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Nasir al-Din Tusi *Akhlaq-i Nasiri* [The Nasirean Ethics]

In Arabic, manuscript on paper

Western Iran or perhaps Baghdad, completed in Safar 663 A.H. / November-December 1264, during the author's lifetime, by the copyist Yahya ibn Muhammad ibn Ishaq al-Husayni

118 folios, on buff paper, initial flyleaf, 21 lines per page of neat naskh script in black ink (justification 193 x 130 mm.), catchwords, chapter headings in larger naskh/mubaqqaq script and red naskh, marginal commentary in place (which warrants further study), later margins ruled in black ink, initial folio missing, f. 116 replacement page. Bound in medieval, though probably not original, brown leather binding with tooled border. Dimensions 240 x 175 mm.

One of the three earliest extant copies (written in the author's lifetime close to the date of its composition) of "the best known ethical digest ... in medieval Persia, if not in all medieval Islam," this Mirror of Princes is the Persian complement to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and Politics. Located in libraries in the Middle East neither of the two other early copies can be expected to become available in the West. According to Wickens, none of the author's worthy predecessors, including Avicenna and Averroes, offered "a conspectus of most of the significant moral and intellectual preoccupations of the medieval Islamic world."

PROVENANCE:

1. Copied within the author's lifetime either at Maragha during Tusi's residence there or in Baghdad, where the Afyonkarahisar copy--the only one which mentions the site of production--was copied. The copyist, Yahya ibn Muhammad ibn Ishaq al-Husayni, is named in the manuscript, which gives its date of composition as 663 A.H. (or 1264 C.E.). The date of composition of the first version is 1235, and the date of the second version—that presented here—is given in the manuscript as 663, the date of the present copy.
2. Private Collection, London, 2007.

TEXT:

Background:

This copy of the famous "Mirror for Princes" of one of the greatest Muslim polymaths, Nasir al-Din Tusi, is one of only a handful of copies written within the author's lifetime. Of the dated manuscripts of the work, it is only predated, by a matter of months, by the copies in the Tehran University (no. 8224) and the Afyonkarahisar (no. 1851) Libraries (see *Akhlaq-i Nasiri*, ed., Ali Riza

Haydari (Tehran 1978), introduction, pp. 1-13). At the time of the copying of these manuscripts Tusi was resident in Maragha, the capital of the Mongol court, where he supervised the construction of a famous observatory, acted as an advisor to Hulagu and Abaqa, and was at the centre of a brilliant circle of scientists, philosophers and astronomers. It is possible that the manuscript was copied at Maragha during Tusi's residence there. Another possible provenance is Baghdad, where the Afyonkarahisar copy--the only one which mentions the site of production--was copied.

The *Akblaq-i Nasiri* is Tusi's most famous and widely read philosophical work. An ethical work in the "Mirror for Princes" tradition, it is in the form a guide for a ruler towards the perfection of virtue within a largely philosophical framework. Covering subjects such as the ordering of society, domestic economy, and politics, it is heavily imbued with Neo-Platonic thinking and the tradition of earlier philosophical masters, particularly Ibn Sina and Ibn Miskawayh. Tusi's vision of a hierarchy of matter and various levels of the soul is clearly of Platonic inspiration, while his equation of kingship and justice with the preservation of social order comes from Aristotle.

Tusi composed the work in honor of the Isma'ili governor of Quhistan, Muhtashim Nasir al-Din 'Abd al-Rahman, at whose court he served for over a decade. Many years later, by this time in the service of the Mongol rulers of Iran, Tusi wrote a second version, omitting the name of Muhtashim Nair al-Din in the preface and diluting the Isma'ili content. This copy contains the second version of the text, as are most of the other early copies of the *Akblaq-i Nasiri*.

The Manuscript:

The manuscript is almost complete, missing only the first page of the introduction. Following the introduction, which is the version rewritten after Tusi's split with the Isma'ili movement, there is an index outlining the contents of the manuscripts. The book is divided into four major sections with further sub-divisions and individual chapters. The four major sections called Discourses are:

1. On the Perfection of Morals [Ethics]
2. On the Arrangement of the Classes of Men [Economics]
3. On the Politics of the Cities [Politics]

Under these main titles fall numerous further subjects, such as the nature of the soul, man's relation to other creatures, the control of the various elements of society, the treatment of slaves and servants, the nature of kings, companionship, and the merits of different types of governments or communities.

