until it seems to have been superseded by Mannini’s commentary. It is preserved in numerous manuscripts, including at least one autograph manuscript. The Basatin al-Fudala, Mannini tells us, was the sole commentary available to him when he was working on al-Fath al-Wahbi, and Mannini’s work does incorporate large chunks of Najafi’s work both with and without acknowledgement. Indeed, Mannini is somewhat disingenuous in his explanation of why he composed al-Fath al-Wahbi: he claims that his commentary was the first to include the entire text of the Yamini, but in fact this is certainly true of Najafi’s commentary too. I will discuss why in fact Mannini may have been interested in the Yamini in due course, but first of I wish to make some observations on the Basatin al-Fudala.

Firstly, as can be seen from the incipit of the manuscript on display here, held in the Suleymaniye Library in Istanbul as Fatih 4410, which purports to be a copy of an autograph manuscript dated 1310 composed in Tabriz. Here, Najafi’s introduction to the Basatin al-Fudala attracted its own later marginalia, in Ottoman Turkish mixed with Arabic – another limited example of the “commentary on the commentary” genre. Najafi explains his work, which must be addressed to a Persian-speaking audience, that the existence of the Qur’an has made learning Arabic an obligation. After the Qur’an and Hadith, there has rarely been another book like the Yamini “whose prose is licit magic (al-sahir al-halali) and whose verse is sweet water (al-‘adhdh al-zulali). The excellent man of letters must master it and repeat it, while the intelligent orator and the complete scribe must learn it and repeat it.” Najafi then describes the work’s numerous difficulties of vocabulary and says that he consulted five different commentaries, but found all of them inadequate, which inspired him to write “a complete commentary (sharh) to solve its difficulties...containing everything in those [previous] commentaries with appropriate additions and fine points in the explanation of vocabulary and
the essential meaning...and to explain its [use of] relative pronouns...and the names of people and dates ... and the use of masdars."

Najātī says that after he had prepared a rough draft, he showed it to the famed scholar and physician Qub al-Dīn Shīrāzī, himself the author of several commentaries, including one on Suhrāwārdī’s Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq and also works on the Qur’ān. Qub al-Dīn Shīrāzī approved of the work, so it must have been completed by 1311, which is when he died, not as, has been suggested by CE Bosworth, in the 1320s. Najātī’s commentary is, then, explicitly concerned mainly with the numerous lexical and grammatical problems in the Yamānī. Nonetheless, it does contain some historical information additional to that provided by ‘Utbī. Najātī gives brief biographies of several prominent political and literary figures in the Ghaznavid state and that of their predecessors, the Samanids. Among the literary figures discussed are the Persian poet Rudaki, the Arabic litterateur Abū Bākṛ al-Khwārazmī, best known today for his defeat in a literary contest by the famous inventor of the maqāmāt, Bādī’ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī. There is also some historical information about the Simjurīs, a Mamlūk dynasty that ruled Khurasān for the Samanids at the end of the tenth century, and an anecdote about one of the early Samanid amirs that does not appear in any other source. All in all, however, such historical information only accounts for a tiny part of the Basāṭīn al-Fudālā’ī. This may be somewhat disappointing for historians, but it is entirely in keeping with Najātī’s aims. For nowhere – and this is an important point – does Najātī suggest that anyone would want to read the Yamānī for its historical information; its audience, and that for his commentary, is intended to be people interested in literature, not history. We will return to examine the implications of this later.

Most of Najātī’s sources now seem to be lost. A commentary by Kirmānī survives in a complete manuscript in Istanbul, which I have not yet inspected, and in a fragment in a nineteenth century compilation in the British Library in London. It is evident, however, that both Kirmānī’s work and the other four lost commentaries resembled the Basāṭīn al-Fudālā’ī in their concentration on philological points. The names of the other commentators, if not the titles of their works, are preserved in the Basāṭīn al-Fudālā’ī, and it is possible to construct a rough chronology of the composition of these works.

