

History of Medicine

Borzuyeh e Tabib (The Iranian Physician)

Touraj Nayernouri MD^{*}[†]Cite this article as: Nayernouri T. Borzuyeh e Tabib (The Iranian Physician). *Arch Iran Med.* 2016; 19(4): 300 – 304.

Introduction

Kalileh va Demneh' is a collection of stories and an allegorical fables purportedly translated by Borzuyeh from the Sanskrit 'Panchatantra' (the five principles) into the Pahlavi language (middle Persian) and brought to Iran from India during the reign of the Sassanid king, Khosro Anoushiravan (reign 531–579 C.E.).

As legend has it, Borzuyeh was a physician of high rank in the court of Khosro Anoushiravan, who had heard of a plant in India that could revive the dead and asked permission from the King to travel to India in search of this magical herb. The king agreed and financed his journey and after an undisclosed time Borzuyeh returned to Iran with the translation of the 'Panchatantra' as well as several medical texts. The delighted Khosro Anoushiravan offered rich financial rewards which Borzuyeh refused but only asked if the king's wise vizir, Bozorgmehr (or Bouzarjomehr) would write a biographical preface to his translation. Herein lies a mystery shrouded in an enigma.

Although this article is primarily concerned with Borzuyeh the physician, yet it is inescapable not to mention briefly the book 'Kalileh va Demneh' and Khosro Anoushiravan's legendary vizir, Bozorgmehr (or Bouzarjomehr). Of course, what follows in this essay, is based on a minimum of extant primary sources, and much relies on conjecture, though I have attempted to base those conjectures on a rational process of deductions, based on available evidence.

Kalileh va Demneh

As mentioned above, this collection of animal fables, based on ancient Indian oral traditions was seemingly transcribed into Sanskrit as the 'Panchatantra' (the five principles). It is a series of interwoven didactic stories, with moral advice, as related mostly by the two principal characters, the jackals, Kalileh and Demneh.

This Panchatantra was translated from Sanskrit (together with some other stories from the Indian 'Mahabharata') into Pahlavi (Middle Persian language) in 570 C.E. allegedly by Borzuyeh, the famous physician at the court of the Sassanid king, Khosro Anoushiravan.

There was an early Syriac translation of this book from Pahlavi, known as the 'Kalilag wa Damnag' in the 6th century C.E.

In 750 C.E., the Persian scholar, Abu Mohammad Abd-Allah Rozbeh ibn Daduyeh, known by his Arabic name as Ebn-Moqaffa (ca.721-ca.757) translated the work into Arabic from its original Pahlavi, under the title of 'Kalilah wa Dimnah' during the time of the second Abbasid Caliph Al-Mansur (reigned 754–775). It seems that Ebn-Moqaffa added at least a second chapter to the original stories in which Demneh is accused of instigating the death of the Bull 'Shanzabeh', is found guilty and put to death; which may have been motivated by the political and moral situation in Ebn-Moqaffa's time. Of course there is a more significant presumption that Ebn-Moqaffa in fact wrote the Introduction, Babe Borzuyeh, to the book of Kalileh va Demneh for his own reasons. We shall come back to this intriguing mystery, which is the 'Raison d'être' of this essay later.

Meanwhile in Iran, the poet Rudaki (858–ca.941), during the reign of the Samanid ruler, Nasr II, turned the story into a narrative poem, fragments of which still remain

A further point of significance is that the Iranian poet Ferdowsi (ca. 940–1020 C.E.) wrote his Shahname (the Book of Kings)¹ based on the translation of the Pahlavi Khoday-Nameh into modern Farsi by Abu Mansur Mamari (961 C.E.). Ferdowsi's stories relating to Kalileh va Demneh, Borzuyeh and Bozorgmehr (Bouzarjomehr) are drawn from the Abu Mansur translation.

The most significant of these later Iranian writers, however, was Abol Moali Nasr-Allah Monshi, who in 1121 C.E., [during the reign of Sultan Bahramshah of the Turkic Ghaznavids], using Ebn-Moqaffa's Arabic text as a template, translated the work as 'Kalileh va Demneh'. Abol Moali Monshi, however, did not translate the book verbatim, but changed, added and deleted many passages and stories to his own liking as well as adding Arabic and Persian verses of poetry. His major concern was to set a high standard of literary Farsi prose which remained as the 'Gold standard' for many centuries to be imitated by later Farsi writers.

