

## SELJUQS CULTURAL HISTORY – Literature

### The Great Seljuqs

When the Seljuqs defeated the Ghaznavids at the Battle of Dandanaqan in 1040 they not only became the heirs to Ghaznavid territories in Khorasan, but also to the Ghaznavid cultural and administrative legacy there. The Seljuqs had a long military tradition, but no experience in administering an empire and did not have a literary culture to compete with Persian. As a result, the Seljuqs employed administrators, officials and viziers of Iranian background to run the imperial bureaucracy, and adopted Persian not only as the language of administration but also the language of culture. Among the results of these policies was that the Seljuqs not only became patrons of a very active period of literary production in Persian, but also helped to spread Persian literature and culture, giving the language the status of the second major language of Islamic culture after Arabic.

However, the blossoming of Persian literary works in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries was due to more than official Seljuq patronage or the patronage of other contemporary royal courts. The movement of poets and scholars from one court to another, the spread of Sufism and the eventful nature of this period also contributed to the development of new themes and new modes of literary expression. The *qasida* (قصيدة), a long ode on a single topic and generally containing between fifteen and eighty lines (although some were longer), continued to be employed, particularly for panegyric poetry. Similarly, poets also continued to write *ghazal* (غزل), shorter poems consisting of five to fifteen couplets, generally on the themes of love and separation, although mystical themes appeared with increasing frequency during the Seljuq era. While these two poetic forms had originated in Arabic poetry, they were adapted to Persian.

However, the poetic form that became the most characteristic of this period was a Persian poetic form generally known by its Arabic name, *ruba'i* (رباعي, plural *ruba'iyat* رباعيات), but is also known in Persian as *chahargana* (چهارگانه). The *ruba'i* is a four line / two couplet poem with a rhyme scheme of AABA or AAAA. Perhaps because it had developed outside of the tradition of Arabic poetry, the *ruba'i* came to be used for a number of themes, but particularly for philosophical or mystical themes. These themes predominate in the poems of the most famous composer of *ruba'iyat* in the English-speaking world, Omar Khayyam.

Three sultans of the Great Seljuqs in Iran were especially noted by contemporary sources as patrons of Persian literature – Alp Arslan, Malekshah and Sanjar. During Alp Arslan's reign (r. 1063-1072), several notable poets were associated with the Great Seljuq court, among them Abd al-Malik Borhani (عبد الملك برهانی) and 'Am'aq Bokhara'i (عمیق بخارانی). In reign of Malik Shah I (r. 1072-1091) his vizier Nizam al-Mulk composed his famous prose "mirror for princes" the *Siyasat-name*. In addition, the poet Mo'ezzi Nishaburi (معزی نیشابوری), the writer the *Chahar Maqala* (*Four Discourses*) Nizami Aruzi (نظامی عروضی), and the poet and scientist Omar Khayyam (known for his collection of quatrains, *The Ruba'iyat*) were all associated with the Seljuq court. During the reign of Sanjar (r. 1118-1157), the last of the Great Seljuq rulers, the court remained a center of learning and culture and attracted poets whose works are still appreciated throughout the Persian-speaking world – Anwari (انوری), Adib Saber (ادیب صابر), and the first woman poet in Persian whose works have survived in substantial quantity, Mahsati Ganjavi (مهستی گنجوی).

### The Seljuqs of Rum

Despite its tumultuous history and more limited resources in comparison to the Great Seljuqs, the Seljuqs of Rum established a thriving Muslim literary culture in Arabic, to a limited degree, and Persian to a much greater degree. While some early works in Arabic on law and religion were composed in Anatolia, literary activity in Persian seems to have become prominent only in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century during the last years of the reign of Qilich Arslan II (r. 1156-1192) and the reigns of his sons in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Contemporary sources mention an encyclopedic work written for Qilich Arslan II and his son Qutb al-Din

