AL-IŞFAHÂNĪ’S FANDOM IN THE KITĀB AL-AGMAH (THE BOOK OF SONGS): AN ANALYSIS OF THE BIOGRAPHY OF IBN SURAYḠ

(Al-Iṣfahānī’s Fandom dalam Kitāb al-AGMAH (Buku Lagu): Suatu Analisis Biografi Ibn Surayḡ)

¹SU, I-WEN

¹ Department of Arabic Language, National Chengchi University (NCCU), Taipei, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

This article examines the biography of the musician, Ibn Surayḡ (d. c. 96/714), in the Kitāb al-AGMAH, with regard to how the compiler, Abū al-Farağ ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Iṣfahānī (d. after 356/967), edits his source material (aḥbār) in order to articulate his admiration for the musician, Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣili (155–235/772–850). Through an investigation of al-Iṣfahānī’s repetition and juxtaposition of aḥbār, his fandom is revealed in the article on Ibn Surayḡ, where al-Iṣfahānī shapes the narrative that problematizes a report unfavourable towards Iṣḥāq while elevating his musical achievement. Although the Kitāb al-AGMAH, as an aḥbār compilation, seems void of authorial voice, and, thus, of originality, examination of the compiler’s editorial work shows his articulation of his own perspective.

Keywords: Abū al-Farağ al-Iṣfahānī; Kitāb al-AGMAH; Ibn Surayḡ; Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣili; authorial voice; aḥbār compilations

ABSTRAK


¹ Corresponding author: Su, I-Wen, Department of Arabic Language, National Chengchi University (NCCU), Taipei, Taiwan, Email: tsu@nccu.edu.tw
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al-Mawṣilī (155-235/772-850). Melalui analisis yang dibuat oleh al-İsfahānī’s berdasarkan pengulangan dan perbandingan dalam aḥbār, fandom beliau ditemui dalam makalah berkaitan İbn Surayğ, yang mana al-İsfahānī membentuk naratif yang menyelesaikan kekeliruan daripada laporan berkenaan İshāq yang kurang memuaskan, di samping mengiktiraf pencapaian beliau dalam bidang muzik. Walaupun Kitāb al-Ağānî adalah kompilasi aḥbār yang tidak mengutarakan suara pengarang, namun keaslian analisis daripada kerja-kerja editorial yang dibuat oleh penyusunnya menunjukkan gambaran atau ekspresi daripada perspektifnya sendiri.

Kata Kunci: Abū al-Farağ al-İsfahānī; suara pengarang; kompilasi aḥbār

INTRODUCTION

The classical Arabic literary tradition, to a large extent, is shaped by transmission, rather than originality, “since the author himself, rather than expressing his views with his own words, hands down materials quoted from earlier authorities” (Leder 1998, 67). While there are exceptional cases such as poetry or maqāmāt, the majority of classical Arabic works comprise the collection of reports (aḥbār, sing. ḥabar), aphorisms, letters, orations, or eloquent expressions (Leder and Kilpatrick 1992). The unit of such a composite collection is a ḥabar, a report, narrated from an authority, identified in the chain of transmission (isnād) or remaining in anonymity. Numerous aḥbār, whether arranged in a particular way or not, form the narrative of a work. Thus, the authors of such works appear to be no more than collectors and compilers. Nevertheless, recent studies have shown that examination of a compiler’s editorial intervention — selection, arrangement, juxtaposition, and reshaping of the material — can reveal authorial ingenuity. In such studies, a redactional analysis of aḥbār compilations is applied to specimens from different genres and generates thought-provoking conclusions: although the compilers’ voice is often buried in the cited reports, their works consciously engage with issues central to their theological, sectarian, religious, literary, and historical views and values (Leder 1990, 1992; Donner 2001; Fahndrich 1973; Fedwa 1981; Frolow 1997; Stewart 2007; Newman 2000; Burge 2011).

The present study illustrates the usefulness of analysis of the compiler’s repetition and juxtaposition of the aḥbār by examining how Abū al-Farağ al-İsfahānī (d. after 356/967) edits reports to articulate his admiration for the musician, İshāq b. İbrahim al-Mawṣilī (155–235/772–850), in the article on İbn Surayğ (d. c. 96/714), in his monumental compilation, the Kitāb al-Ağānî (hereafter, the Ağānî). The Ağānî