In Europe, the Hebrew translation, ascribed to Rabbi Joel (1200 C.E.) became the source of many other renderings through its Latin translation by John of Capua (1260 C.E.) and the later Italian translation of Anton Francesco Doni (1513 – 1574) and its subsequent rendering into English by Thomas North (1535 – 1630) whence it became known as the fables of Bidpay. Several of these stories were subsequently included in Aesop's and La Fontaine's Fables.[Kalileh va Demneh; available on the internet, Wikipedia and Encyclopedia Iranica on line.]

Bozorgmehr-e Boktagan

As mentioned earlier, Bozorgmehr was the legendary wise vizir of Khosro Anoushiravan who purportedly wrote the biography of Borzuyeh as the preface to the Pahlavi translation of the Panchat-

Author's affiliation: Academy of Medical Sciences of the I.R. of Iran, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: tnayernouri@yahoo.co.uk

Corresponding author and reprints: Touraj Nayernouri MD, Academy of Medical Sciences of the I.R. of Iran, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: tnayernouri@yahoo.co.uk

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Kalilah wa-Dimnah (The Fables of Bidqai) _ Treasure of the Bodleian
Source: <http://treasures.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/The-Fables-of-Bidpal/>.

antra as Kalileh va Demneh. This story is mentioned in the Shahname of Ferdowsi¹ in some detail and to a lesser extent in Taalebi's Gorar and Masudi's Moruj.

As mentioned above, it has been suggested that both Ferdowsi and Taalebi have taken their story from the prose Shahname of Abu Mansur which was a Persian translation of the Khodai Nameh (Xwaday-namag), written in late Sassanid era.²

It seems that throughout the one thousand years, from the beginning of the Achaemenid Empire (6th century B.C.E.) to the time of the Sassanid King, Khosro Anoushiravan (6th century C.E.), the Iranian tradition of historiography maintained a peculiar characteristic very different to the tradition laid down by Herodotus. In Iran, apart from the recording of significant historical events in base relief carved in stone, history was mainly related orally by Gosans (minstrels and bards) which was often an admixture of some facts with heroic sagas and romantic lore, but the events and stories of one ruler were fluidly attributed to another according to historical changes.³

Khosro Anoushiravan resolved to have the Iranian history recorded in writing and during his reign such a narrative history was compiled as the Khoday-Nameh (Xwaday-namag) or the 'Book of Kings'. This book, however, remained true to the previous oral traditions and mingled facts with legends and myths. Several other stories, written at that time and in the same spirit, have survived in translation from the Pahlavi language, including 'Karnameh Ardesir-e Babakan'⁴ relating the ascension to the throne of the founder of the Sassanid dynasty as well as 'Nameh-e Tansar'⁵ describing how the recluse mobed, Tansar, helped the same Ardesir in establishing his kingship.

It appears that both these texts were written much later than the beginning of the Sassanid dynasty and probably during the reign of Khosro Anoushiravan, if not several years later, yet retelling the events of the establishment of the Sassanid Empire some 300 years earlier. What is of significance to this essay is that the Karnameh describes the game of chess (shatrange) and Backgammon (nard) as princely pastimes during those eras as well as riding, hunting and playing polo (chogan).

Another legend relating to the game of chess (shatrange) and backgammon (nard) is a Pahlavi text, probably written during the time of Khosro Anoushiravan, or even later, known as 'Wisarisin i Catrang' which describes Bozorgmehr solving the rules of the

game of chess sent by an Indian king (?Debsalm) to test the sages of Iran. Bozorgmehr, in return, invents the game of backgammon (nard) whose solution baffles the Indian court.

It must be mentioned in passing that such late Sassanid writings can be regarded as propaganda to promulgate the superior wisdom of the Iranians in comparison to the Indian Sages and kings.

To return to the personage of Bozorgmehr, several scholars have raised questions as to his historical existence.

