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**Report/Vladimir Rozov: ARABIC RHYMED PROSE (*SAJ'*) IN RELIGIOUS
AND RITUAL TEXTS OF PRE-ISLAMIC AND EARLY ISLAMIC ARABIA**

Vladimir Rozov's dissertation tackles an interesting and extremely difficult question, the use of *saj'* in pre-Islamic and early Islamic times (with some notes on its later use), but it seriously suffers from several fundamental problems that essentially limit its scholarly value.

The most unfortunate of these is that the Candidate gives little attention to source criticism and does not offer any meaningful discussion of crucial source critical problems. In the very few cases, where the Candidate shows himself to be aware of at least some of these, he immediately waters this down by using words such as "nevertheless" or "however" and dismissing the problems related to the authenticity of the material without any serious discussion and then continues using even the manifestly inauthentic material as reflective of pre-Islamic *saj'*.

This lack of any meaningful discussion of source critical issues is highlighted at the beginning of the dissertation, pp. 12–13 [all references are to the English version], where the Candidate brushes aside the question by what he takes to be a parallel case: a fake banknote, he claims, only works "because counterfeiters strive to make it as close to the original as possible." This facile manner of dismissing a crucial problem without any real discussion is not a very academic approach in the first place, and, moreover, it is obviously radically misguided.

To make the point clear: A counterfeit banknote will be measured against genuine ones, but the mainly ninth-century or later pieces of *sajʿ* codified in books could no longer be measured against genuine pieces of pre-Islamic times, as there was no point of comparison. Without giving any evidence, the author claims that the *sajʿ* tradition continued, presumably unchanged, among Bedouins until the ninth century and even later. Such a claim is highly controversial. Bedouin culture may be slow to change, but one cannot merely assume it to have remained unchanged for some 300 years. In addition, it is to be remembered that the readers of Classical Arabic literature were city dwellers, not Bedouins, so that an ordinary reader of, e.g., the Prophet's biography would not have been familiar with any Bedouin *sajʿ* in the first place.

Moreover, there are two further problems involved. Much of the *sajʿ* preserved in books relates to religion, and Muslim authors were well aware that Muhammad had been accused by his contemporaries of being a *kāhin*, a claim that is several times refuted in the Qurʾān. It did not need much imagination to see that this necessitates some similarity between the early Qurʾānic style and *kāhin* sentences, and when later authors produced such sentences (e.g., to prove that even the *kāhins* had predicted the coming of the new prophet), it was obvious that they attempted to recreate something similar to the Qurʾān.

Something similar, yet inferior. The second problem is that especially the sentences by Musaylima and other "pseudoprophets," but also *kāhins*, are often openly ridiculous and so empty of real meaning that one must assume they were intentionally made to be travesties of the Qurʾān, underlining the difference between true and false revelation. This can be seen even in many of the examples given by the Candidate that are so Qurʾānic that there is no reason to assume any pre-Islamic origin or similarity to genuine pre-Islamic *kāhin* sentences, except possibly through the Qurʾān. It is quite obvious that, e.g., the text by Musaylima quoted on pp. 108–109, is a travesty of Q 100: 1–5, as the Candidate himself points out on p. 109, designed to show the inferiority of Musaylima's "revelations." These passages were produced on the basis of the Qurʾān and they

reflect later ideas of how ridiculous they should have sounded. They would not have been compared to any genuine pre-Islamic *sajʿ* but to Qurʾānic Surahs.

If the literary tradition of *sajʿ* is, at least partly, based on the early parts of the Qurʾān and if we admit that there was some similarity between these and pre-Islamic *sajʿ*, then we do have a chain of similarities that justifies seeing literary *sajʿ* as a vague and unreliable, distorted image of genuine pre-Islamic *sajʿ*, but no more than that. To take it as material for a detailed study of pre-Islamic *sajʿ* is unwarranted. The more one goes into details, the clearer it is that the preserved material cannot be used as representative of pre-Islamic *sajʿ*.

The dissertation ignores these problems, which leads to a naive reading of the material, where obvious forgeries are taken at face value. The Candidate does not tackle the crucial question of whether the specimens of pre-Islamic *sajʿ* resemble early Qurʾānic Surahs because the latter used *kāhin* style or whether this resemblance is due to the *kāhin* sentences having later been modelled after the Surahs.

How precarious such conclusions may be can be seen from the fact that the Qurʾān also emphasises that the Prophet was not a poet. If we did not have a corpus of pre-Islamic Arabic poems, we might well assume that these resembled the Qurʾān, which is not the case. The Prophet's contemporaries saw similarity differently from how we see it.

The Candidate also uses nineteenth-century and later material from the Arabian Peninsula, assuming that there was a continuity from pre-Islamic times to the modernity. This is a question that would have needed a critical analysis. Overall, merely assuming continuity over more than a millennium without providing any evidence does not meet scholarly standards. Magic and popular religion are fields where popular and learned cultures have lived in contact throughout centuries and it is unwarranted merely to assume a continuity from the sixth to the twenty-first century. Some of the material quoted by the Candidate obviously derives from literary Islamic material, and the rest is questionable.

