On Kalila wa Dimna and Persian National Fairy Tales

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An introduction to Kalila Dimna on Silk, online art exhibition by Elena Uzdenikova

The Persian national fairy tales are a part of the richest Iranian folklore. The original golden age of the classical Persian literature has begun with 10th centuries in Iran and Central Asia. An enormous layer of prosaic works of anonymous character existed long since along with high poetry of such coryphaeuses as Rudaki, Firdowsi, Hafiz, Jami which wrote by against order of notable patrons and usually received for this work rich gifts. This tales did not cause in venerable literary-men and philologists anything, except for smiles, being in a shadow of masterpieces of graceful literature. At that time of previous flourishing of the classical Persian literature, among scientists there was a popular belief in the maximum status of the Arabian language, surpassing Persian in all things. It is their opinion that Persian suitable ostensibly only for market cock-and-bull stories and «Khusraw’s tales». However fairy tales enjoyed wide popularity on a market among masses and in shah’s palace, in an environment of powerful masters, which listened to witty instructive legends in leisure-time with great pleasure. Numerous evidences are confirmed, that the professional story-tellers incorporated in the shops carried with them the hand-written books containing their narrative repertory. It has been connected by fact that in the course of time initially small legends expanded in the separate cycles non-portable in peoples memory. Subsequently some such books have been found. They are very various on the stories, forms and artistic means. In spite of the fact that practically all legends are anonymous, their stories have been traced to an extreme antiquity and well-known to the world literature. There are, basically, the remaking stories of prose of Ellinism, Indian, Arabian and Iranian legends. Oral narrative of the fantastic narrations was the main cause of their dynamical development, characteristic of folklore. Distinctive feature of the Persian fairy tales is their fixing in the form of the written body. This fact generates a problem of definition of a genre of works. A number of researchers ranks them as folklore, their opponents ranks them as written literature. It seems to more exact a definition of the folklore fixed at a certain stage in the form of a written canon in «fantastic encyclopedias».

Bright feature of the Persian fairy tales is so-called «framed story». This is incorporation of smaller legends in the basic story. Such put-in stories appear on a course of action being the illustrative examples confirming a lecture uttered before. In the first variant the narration is result in reply to the request of the interlocutor to illustrate this or that moral maxim, to give an example this or that vital situation. In the second variant one of heroes had been giving some advice, when analyzed an experience in which his interlocutor has got. He illustrates this situation by reference to any parable, and results it whole in reply to the constant request. «The framed stories» has been borrowed by Persians from India. Such well-known monuments of the Indian didactics, as «Panchatantra» («Five books»), «Hitopadesha» («Kind manual»), «Shukasaptati» («Seventy stories of a parrot»), etc. base on this principle. A number of literary monuments of didactic prose has been translated or retold into Persian. Thus have arisen «Sindbad-nama» («Sindbad’s book»), «Kalila and Dimna» of Ibn al-Muqaffa, «Javahir al-asmar» («Pearls of conversations») of Imad an-Na’ari, «Tuti-nama» («the Book of a parrot») of Ziya ad-Din Nahshabi. The principle of the «framed narration» has been borrowed together with this stories. Some literary monuments of didactic prose have been translated into other languages, from Arabian, Jewish, Syrian, Armenian and Georgian up to Slavonic and the Latin languages. It need remember «One thousand and one night» as a striking example of «the framed story» where have entered the remaking legends from the some sources mentioned above.

«Kalila and Dimna» is the sample of the Persian didactics. The collection of fables, parables, and instructive stories comes from the pen of Ibn al-Muqaffa. He was most outstanding medieval Persian writer wrote Arabic, the author and the translator of some didactic books. The book is a remake of Indian «Panchatantra». «Panchatantra» begins with the story about king of animals the lion and two jackals Karataka and Damanaka. In the Arabic translation the form of their names are still Kalila and Dimna.

The author of «Panchatantra» is unknown. In opinion of researchers, its initial variant didn’t reach us. It has been composed by unknown Vishnuite Brahman in Kashmir in the 3th – 4th centuries A. D, during the reign of Gupta dynasty. However separate fables about people and animals have appeared much earlier. These fables were a part of folklore of India. So-called vagrant stories in folklore of many nations of the world appeared from that fables.

In Iran «Kalila and Dimna» has appeared still in the time of the Sasanids. According to the legend, on behalf of king Anushirvan (4th century) court doctor Burzoe has gone to India to get a secret book guarded in treasury of the Indian kings, composed, according to the Persian legend, by the wise philosopher, the chapter of Brahmans Baydaba for powerful king Dabshalm. Burzoe has got the book and has translated it on Middle Persian (Pahlavi). It was the «Panchatantra». Ibn al-Muqaffa worked with the non-extant Middle Persian
The further destiny of the book is even more surprising. Already before the Arabic translation in the 4th century it appeared a Syrian translation. About 1080 the Byzantine prose writer Symeon son of Seth translated Ibn al-Muqaffa's «Kalila and Dimna» from Arabic into Greek language. He called the book «Stefanit and Ihnilat» (Symeon recognized in Kalila the Arabic iklil “crown” and in Dimna the Arabic word for “trace”). The Greek translation formed a basis for some translations into Slavonic languages. In the 12th century, the book «Stefanit and Ihnilat» has come to Russia where has got wide popularity as moralizing mirror. Old Russian translators esteemed the book as manual in Christian piety and attributed its authorship such well-known Christian holies as John Damascene or John Climacus. In the beginning of the 12th century rabbi loel has translated «Kalila and Dimna» into Jewish. In following century there is a Spanish translation. Then John from Capua translated the Jewish text into Latin. Thus there was a «Manual of a human life» translated into German, Italian, French, Czech. Influence of fables from «Kalila and Dimna» is traced in short-stories of writers of Renaissance, in Boccaccio's works, in Schwanks of Hans Sachs then in La Fontaine's fables where serve as a addition to fables of Aesop.