Arthur Christensen, the Danish Iranologist, argued that as Bozorgmehr was not mentioned by contemporary Byzantine and Armenian historical sources, nor by the historians Tabari, Ebn Qotayba and Hamza Esfahani, therefore Bozorgmehr was identical to Borzuyeh the Physician and that the name Borzuyeh was probably a shortened version of Borzmehr.⁶ This interpretation, however, has not been accepted by other scholars including Djalal Khaleghi Motlagh.²

Arthur Christensen also argued that the name Bozorgmehr as the vizir of Khosro Anoushiravan is a misreading of the title 'Bozorgfarmay' or 'Vazargfarmazar' who sat immediately below the throne of Anoushiravan, as his Vizir, and above the seat of the 'Mobed Mobadan' and other high ranking officials of the court, as mentioned in the 'Farsnameh' of Ebn Balkhi, and thus Bozorgmehr is a misreading of Vazargfarmazar which referred only to a title and not the name of a real person.⁷

Djalal Khaleghi Motlagh, in his article 'Bozorgmehr-e Boktagan'² mentions that the historian Masudi in his 'Moruj' "erroneously identifies Bozorgmehr as a minister of Khosro II Parviz (reigned 590 – 628 C.E.)" and Masudi also mentions that Khosro Parviz had Bozorgmehr imprisoned in the 13th year of his reign and had him executed on grounds of being a *zandig* (Manichean). A point to remark here is that Khosro I Anoushiravan reigned for 48 years and he seemingly appointed Bozorgmehr as his vizir quite early in his reign and the execution by Khosro II Parviz was 23 years after Anoushiravan's death which would have made Bozorgmehr quite an elderly man. In many Late Sassanian writings which mention Bozorgmehr, he is depicted as a pious Zoroastrian and it thus seems unlikely that he may have been a Manichean. Other sources, including the Shahname of Ferdowsi, mention that Bozorgmehr was executed by Anoushiravan's son, Hormoz IV.

Khaleghi Motlagh in the same article also mentions that many other late Sassanian or early Islamic works written in Pahlavi and attributed to Bozorgmehr including 'Ayadgar i Wuzurgmehr' and 'Zafar-nama' which "... are too evanescent to be trusted" and he goes on to state that "Author's names were commonly changed in new recensions and identical aphorisms credited to different sages."

In the 'Fihrist' of Ibn Nadim⁸ Bozorgmehr is mentioned only twice. The first is a quote attributed to him on page 17, and later where Ibn Nadim mentions the book Kalileh va Demneh, on page 541 – 542, he states that "some say that Bozorgmehr wrote parts of it". There is however, no mention of Borzuyeh anywhere in the 'Fihrist'.

Thus it seems that Bozorgmehr may not have been a particular person but the title of the king's vizir which later became a legendary 'will-o'-the wisp' character to whom many wise acts and sage councils were attributed.

Ebn Moqaffa

Before I finally come to Borzuyeh, I must give a brief biography of Ebn Moqaffa who translated the 'Kalileh va Demneh' from the

Middle Persian (Pahlavi) into Arabic and who is perhaps to blame for the whole saga of Borzuyeh.

This Ebn Moqaffa (ca 721 – ca 757 C.E.), whose Persian name was Roozbeh pur Daduyeh was from Firouzabad in Fars. His father had been an official in charge of local taxes under the Islamic Umayyad caliphs and was convicted of embezzlement and therefore punished by having his hands crushed and hence the name ‘Moqaffa’; ‘crushed hands’.

After various travels and jobs, eventually the young Ebn Moqaffa returned to Basra and became the secretary (kateb) to Isa Ibn Ali and Suleiman Ibn Ali, the uncles of the Abbasid caliph Al-Mansur. He was a prolific translator of middle Persian texts into Arabic, a language in which he excelled and was superior to most of his Arab contemporaries. Apart from his translation of Kalileh va Demneh, some of his other notable translations include the Xwaday-Namag (Book of Kings); a mixture of legend, myth and history relating the stories of pre-Islamic Persian kings and warriors, probably written during the last few years of Sassanid rule as well as Nameh Tansar, again written in late Sassanid era but describing the ascension to the throne of Ardeshir, the founder of the Sassanid Empire, Tansar being the recluse Zoroastrian mobed who advised Ardeshir.

Ebn Moqaffa’s Arabic literary prose set the standard of excellence for many decades to come. He was an arrogant Irano-centric scholar and was suspected of being a ‘Zandig’ and was therefore tortured and executed by the caliph al-Mansur.

It must be clarified here that the term ‘Zandig’ was originally applied to Manicheans, but in early Islamic periods, the term denoted all those who attempted to cast doubt on Islamic teachings as well as all other religious beliefs.⁹

Borzuyeh Tabib

And finally after a lengthy and tortuous introduction we have arrived at the legend of Borzuyeh.