with information on dream interpretation, *adab* (ادب, general culture), medicine, and astronomy written by an author from Tbilisi, Sharaf al-Din Hubaysh Tiflisi (شرف الدين حبيش تفلسي). Another writer, Muhammad bin Ghazi (محمد بن غازي), composed a work for another of Qilich Arslan II's sons, Rukn al-Din (r. 1196-1204) titled *Rawzat al-'uqul* (روضت العقول). This work was an adaptation of an earlier Persian "mirror for princes" prose work, the *Marzban-nama* (مرزبان نامه). In the same period, a poet by the name of Abu Hanifa 'Abd al-Karim compiled a collection of *ruba'iyat* for a yet another of Qilich Arslan II's sons, Muhyi al-Din. In addition to these, in the last decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the mystical-poetic masterpieces of Jalal al-Din Rumi, the *Divan* (ديوان) and the *Masnawi* (مثنوي), and a collection sayings entitled *Fihi ma fihi* (فيه ما فيه) all appeared.

While similar types of literature had been written in the courts of the Great Seljuqs, under the Seljuqs of Rum a genre that did not appear among the Great Seljuqs, historiography, accounts of the rulers and the events of their reigns appeared. Three major works were composed in Persian, all during or shortly after the last years of Seljuq rule in Anatolia, and while none provides detailed information on the early years of the Seljuqs in Rum, they all provide reliable information on the later periods.

The first work was written by a *munshi*, an official in the Seljuqs' secretariat, named Nasir al-Din Husayn (ناصر الدين حسين), but better known as "Ibn Bibi" (ابن بي بي) due to his mother Bibi Munajjima, a famous astrologer. Covering the years between 1188 to early 1281 the *al-Awamir al-'ala'iyya fi al-umur al-'ala'iyya* (الاورامر العلانية في الامور العلانية, "The Commands of Ala'i over Exalted Affairs") is a mix of Ibn Bibi's personal recollections and a history of the late Seljuq rulers in Rum. Ibn Bibi's style of Persian was elaborate and convoluted, making it difficult to read, despite its great historical value. As a result, during his lifetime an abridgement called the *Mukhtasar* (مختصر) appeared which eliminated most of overly literary passages. Due to its simpler style, many historians of the late Seljuq period in Rum have used the *Mukhtasar* rather than Ibn Bibi's longer and more difficult work as their source of information.

The second work was also written by *munshi*, Karim al-Din Aqsara'i (كريم الدين اقسراي) in 1323 and is titled *Musamarat al-akhbar wa Musayarat al-akhyar* (مسامرة الاخبار و مسايرة الاخيار, "Nighttime Narratives and Keeping up with the Good"). This work was arranged as a general history covering early Islamic history, but concentrating of the Seljuqs of Rum through the reign of Kay Khusrav II (r. 1237-1246), the various officials and minor rulers of the time, and the coming of the Mongols. Due to its later composition at a time when the Seljuqs of Rum were vassals of the Mongols, the *Musamarat al-akhbar* covers events and people beyond Rum. In addition, while in his section on the Seljuqs of Rum Aqsara'i follows almost the same sequence of events found in Ibn Bibi's chronicle, he includes additional information and details not found in Ibn Bibi.

The last work, the *Tarikh-i Al-i Saljuq* (تاريخ آل سلجوق), is an anonymous history completed in 1363. Although the book begins with the rise of the Seljuqs in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, it provides more detailed descriptions of events between 1277-1299, and then limited information on developments in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century up to 1341. Many of its sources of information are unknown, but it does provide details and interpretations of events that differ from both Ibn Bibi and Aqsara'i. In addition, in contrast to these two authors, the style of the *Tarikh-i Al-i Saljuq* is simpler and lacks the use of poetic excerpts or quotations from other works.

## Readings

Boyle, J.A. (ed.). *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. 5, The Saljuq and Mongol Periods*. Cambridge, 1968.

Cahen, Claude. *The Formation of Turkey: The Seljukid Sultanate of Rūm: Eleventh to Fourteenth Century*. Harlow, 2001.

## Discussion Questions

1. What was the long-term historical significance of the Seljuqs' adoption of Persian as the language of administration and culture?

2. After the collapse of the Seljuqs of Rum, why was the Seljuq tradition of using Persian as the language of the court, the administration and culture not continued in Anatolia by the various Turkish beyliks and the Ottomans?