In the end of the 16th century Abu-l-Fazl (wazir of the Great Mughal Akbar (1556-1605)) remade one version of «Kalila and Dimna» and entitled his work «Iyar-i Danish» («Measure of wisdom»). This book has been translated into Hindustani and Urdu. Thus «Panchatantra» has returned to India having a long marsh. The book has come to the Europe once again in the likeness of Turkish «Humayun-nama» («The Regal book»). On this occasion it was translation from Persian. The Turkish book has soon been translated into French.

Thus «Kalila and Dimna» has entered into gold fund of the world literature. During various epochs readers found in «Kalila and Dimna» some ideas that was interesting for all estates: scientists penetrated into the latent sense of amusing fables and fairy tales, the townspeople laughed at misadventures of not bright husband believed to the adulteress, etc. Theologians saw allegory of vanity of a perishable world and those virtues which each believing and pious person should possess.

The central subject of «Kalila and Dimna» is conversations of king Dabshalim with Brahman Baydaba. During the conversation, king asks questions on this or that moral idea with the request to illustrate it on a material of a parable. The first parable is about two jackals Kalila and Dimna, the lion-king and the bull. This fable narrates about the slanderers sowing hostility between friends, the second parable is about true friends (the pigeon, the raven, the rat, the turtle and the gazelle); third fable is about guile of the enemy posing as a friend (ravens and owls), a following narration is about entrusted the guileful enemy (the turtle and the monkey) etc.

From stated above it is visible, that we see acts of animals in the majority of Ibn al-Muqaffa's parables. Popularity of animal stories in the Arabian and Persian didactic shows not only the veiled criticism to authors of their epoch, but also opportunities of cliches those or other characters. As a result, the certain canon was developed in the literature with the framework of which concrete qualities were attributed to the certain animal. For example, cunning and resourcefulness inhere in the jackal and the fox, guile to the cat, nonsense, short-sightedness and arrogance to the monkey, cowardice to the leopard. Often concrete image personifies certain estate in a human society. The striking example is the lion personifying the king. Similarly to king, his commands can be wise, if he follows a advice of kind advisers (the peacock and the partridge) or, on the contrary, severe and short-sighted if he follows a advice of the jackal and the raven thinking only about own benefit.

Being a treasury of ancient wisdom of the East, the Persian fairy tales among other things have aesthetic character. Wisdom of the story-teller consists in observance of precise proportions between didactic wisdom, urged to generate deep meditation, both entertaining easy stories and the magic stories having the purpose to entertain and cheer up the listener. This party of the Persian fairy tales explains their demand and constant popularity among various people during various epoch.

In Persian literature Kalila wa Demna has been known in different versions since the 6th century CE. The circulation of Kalila wa Demna in Persian literature documents how Iran mediated the diffusion of knowledge between the Indian subcontinent and the Mediterranean. The oldest extant versions of the story cycle are preserved in Syriac and Arabic, and originate from the 6th and 8th century, respectively, as translations of a lost Middle Persian version. Pavel Basharin, On Kalila wa Dimna and Persian National Fairy Tales, Transoxiana.com, Moscow, Transoxiana 12, 2007. E. L. Ranelagh, The Past We Share. The Near Eastern Ancestry of Western Folk Literature, Quartet Books, Horizon Press, New York, 1979. Munther Younes, Tales from Kalila Wa Dimna: For Students of Arabic. (Paperback). Spoken Language Services; Pap/Com edition, 2001. 1. IJLL - Kalila Wa Dimna _2 - Free download as PDF File (.pdf), Text File (.txt) or read online for free. As a literary genre Kalila wa Dimna plays an important role in the realm of Arabic literature; it was translated into Arabic by the distinguished essayist 'Abd Allāh Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d.756 A.D.) from the book Kalile va Dimne written in the Middle Persian Pahlavi language. As a resident of Basra, 'Abd Allāh Ibn al-Muqaffa' was well versed in Persian language; but he learnt Arabic and became expert in Arabic literature. As a literary genre Kalila wa Dimna plays an important role in the realm of Arabic literature; it was translated into Arabic by the distinguished essayist 'Abd Allāh Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d.756 A.D.) from the book Kalile va Dimne written in the Middle Persian Pahlavi language. On Kalila wa Dimna and Persian National Fairy Tales. January 2007. Dr. Pavel Basharin. Through 21st-century digital technology, the National Gallery of Art brought to life the work of the 17th century Dutch master Johannes Vermeer. Creating a CG model of "The Music Lesson" in Alias/Wavefront's Maya, the National Gallery engineered animations and fly-throughs of the virtual painting, gaining access to details not seen on a flat canvas and discovering new insight into the artist's [Show full abstract] techniques. Read more. Kalila Wa Dimna, Ibn al-Muqaffa Abū Muhammad 'Abd Allāh Rūzbih ibn Dādūya, original Persian name Rōzbih pūr-i Dādōē, known as Ibn al-Muqaffa, (died c. 756/759), was an ethnic Persian translator, author and thinker who...
wrote in the Arabic language. Kalila wa Dimna: His translation of a Middle Persian collection of animal fables, mostly of Indian origin, involving two jackals, Kalila and Demna. Kalila and Dimna is a book containing a collection of fables. It was translated into Arabic in the Abbasid age specifically in the second hijri century (the eighth Gregorian century) by Abdullah ibn al-Muqaffa using his own writing style. A lot of researchers have agreed that the book goes back to Indian roots, and was based on the Sanskrit text Pañcatantra.