For example, the third section, which relies on Aristotle and treats the Politics of the Cities, distinguishes between various types of cities: the Virtuous City is opposed to the Un-Virtuous City (also called the Ignorant City); and the Necessary City is opposed to the Servile City. There is the Free City, which is also known as the City of the Community. According to Tusi, this is the city in which all citizens are free and in which there is the greatest diversity, but this freedom can lead to corruption because there are "Heads" from whom the inhabitants derive no advantage; yet they "bestow on them ennoblements and possessions in respect of the grandeur they conceive

them to possess....” In this case, the Free City can even become the city “most admired of the Cities of Ignorance.” (see Wickens, tr., pp. 223-225).

The Author:

Tusi’s biography exemplifies the extraordinary achievements as well as upheavals of the thirteenth century in Iran. Born in 1201 to a Shi’i family near Tus in Mashhad, Tusi studied the Qur’an, Islamic law, theology, philosophy, medicine, and mathematics with some of the most brilliant scholars of the day in Nishapur, Baghdad and then Mosul. Tusi’s involvement with contemporary rulers began with his appointment at the court of the Isma’ili governor of Quhistan, Muhtashim Nasir al-Din ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Abi Mansur. Tusi had already studied Isma’ili doctrine under his father’s tutelage, and during his residency at Nasir al-Din’s court, he wrote the *Sayr al-Suluk*, an account of his spiritual journey towards esoteric Isma’ili truth. It was also during this period that Tusi wrote the *Akblaq-i Nasiri*, as well as an earlier philosophical treatise in Arabic, called the *Akblaq-i Muhtashimi*. By 1246, Tusi was a resident of the Isma’ili fortress of Alamut in the Alburz Mountains, where he composed many scientific works, taking advantage of the rich library there. When the fortress was under threat from the invading armies of the Mongols, Tusi was sent to negotiate with Hulagu Khan. After the fortress succumbed to the Mongols in 1258, Tusi joined Hulagu’s entourage, witnessing the destruction of Baghdad and the termination of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate in 1258. Shortly after, as court astrologer, Tusi was charged with the construction of an observatory at Maragha, the Mongol capital of Iran, to enable him to produce accurate astronomical tables; the results, the *Zij-i Ilkхани*, dedicated to Hulagu’s successor Abaqa, maintained their status as the most detailed and advanced astronomical calculations, even though Tusi did not incorporate many of his most remarkable astronomical findings into these. His invention of a planetary sphere that adjusted understanding of the Ptolemaic system of uniform circular motion of the planetary spheres was a major step in the advancement of astronomy and navigation in Islamic and subsequently Western science. Shortly before his death in 1274, for unknown reasons, Tusi decamped to Baghdad with a large number of his pupils and followers.

A manuscript of Tusi’s *Zij-i Ilkхани*, the earliest copy of that work transcribed just four years after his death, which was estimated between 80,000 and 120,000 £ Sterling, was sold in at Sotheby’s London in Spring 2008 for 320,000 £ Sterling. Slightly later than the present copy and by a similar scribe in comparable format, the sale of the *Zij* set a new record for a work by Tusi at public auction.

According to Wickens, who is responsible for the best translation of Tusi’s work, he was contemporary in Islam with some of its greatest writers (Rumi and Sa’di) and, outside Islam, with Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great, and Roger Bacon. Tusi possessed a vast library. Further study from a global perspective would likely produce interesting and timely cross-cultural observations.

BINDING

The manuscript is bound in a medieval, possibly contemporary, binding. Though shrinking of bindings is not uncommon, the discrepancy between the size of the folios and the binding makes it unlikely that it is the original.

LITERATURE

Ali Riza Haydari, ed. *Akblaq-i Nasiri* [edition of the Persian with a study of the manuscript tradition], Tehran 1978.

Fakhry, M. *Ethical Theories in Islam*, Leiden, Brill, 1994 (2nd ed.).

Wickens, George M., trans. *The Nasirean Ethics by Nasir ad-Din Tusi*, London, 1961.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Ethics in Islamic Philosophy

www.muslimphilosophy.com

Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (1201-1274 C.E.)

www.unhas.ac.id/~rhiza/saintis/tusi.html