In all the extant versions of the book of Kalileh va Demneh, there are three main sections:

1. The introduction giving the circumstances and the reasons for Borzuyeh’s voyage to India.

2. The ‘Bab e Borzuyeh’ which is putatively a biography of Borzuyeh written by Bozorgmehr, although as it is written in the first person narrative, it seems like an autobiography.

3. The main narrative stories of Kalileh va Demneh.

Francois De Blois has made a scholarly review of the work in his ‘Borzoy’s Voyage to India’.¹⁰

After giving a long list of the various translations of Kalileh va Demneh throughout the ages at the beginning of his book, he produces, in the last half of his book, an examination of the different versions relating to Borzuyeh’s voyage to India (section 1 above). Neither section 1 nor section 3 above, concerns us in this essay.

There are, however, certain points mentioned in De Blois’ work which I must comment on.

He has stated at the beginning of his book that the oldest extant translation of Kalileh va Demneh is an older Syriac translation directly from the Pahlavi text, independent of Ebn Moqaffa’s work. On pages 25 and 40 he mentions that the chapter of Borzuyeh the physician does not exist in this early Syriac version. On the same page (page 25), when he refers to Silvestre de Sacy’s edition, he states that the third chapter of Sacy’s edition, ‘the purpose of the book’, (commonly attributed to Bozorgmehr) “is in fact the work

of the Arabic translator, Abd Allah ibn al-Muqaffa”.

De Blois, however explicitly assumes the veracity of Borzuyeh as a real historic figure who wrote his autobiography as the ‘Bab Borzuyeh’ in the Kalileh va Demneh himself. One would imagine that if this autobiography did not exist in the oldest Syriac version, translated directly from the Pahlavi, but only appeared after Ebn Moqaffa’s translation and thereafter, might it not raise some questioning eyebrows about its’ authorship?

Even though De Blois mentions that Abu Rayhan Biruni, (died 1048 C.E.) in his ‘Tahqiq mal al Hind’^{11,12} accuses Ebn Moqaffa of writing the ‘Bab Borzuyeh’ for his own Manichean propaganda, yet he dismisses this possibility because he does not imagine that Biruni could read Pahlavi texts (page 29).

De Blois, however, has conceded that some stories, and in particular, Demneh’s trial, are the work of Ebn Moqaffa.

Abu Rayhan Biruni (973–1048 C.E.) was a scholar and a polymath; was conversant in Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit and could also read Greek, Hebrew and Syriac.^{11,12} He spent 13 years in India and wrote volumes on Indian customs, religions, beliefs and behaviors. He was a meticulous and accurate chronicler and writer and it seems unlikely that he would have asserted the invention of ‘Babe Borzuyeh’ by Ebn Moqaffa if he did not have sufficient reason to do so. Whether he could read Pahlavi or not I cannot state definitively but neither can De Blois, although Mojtaba Minovi in his preface to ‘Nameh Tansar’ mentions on page 35, that Biruni must have had access to and had read the Nameh Tansar in Pahlavi.⁵

De Blois, on page 26 of his book, gives a translation of the passage of Biruni’s ‘Tahqiq mal al Hind’ regarding the ‘Bab Borzuyeh’, which he states is based on the Noldeke’s 1912 German translation of the passage with “few minor changes” which De Blois himself made in the rendering. In my reading of the Arabic text of Biruni’s passage and its Farsi translation by Manouchehr Sodooghi Saha,¹¹ on page 122 the passage reads as such: “And they(the Indians) have many other books of wisdom which lie out with the scope of my knowledge, but I do wish that I could translate the book of ‘Panchatantra’ which we know as ‘Kalileh va Demneh’ which has been changed by so many translations including that of Abdolah Ebn Moqaffa who added the ‘Bab Borzuyeh’ to it...”.

Many historians and scientists can be biased in their interpretation of data, due to presuppositions that they may harbor, which may taint their conclusions. I am in no position to cast dispersions on De Blois’ scholarship, but such biases abound in scientific literature.

To return to ‘Bab Borzuyeh’, it is obviously written in the first person narrative and thus unlikely to have been written by Bozorgmehr, as legend indicates. It is written as an autobiography, in which the author (Borzuyeh?) divulges his inner thoughts and motive for his actions.