1 For the controversy over the date of al-İsfahānī’s death, see: (Su 2016, 61-62).
is one of the most important sources for Arabic literature, classical Arabic music, and early Islamic history.\footnote{As the Ağâni is structured around the songs and contains abundant information about songs, melodies, singers and musicians, it is one of the most crucial sources for the classical Arabic music, see: (Sawa 2009, 1985, 2015, Farmer 1961, 1940, 1929). A summary of the musicological studies related to the Ağâni, see: (Bü ÍJasan 2003).} Besides abundant information on the poets, musicians, and men of letters before the tenth century, the detailed citation of the chains of transmissions by al-Iṣfahānī also facilitates source studies (Quellenforschungen), which provide important insights into the transmission and dissemination of knowledge within mediaeval Islamic society (Zolondék 1961; Fleischhammer 2004; Sezgin 1984; al-Şalîhî 2013). Recent studies, by Sallûm and Kilpatrick, on the Ağâni address its structure, al-Iṣfahānī’s conception of his own work, and his treatment of source material (Kilpatrick 2003, 1997; Sallûm 1985). Following on from these works, which reveal al-Iṣfahānī’s authorial ingenuity, this article engages with the compiler’s editorial concern and its impact upon his re-presentation of the past, in hope of furthering our understanding of this great Book of Songs, and, in general, of classical Arabic textual culture and editorial convention.

In what follows, this article first introduces the compiler, al-Iṣfahānī, and the work, the Ağâni, with reference to al-Iṣfahānī’s favouritism towards the musician, Iṣḥāq. Then, it analyses the impact of the compiler’s fandom in the article on Ibn Surayğ.

**ABÛ AL-FARAĞ AL-IŞFAHÂNİ AND HIS MAGNUM OPUS, THE AĞÂNİ**

Abû al-Farağ ‘Ali b. al-ハウスyn b. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. al-Ḥayṭam al-Umawi al-Iṣfahānī was a litterateur, mastering a number of Arabic sciences, including history, genealogy, music, and poetry. His reputation for erudition is best illustrated by Abû ‘Ali al-Muḥāssin al-Tanūḥî’s (329–384/941–994) comment:

Amongst the Šiʿî narrators whom I have known, none has learnt poems, melodies, reports, traditions (al-ʿaṭṭû), al-ʾaḥâdîṯ al-musnadā [narrations with chains of transmission, including the Prophetic hadîj], and genealogy by heart like Abu al-Farağ al-Iṣfahānī. Very proficient in these matters, he is also knowledgeable in the military campaigns and the biography of the Prophet (al-mağāzî and al-sîra), lexicography, grammar, legendary tales (al-ḥurâfât), and the sciences desirable in the court (alat al-munâdâma), like falconry (al-ʾawârîh), veterinary science (al-bayţara), something about medicine (mutsafan min al-ṭîbâ), astrology, drinks (al-ʾašrîba), and other things (Al-Ḥaṭîb al-Bağdâdî 2001, v.l3, 339; Ibn Ḫallikân 1972, v.l3, 307; al-Ḏâhabî 2004, 2774; al-Qiṭî 1986, v.l2, 251).
Al-İşfahānī also composes poems, some of which are preserved in al-Ṭa‘ālibī’s anthology (Al-Ṭa‘ālibī 1983, vl.3, 127). His broad interests are reflected in the wide range of different literary topics covered by his works. Besides the Ağānī, among thirty works attributed to him, the ones which still exist today, either in fragment or in complete, are: the Monasteries (al-Diyārāt), the Extract of the Songs (Muğarrad al-ağānī), the Singing Girls (al-Qiyān), the Țalibid Martyrs (Maqāṭil al-Țalibiyin), the Poetess Maids (al-İmāʾ al-șawâʾir), and the Etiquette of the Strangers (Adab al-ğurâbā’).

The Ağānī is a huge aḥbār compilation extending to twenty-four volumes. It consists of articles on people (especially poets and musicians) and events (from pre-Islamic tribal sagas, the Prophet’s mağāzī, and others) of different times and places related to songs. The Ağānī preserves the songs, their melodic modes, their composers, and the biographies of the poets whose poetry serves as the lyrics of the songs, either in their original form or following their adaptation by the composers.

In the preface to the Ağānī, al-İşfahānī explains the reason behind his compilation: “[…] one of the chief men (rāsīn min ru’asā ‘inā) commissioned me to collect this work for him. He informed me that he had heard that the book attributed to İşhâq, which is worthless, is not really his work and that he doubted its attribution, since most of İşhâq’s companions reject it, including İşhâq’s son, Щammād. By my life, he is honest in what he mentions and correct in what he denies (al-İşfahānī 2000, vol.1, 16).” This rāsīs is most likely to be the Bûyid vizier, al-Muhallābī (291—352/903—963) (Su 2016, 68—72). This not only accounts for the motivation driving al-İşfahānī to undertake this monumental work, but also highlights the fact that the Ağānī is a product of the ‘Abbāsid court culture, anticipating the court elite who appreciates music and literature as its readers (Kilpatrick 2003, 15).