The earliest commentary appears to have been that of the Qādī Majd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, of which the title is unknown; Kirmānī probably died in 1166 AD. Najātī also cites extensively the commentary by Sadr al-Afāḥīl al-Qāsim b. al-Husayn al-Khwārazmī, who died in 1220. The latter was the author of numerous commentaries on literary works, including the Maqāmāt of al-Harīrī and al-Zamakhshārī’s grammatical works. Sadr al-Afāḥīl was a good friend of the famous Yāqūt, who included a long entry on him in his biographical dictionary, the Ishrād al-Ārīb. Najātī also mentions a commentary by Tāj al-Dīn al-Zawzanī, who died in 1299, and wrote other commentaries on grammatical works. Perhaps most intriguing are Najātī’s frequent references to a commentary by the Persian translator of the Yamānī, Abū al-Sharaf Jurbādḥānī, who lived in the early thirteenth century. Nowhere else, even in the Persian translation, has any other record of this work survived. It is clear from Najātī’s citation of it that it was independent of the translation, which is very free and does not correspond at all to the passages from Jurbādḥānī’s commentary recorded in the Basāṭīn al-Fudālā’ī. Just like the others, Jurbādḥānī’s commentary seems to have concentrated on the philological aspects of the Yamānī, although in his Persian translation he seems to have been more concerned with the contemporary political purposes to which he could adapt ‘Utbī’s work. Najātī also mentions a commentary by a pupil of Jurbādḥānī, one Tāj al-Dīn ‘Isā b. Maḥfūz al-Taraqī, but I have been unable to discover any information about him or his work.

Judging by the nisbāt of these commentators, they were all from the eastern Islamic world, either Central Asia or Iran: Kirmānī, Khwārazm, Zawzan in Sistān and Jurbādḥānī near Isfahān. Al-Subkī comments that in the Islamic east, the Yamānī was as famous as the Maqāmāt of al-Harīrī in the west. Nonetheless, none of these commentators seem to have been interested in the Yamānī because of its undoubted importance as a source for the history of the eastern Islamic world. Rather, they were attracted to it as a fine specimen of Arabic prose that presented
particular difficulties. Why, then, did Mannînî, an eighteenth century Syrian, feel the need to compose his own commentary on the work, when previously there had been little evidence of any interest in the work outside of Iran and Central Asia?

The reasons for Mannînî’s composition of al-Fath al-Wâhî may be traced to the political circumstances of his own day. As mentioned earlier, Mannînî is distinctly disingenuous in claiming that his was the first commentary to include the complete text of the work, for this had been done in the Basâîn al-Fudâlî which he specifically mentions consulting and cites frequently. However, Mannînî tells us that he was ordered to write the work “by he whose order must be obeyed” on a visit to Istanbul in 1731. This was a crucial point in Ottoman history; the sultan, Mahmûd, had come to power four years earlier in a coup d’etat and was eager to do away with the atmosphere of indulgence and luxury that had permeated the Ottoman court during the eighteenth century in what was known as the “Tulip Age”. He adopted the title “Ghâzî”, and after suppressing internal dissent, started to wage war on his eastern neighbours, the Shi’ite Safavids. He achieved his first great success against them in 1731, the year that Mannînî came to Istanbul. Although there is no direct evidence for it in the text, it seems likely that the order to compose al-Fath al-Wâhî came from the court, and was intended to reinforce the Ottoman sultan Mahmûd’s image as a military hero and warrior against those hostile to Sunnism by associating him with his famous Ghaznavid namesake who was famed for precisely these attributes. Certainly, the manuscript tradition of al-Fath al-Wâhî supports the impression that it was commissioned and copied as a result of an official initiative. Of the ten manuscripts of al-Fath al-Wâhî in the Suleymaniye Library in Istanbul, every single one can be dated to Mahmûd’s reign, which cannot be a coincidence.

Al-Fath al-Wâhî is thus a somewhat atypical of the tradition of commentaries on the Yamînî which seems to have been solidly rooted in interest in the work for literary rather than historical reasons. Historians have tended to ignore them for this very reason, but there is every reason to be grateful for this, for it seems to have ensured that, unlike other Arabic saj' histories, it has been preserved complete and unabridged in numerous manuscripts, some of them very early. Moreover, there is much to be said for regarding the Yamînî as a work of literature rather than history. Scholars have traditionally argued that it was composed to eulogise the achievements of Mahmûd, and ‘Utbî is frequently referred to as “the Ghaznavid court historian” or in similar terms. If one actually reads the Yamînî, it quickly becomes clear that this interpretation is untenable. Less than half the work is actually concerned with Mahmûd, and as a couple of scholars realised recently, ‘Utbî’s presentation of the sultan is by no means unambiguously positive. In fact, much of the Yamînî is concerned with ‘Utbî’s other former patrons, many of which are subjected to vicious character assassinations by the author. The Yamînî concludes not with praise of Mahmûd but a long denunciation of one of ‘Utbî’s enemies in exaggerated terms that remind one less of conventional mediaeval historical writing than the Muqâmî of Bâdî’ al-Zamân – himself a friend of ‘Utbî. In the final sentences of the book, ‘Utbî explains that the purpose of his writing is precisely to get revenge on his enemies by immortalizing them in grotesque images. Far from being a simple panegyric, the Yamînî is a highly complex literary creation, as the mediaeval commentators realised but modern scholars have generally forgotten.