After a brief summary of his parentage and medical training, he describes his enthusiasm for treating patients as a physician, with ample remuneration ensuring a comfortable life in line with that of his peers. At this point ‘Borzuyeh’ describes a soul searching period when he concludes that financial gain and social status are worthless and evanescent in comparison to moral rewards and salvation in the life hereafter and thus he must make provisions for such eventuality as the approaching footsteps of death were not far behind. He thus decides to forsake worldly pleasures and the company of friends whose life was spent in gathering world-

ly goods for their own and their children's life. He concludes to spend his life dedicated to curing illnesses which cause men great pain and suffering despite the fact that patients may not appreciate the physician's efforts and care, but being content that to lessen pain and suffering, without the expectation of financial gain, shall be rewarded in the nether life.

Having chosen this way of life, his soul felt free of worldly desires and his sincere attempts at helping the diseased were rewarded by respect and gifts from kings and commoners alike, and his status and wealth surpassed those of his colleagues.

At this stage of his life another period of doubt and despair be-sets him. He contemplates the true worth of medical knowledge, but could not find an instance where a treatment resulted in a total cure and restoration of perfect health but that any cure was only temporary and later the patient died of another incurable disease.

Upon this conclusion, he decides to forsake medicine and turn to religion but finds no solace in such a dark and endless road filled with fear and with no guidance, nor could he find advice in any medical text to help him in this endeavor. He further states that people of different creeds have blindly followed the system of beliefs handed down to them by their forefathers without rational introspection and thus pursue passing fancies seeking worldly goods and social status, or through fear for their lives, follow their leaders and sovereigns without question. These people tend to lean on rotting bones and unstable moorings. Their belief in the Creator, Origins and the Infinity that awaits them is based on the presumption that their faith is the only true faith while all those that hold other faiths are mistaken.

Lost in these doubts and indecisions, where no answer was forthcoming, he seeks and questions the leaders of other faiths. Each steadfastly insist on the veracity of their faith while dismissing others as evil and faithless, but none could convince him of the rationality of their beliefs. Thus it became clear to him that to accept and follow any of such religions, he would remain in ignorance and doubt.

And so finally (Borzuyeh) decides to forsake the mundane and the material world and pursue an ascetic and hermitic life. Neither to harm people nor animals; to shun anger, treachery, stealing or lying and all other harmful actions and thoughts, as well as magic and sorcery. He chose a celibate life, avoided women and never had any children.

He remained in this state of mind and way of life and reconciled himself to *fate and destiny* until the opportunity arose to travel to India.

And such is the essence of the 'Bab Borzuyeh' according to Abol Moali Monshi, from whose 'Kalileh va Demneh' I have paraphrased this section but have left out the illustrative stories. Monshi himself, in his introduction states that he has shortened the 'Bab Borzuyeh', which has been attributed to Bozorgmehr, for the reason that this 'Bab' is a mere story and no more.

In essence, this 'Bab Borzuyeh' describes the spiritual journey of a young man whose parents are of high standing in the Sassanid social hierarchy and who is encouraged to study medicine from an early age. He gives himself totally to his profession, at first for worldly goods and social standing but later his concerns turn toward a selfless devotion to diminish suffering and pain without regard to worldly remuneration, but finally realizes that he cannot dispense immortality (c.f. with those introductions to 'Kalileh va Demneh' wherein he travels to India seeking such a plant).

He forsakes medicine and turns to religion but again finds no

solace and no answer in any of the various faiths that he encounters and finally surrenders to *fate and destiny*.

The important question arises here as to the purpose and meaning of this whole 'Bab'. Is it the life of a real person (Borzuyeh) or an allegorical fable, wherein the author attempts to debase the mundane world of humans and to extol the ascetic and the spiritual life?

The context of the 'Panchatantra' as De Blois mentions on page 15 of his book,¹⁰ is not a moral tale but rather a Machiavellian one; that is "it condones deceit and treachery as necessities of politics and life in general". The 'Bab Borzuyeh' seems in stark contrast to this amoral message.

Perhaps the answer lies in the religious and philosophical milieu and tendencies that were rife in late Sassanid Iran which carried over to the early Islamic period.

