letters

Persian or Arab? The “anatomy charts” from the collection of Sami Ibrahim Haddad

To the Editor: We read with interest the articles of Dr. Farid S. Haddad on anatomy charts published in the recent issues of *Annals of Saudi Medicine*.^{1,2} The author presented two anatomy charts and mentioned that parts of the text are in Arabic and others are in Persian. We examined the charts carefully and found several points worthy of mention.

First, all the text is in Persian; no sentence in the chart is in Arabic. The script used for writing the text is *Nastaliq*, a well-known Persian calligraphy invented by Mir Ali of Tabriz (North-West of Iran), the most famous calligrapher of the Timurid period (1402-1502).³ *Nastaliq* script is traditionally considered the most beautiful Persian script and has almost only been used by Iranians.³ There are, however, many Arabic words in the text, but that is not surprising.

Soon after the time when Islam entered Iran, many Arabic words entered our language, as well as many words taken from English, French, Russian, and others. Some of these words are so familiar to Iranians that many people are not aware they originated from another language. Furthermore, English has not always enjoyed its current position as the *lingua franca* and the language of science. Previously, this role was played by other languages like French, Arabic, and Greek. As we use English for many of our scientific communications today, previously scientists wrote their articles in Arabic to reach their audience more readily. Avicenna and Rhazes, two well-known Iranian scholars, were among such scientists who wrote many of their books and articles

in Arabic for the very same reason. Therefore, although writing an article or chart in Arabic by an Iranian scholar in that era might not be surprising, writing a text in Persian by an Arab was very unlikely. And, that is why we believe that the author of those charts was undoubtedly a Persian and not an Arab.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Mr. Naser Habibzadeh, a retired professor of Persian linguistic, for his invaluable comments on the linguistic aspects and script analysis of the charts.

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Reply

In his comment, Dr. Farrokh Habibzadeh asserts that the script he saw on the charts is *Nastaliq*. The authors deserve our thanks for the comment although I believe it is only a simple observation. The second discovery that the notes on the charts are in Persian is also obvious. When he writes: “Avicenna and Rhazes, two well-known Iranian (sic) scholars ... wrote many of their books and articles in Arabic”, he stuns us with the notion that “Iranian” and “Persian” are synony-

mous terms. How could *ibn sýna*, who died 1000 years before “Iran” was scripted on a map, be Iranian? How could *alrazý* be called Iranian by any stretch of the imagination? I have yet to see a work by *ibn sýna* or by *alrazý* written in Persian, which is not a translation from Arabic. The great Persian civilization antedated the Arab civilization. The Iranian Renaissance, whether pre-Pahlavi, Pahlavi or post-Pahlavi, is no less brilliant but should not be confused with the much older Persian period.

I am also surprised by the final statement in the letter: “Unlike what the author mentioned, all the text is in Persian; no sentence in the chart is in Arabic”. I had clearly stated in an earlier letter that “the notes on these sets are written in Persian calligraphy ... these drawings are the work of a Persian scribe-artist”.¹ One should not confuse the author of the charts with the scribe who copies them. I also wrote that: “parts of the text are in Arabic and parts in Persian.”² This refers to the text of the book, not to the legend notes on the charts. As a matter of fact the preponderant part of the book is written in Arabic. I am surprised that the author jumped to this conclusion after looking at a reproduction of two charts out of about 76, that the text is Persian? A careful study of all available material is necessary before any definitive conclusions can be made. I have attentively, carefully, meticulously and thoroughly studied these charts and the manuscripts in which they are found for over 70 years; yet I still hesitate to make any final conclusions. Here are my preliminary and tentative comments. The book in which the charts were inserted was actually copied in Putna, Behar, India and comprises 264 folios. I wonder how one can jump to conclusions before one reads the book,

or takes a look at it, or at least recognize its existence.

Nationalism is laudable, but should not be used to bend history, which remains a universal science that belongs to all nations. The great Pasteur had said "La science n'a pas de patrie", which translates into "science has no fatherland." Michael DeBakey recently died at the age of 99. Whether he is considered American, Lebanese or Arab does

not change in any way his enormous, important and signal contributions to surgery; they belong to all humanity and not to any particular group, culture or nation. Fortunately, history has not yet stooped as low as political punditry.

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