

Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition

Nahdj al-Balāgha

(1,330 words)

(“The Way of Eloquence”) is an anthology of dissertations, letters, testimonials and sententious opinions, traditionally attributed to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661 [q.v.]).

The authorship of this work has been an issue attended by constant and lively polemic, from the Middle Ages to the present.

Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1283 [q.v.]) seems to have been the first to raise doubts concerning the *Nahdj*. “It is not known,” he writes, “which of the two brothers, al-Raḍī (d. 406/1015 [q.v.]) or al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044 [q.v.]) put together this work. Some assume that the compiler would also be its author, but that he would have attributed it to ‘Alī” (*Wafayāt* , Beirut 1968-78, iii, 313).

The majority of later writers, beginning with al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348 [q.v.]; *Mizān al-i’tidāl* , Beirut 1963, iii, 124), continuing with Ḥadjdji Khalīfa (d. 1067/1657 [q.v.]; *Kashf al-ẓunūn* , Tehran 1947, ii, 1991), and concluding with Brockelmann (I, 405, S I, 704 f.), have in their turn revived these suspicions.

Misled by the surname *al-Murtaḍā* (“the one accepted by God”), which appears on the frontispiece of the ms. of the *Nahdj* in the B.N. (no. 2423, fol. 2b), de Slane concluded that the reference could be to al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā. He also attributes the work to the latter (*Cat. des mss. arabes B.N.* , Paris 1895, 425; cf. Veccia Vaglieri, *Sul Nahǧ al-balāgha e sul suo compilatore al-Raḍī*, in *AIUON*, viii [1958], 13 f.)

However, al-Murtaḍā is a surname often used to designate ‘Alī, not only among the Shī‘īs but also among the Sunnīs (cf. Ibn Abi ‘l-Ḥadīd, *‘Alawīyyāt* , Beirut 1972, 137 and *Sharḥ Nahdj al-balāgha* , Cairo 1962-7, xi, 120; Ibn Arabī, *La Profession de foi* , tr. R. Deladrière, Paris 1985, 209.).

Furthermore, it is stated explicitly, at the end of the ms., that this is a collection of the sayings of ‘Alī (*kitāb ۞ Nahdj al-balāgha min kalām ... ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib* ; B.N. fol. 351b). Also to be found here

is a biographical notice devoted to al-Raḍī, in the role of compiler, followed by another relating to ‘Alī and his “marvels” (ms. B.N., fol. 1a).

The Mu‘tazilī Ibn Abi ‘l-Ḥadīd (d. 656/1258 [q.v.]) has no doubts as to the authenticity of the work. For him, in fact, it is a work of ‘Alī, compiled by al-Raḍī (*Sharḥ*, x, 128 f.). The Shī‘īs, ancient as well as modern, are unanimous in this regard. According to them, the work is of undoubted authenticity. Furthermore, all mss. of the *Nahdj*, in the East as in the West, attribute the book to ‘Alī and the compilation to al-Raḍī (for a list of the mss., see Brockelmann, I, 405, S I, 705).

It is undeniable—as has been shown by Laura Veccia Vaglieri (*op. cit.*, 1-24)—that a large portion of the *Nahdj* could indeed be attributed to ‘Alī, especially certain historical and panegyric passages, although it is difficult to ascertain the authenticity of the more apocryphal sections. In fact, numerous authors, long before the time of al-Raḍī, had related the sermons of ‘Alī. The compiler himself specifies certain of his sources, in particular the *Djamal* of al-Wāḳidī (d. 207/823; *Nahdj*, iii, 149), the *Bayān* of al-Djāḥiẓ (d. 255/869; *op. cit.*, ii, 76) and the *Ta’rīkh* of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923; *op. cit.*, iii, 243). Other collections of homilies of ‘Alī, previous to the *Nahdj*, were also compiled, such as the *Khuṭab ‘Alī* by Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 204/819; Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 96; al-Ṭūsī, *Fihrist*, Nadjaf 1961, 37), the *Khuṭab ‘Alī wa-kutubuh ilā ‘ummālih* by al-Madā’inī (d. 255/840; Ibn al-Nadīm, *op. cit.*, 27; Yāḳūt, *Irshād*, Cairo 1928, v, 315), etc. (cf. Ḥusaynī, *Maṣādir Nahdj al-balāgha*, Nadjaf 1968, i, 48-92).

Moreover, it has been possible to identify a considerable number of passages, accompanied by complete *isnāds* dating back to the time of ‘Alī. These texts have been recounted by ancient scholars of repute such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), al-Mas‘ūdī, al-Djāḥiẓ and many others (cf. Djebli, *Encore à propos de l'authenticité du Nahdj al-balāgha*, in *SI*, lxxv (1992), 33-56).

As for the compilation of this book, it is most likely the work of al-Raḍī. In three of his works, the latter refers to the *Nahdj*: *Ḥaḳā’iḳ al-ta’wīl* (Nadjaf, undated, v, 167), *al-Madjāzāt al-nabawiyya* (Cairo 1971, 59, 140, 171) and *Khaṣā’iṣ al-a’imma* (Nadjaf 1949, 87). On the other hand, the compiler evokes, in the *Nahdj*, these latter two writings (i, 254, and ii, 263, respectively).

Whatever the case may be, the *Nahdj al-balāgha* is one of the great masterpieces of Arabic literature. Through the centuries, it has gained considerable admiration.

As its title reliably indicates and in accordance with the aspiration of its compiler, this book asserts the “joys of the Arabic language” (*Nahdj*, i, 2). The powerful assonance of its prose, its sometimes studied rhetoric, its remarkable eloquence, its gripping images, its sober, unpolished and relatively obscure mode of expression, Bedouin wisdom and sensibility blended with Islamic delicacy and vision—all of these constitute the literary worth of the *Nahdj*. This is supplemented by further values, moral and social. In fact, this book has a tireless appeal, full of

fervour and sincerity, on behalf of faith in God and in His Prophet, of piety, of integrity, of justice and of rising above the vanities of this world.

Since its first appearance, the *Nahdj* has been the object of a considerable corpus of commentaries, translations and studies, some 210 titles, according to Ḥ. al-ʿĀmilī in his *Shurūḥ Nahdj al-balāgha*, Beirut 1983. The *Nahdj al-balāgha* has been edited on numerous occasions with, in particular, the annotations of Muḥammad ʿAbduh, Beirut 1885, Cairo 1903, 1910, and of al-Marṣafī, 1925. Subḥī al-Ṣāliḥ has published it recently, with a glossary and a wideranging index (pp. 560-853), Beirut 1983.

Translations are numerous, particularly in Persian, such as the *Sharḥ Nahdj al-balāgha* of ʿA. Fayḍ al-Islām (bilingual ed., 2 vols., Tehran 1947; cf. Ḥusaynī, *op. cit.*, i, 315-66), in English, including that of ʿA. Razā, *Nahdj al-balāgha: selection from sermons, letters and sayings of ʿAli*, Tehran 1980, and in French, in a partial bilingual edition, *La Voie de l'éloquence*, by ʿA. Abu 'l-Nadjā and others, published Beirut 1986.

Among the commentaries, that of Ibn Abi 'l-Ḥadīd remains the most important. With its eight volumes, this monumental book is a truly encyclopaedic work, a literary as well as a scholarly achievement (for the other commentaries, see Brockelmann; Ḥusaynī, *op. cit.*, 247-314; Ḥ. al-ʿĀmilī, *op. cit.*, 35-106.)

(M. Djebli)

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