From the time of Ardashir I, the founder of the Sassanid dynasty, in mid-3rd century C.E., and more prominently during the time of Khosro Anoushiravan, Greek philosophy and Neo-Platonism in particular, were popular sources of discussions at court. Gradually Zervanian beliefs were becoming popular, and although Mazdaism, in its Zoroastrian form, held that human actions determined the fate of the world, yet Zervanism promulgated the role of fate and destiny which lay beyond human effort. Manichianism preached a form of ascetic life and the role of destiny in determining human affairs, not dissimilar to Zervanian teachings. In the early Islamic period, with the Arab conquest of Iran, the Zoroastrian texts started to describe an apocalyptic end-of-world scenario.¹³ It would not be surprising if some Iranians leaned towards Manichianism and Zervanian world views. Perhaps Ebn Moqaffa was one such Iranian, who in his translation of 'Kalileh va Demneh', invented the character of 'Borzuyeh' and inserted it at the beginning of his Arabic translation, to air his views, but from the mouth of some long 'Deceased' character.

Perhaps two further points might help to disentangle the mystery of the authorship of the 'Bab Borzuyeh'.

As De Blois mentions on pages 28 and 29 of his book,¹⁰ Paul Kraus in 1933 had noted that the particular section relating to the uncertainty of religions in 'Bab Borzuyeh', bears a "strong similarity to a passage from the 'Logic of Pawlos Parsaya'(Paul the Persian) which was a Syriac work dedicated to Khosro Anoushiravan" written during his reign. It is most likely that Ebn Moqaffa was familiar with this text.

The second point is, as I have mentioned earlier, that the term 'Zandig' as applied to Ebn Moqaffa, which caused his execution, refers to his casting doubt on Islam as well as all other religious beliefs and does not necessarily refer to Manichianism, which would redress the doubt that De Blois expresses on page 30 of his book regarding Ebn Moqaffa's Manichean tendencies.

Summary and Conclusions

In all recensions of 'Kalileh va Demneh', it is tacitly assumed that India was a far distant and mysterious land where few or no Iranian had visited until Borzuyeh.

Touraj Daryaee, on page 129 in his book 'Sassanian Persia' quoting from Dinkerd Book four, mentions that since the time of Shapour I in mid-3rd century C.E., many books on astronomy, medicine and logic were translated into middle Persian from India as well as from Byzantium.¹³ These translations became more common during the reign of Khosro Anoushiravan as trade with

India and Ceylon (Srilanka) became well established through the sea routes from the Persian Gulf.¹⁴

And so the exchange of ideas between India and the Sassanid Iran including mathematics, astronomy, literature and medicine, must have been a well-established and a regular occurrence throughout the Sassanid era and was not confined to ‘Borzuyeh’s voyage to India as the saga implies. Indian medical texts, as well as Greek, were being translated and taught in Gondeshapur for many years.¹⁵ To pretend that ‘Borzuyeh’s voyage was a ground breaking incident is an impermissible exaggeration.

A similar late Sassanian saga relates the introduction of the game of chess and the invention of Nard as mentioned previously.

Iranian and Arab writers were always fond of inventing stories regarding origins and so we must be more circumspect about ‘Borzuyeh’s voyage to India with regard to the origin of Kalileh va Demneh.

I have stressed that ‘Borzuyeh’ may belong to such a system of fanciful myth-making, as there is no other historical attestation to his existence, apart from the ‘Bab Borzuyeh’ at the beginning of the Kalileh va Demneh.

As De Blois has mentioned, and I have referred to it earlier, this ‘Bab Borzuyeh’ does not exist in the old Syriac version which was translated directly from the Pahlavi source before Ebn Moqaffa’s translation. It seems logical therefore to assume that ‘Borzuyeh’ is an invention of Ebn Moqaffa as a dramatic *persona*.

Even Bozorgmehr, whose wisdom and sagacity have become legendary ever since late Sassanian times, seems to be only an enigmatic shadow as mentioned earlier.

And so we must conclude that Biruni must have been correct in stating that Ebn Moqaffa not only added some stories to the Kalileh va Demneh, as De Blois has conceded on page 29 of his book,¹⁰ but that he invented the whole ‘Bab Borzuyeh’.

Finally, to add a little romance to this mystery, might the name

Borzuyeh be a shortened anagram of Ebn Moqaffa’s Iranian name; Rozbeh Daduyeh? ‘A nom de plume?’

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