The uncritical acceptance of ninth-century and later materials as reflecting pre-Islamic times is unfortunately not restricted to *saġ*, but the Candidate uses Islamic sources as reliable descriptions of pre-Islamic times without any discussion of their reliability. They are just taken at face value without attempting any critical evaluation and no potential Islamic biases have been considered.

The source material is restricted to literary texts, all of which (with the exception of the Qur'ān) are at least about two centuries later than the time they are expected to describe. Pre-Islamic religion is studied with no reference to the corpus of pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions, the study of which has seen a huge development over the last 10–15 years. Much of this research is, moreover, available online and open access. There is no mention of the inscription of 'Ēn 'Avdat or other potentially versified or rhythmical inscriptions. Likewise, there is no discussion of the potentially Christian context in Mecca or of Islam as a Late Antique phenomenon. Even though archaeological excavations in Saudi Arabia have been limited, yet there is a lot of archaeological evidence that is also ignored by the Candidate.

The Candidate's use of secondary sources is highly problematic. It is conspicuous how little the Candidate uses studies written during the last three or four decades, and it is really unfortunate that, e.g., the leading scholars of Qur'anic studies, such as Angelika Neuwirth and Nicolai Sinai, are not used at all in the dissertation. The Late Antique context of the Qur'ān is nowadays generally recognised, perhaps even exaggerated. The Candidate should have engaged in this discussion, but there is nothing in the dissertation that would show the Candidate being aware of the discussion of the last four decades.

While up to date specialist works have largely been ignored, the Candidate very often uses outdated secondary literature that is very general in character. Likewise, scholars working in other fields have been used as authorities in questions of pre-Islamic times. Thus, e.g., Toshihiko Izutsu's *God and Man in the*

Koran (published in 1980, four decades ago) is extensively used. Izutsu was an excellent scholar of semantics and mystical philosophy, but he never did any serious work on pre-Islamic history. Likewise, M.B. Piotrovsky (b. 1944) has had an admirable career as the Director of the Hermitage, but his early 1980s writings hardly reflect the present state-of-art in pre-Islamic studies.

On pp. 15–16, the Candidate lists the three main arguments of his dissertation. The first relates to the continuity of archaic *sajʿ*, which is not discussed, but taken as a given (cf. above). The second relates to *sajʿ* and claims that it is sacred speech, sharply separated “from profane, quotidian speech acts and utterances,” and the third actually argues nothing, but lists the well-known characteristics of *sajʿ*.

The second point is problematic. The Candidate himself later admits that *sajʿ* is also used for non-sacral speech (e.g., p. 89). Classical Arabic sources, in fact, transmit much *sajʿ* that is not sacral in character. Lullabies and riddles, animal fables and aetiologies, weather reports and various descriptions all use *sajʿ*, and they are attested as early as are the *kāhin* sentences. Pre-Islamic *sajʿ* was a form of both sacred and secular speech, if we are to believe Classical Arabic sources, and the preponderance of sacred *sajʿ* in our sources most probably merely reflects the interests of the eighth-century and later collectors and forgers: they were less interested in lullabies and work songs than in pseudoprophets and *kāhins*. It is manifestly wrong to claim that the use of *sajʿ* was restricted to sacred contexts only, and to claim that it was preponderantly used in these would need some argumentation and analysis.

The transliterations are mostly correct, and most mistakes can be seen as mere typos. The translations show some inaccuracies. Of the erroneous translations, I would like to point out the following:

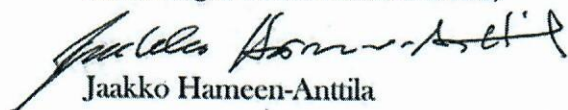
p. 58: Not “by the [two] snakes between the stones,” but “(I swear) by the snakes between the two lava fields.”

- p. 60: *mā fihim illā man yuhfazū ‘anhu* does not mean “And there was no unprotected among them,” but this refers to their words being learned by heart.
- p. 72: *wa ḥaṣāhu* does not mean “And filled him [with prophecy (?)],” but “and (he purified) his intestines,” the reference being to the legend of the purification of Muhammad’s breast. Note also that the saying does not fulfil the criteria of *saj‘*, so it remains unclear why it is discussed here and, in fact, it undermines the Candidate’s claim that there is a clear distinction between sacred and non-sacred use of language.
- p. 90: Translate: “an excellent camel for...”. The mistake derives from reading *ni‘ma* as *na‘am*.
- p. 113: Not “and reach the bosom,” but “and respect family ties.” This is a common expression in the Qur’ān and elsewhere.
- p. 115: the text is not in *saj‘*, as *raḍā‘ah* and *al-am‘ā’* do not form a rhyming pair and their rhythmical patterns are different. This is the more unfortunate as this is the only example the Candidate gives of legal *saj‘*.

Much of what is said in the dissertation is highly speculative and not supported by evidence, which is also reflected in the lack of appropriate referencing in many places. Sometimes this speculation is based on outdated literature, the superficial statements of which are taken as facts, even when they are patently wrong,

As to primary sources, there is no attempt to find new sources, but the Candidate picks his examples from worn-out sources that have been used by many generations of scholars and are well known. It is difficult to see what an uncritical reading of these well-known sources could give to 21st-century scholarship.

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