The Ağānī, as a whole, is divided into three parts: first, the Hundred Songs (al-mi’a al-șawt al-muḥtārā) – which presents al-İşfahānī’s endeavours to reconstruct the collection of songs originally compiled by İşhâq; second, the musicians in the caliphal families (ağānī al-ḥulafā’ wa-awlādihim wa-awlād awlādihim); third, a selection of songs, possibly of al-İşfahānī’s own choice (Kilpatrick 2003, 258—267). The first part – consisting of the Hundred Songs and other collections of songs – begins with the article on Abū Qaṭīfa and ends with the Seven Songs of Ibn Surayğ (al-İşfahānī 2000, vol.1, 22—vol.8, 199). It is structured around The Hundred Songs, a list of exquisite songs revised by İşhâq on the order of al-Wâṭiq (al-İşfahānī 2000,

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3 For a list of al-İşfahānī’s works, see: (Kilpatrick 2003, 23-35). The authorship of Adab al-ğurâbā’ remains debatable, see: (Su 2016, 61).
4 The number, twenty four volumes, is based on the edition published by Mu’assasat al-A’lāmî li-l- Maṭbû’ât, which I use in this study.
vol.1, 16–21). The normative structure in this part is Song-Poet-Musician. A song is placed at the beginning of each section. It then introduces the articles on its poet and its composer (Kilpatrick 2003, 259–262). For instance, the very first song of the Aḡānī is presented as follows:

*Al-qasru faʾl-naḥlu fa-l-ḡammāʾu baynahumā ašḵā ilā al-qalbi min abwābi Ġayrānī* [...] 

Its metre is *Basīṭ* the first [...] The poem is by Abū Qaṭīfa al-Muʿayyī, the musical setting by Maʿbad. It has two melodic modes: one is *ḥafīf taqīl awwal bi-l-wusṭā fī maḡrābāh,* according to the narration of Iṣḥāq, which is the setting of the selected song [the song on the list of The Hundred Songs]; the other is *taqīl awwal bi-l-wusṭā* in Iṣḥāq’s system (*maḏhab*), according to the narration of ʿAmr b. Bāna (al-ʿIṣfahānī, 2000, vol.1, 13–14).

After the preface, the above verses (*al-qasru*) are presented with musical indications. The song first introduces the article about its lyricist, or poet, Abū Qaṭīfa, and subsequently that about Maʿbad, the composer of the song. The Song-Poet-Musician pattern has variants and exceptions, but the overall organisational schema in the first part conforms to this pattern (Kilpatrick 2003, 259–262).

The second part of the Aḡānī centres on the members of the Umayyad and Abbasid families who were known as musicians or to have composed refined songs. It begins with an introduction and ends with the article about ʿAbdallāh b. al-Muʿtazz (al-ʿIṣfahānī, 2000, vol.9, 209–vol.10, 228). The organisational pattern here is different from that of the first part. Al-ʿIṣfahānī names the royal musicians in chronological order, quotes their songs, and then compiles articles on lyricist-poets related to their songs (Kilpatrick 2003, 263). For instance, this part begins with ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (r. 99–101/717–20), reports concerning him, and his musical works. ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz’s song then introduces the article on the poet, Ašḥab b. Rumayla, the poet behind the lyrics of ʿUmar’s song. After this, al-ʿIṣfahānī follows up with the next caliph known for composing songs, al-Walīd b. Yazīd (r. 125–126/743–744) (al-ʿIṣfahānī, 2000, vol.9, 212–228).

The third part, possibly framed by al-ʿIṣfahānī’s selection of songs (Kilpatrick 2003, 259), unlike the first and second parts, is not preceded by a preface and its organisational pattern is less regular. However, it is separated by a transition in era and in the subjects of the articles, beginning with Zuhayr b. Abī Sulmā and followed by a number of pre-Islamic poets, who are apparently not members of the caliphal houses (al-ʿIṣfahānī, 2000, vol.10, 238–vol.11, 39). The organisational pattern of articles in the third part of the Aḡānī is similar to its counterpart in the first part, *viz.*, songs serving as the introductory tool for articles (Kilpatrick 2003, 263–264).
Although the articles in each of the three parts of the Aghānī are organised in different ways, each article is an integral unit. An article usually comprises a summary by al-Iṣfahānī of the subject’s name, genealogy, and other important themes in his or her life; reports juxtaposed with poems and songs; and, more often than not, an account of the biographee’s demise.

**AL-IṢFAHĀNĪ’S FANDOM**

As a book of songs, the Aghānī unsurprisingly takes a certain stance towards different approaches to the performance and interpretation of music, and, here, al-Iṣfahānī goes for Ishāq and his madhab. Al-Iṣfahānī’s inclination towards Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣili is noted by Jalalullāh and Kilpatrick (Jalalullāh 1962, 72–73; Kilpatrick 2003, 16–17). As noted above, upon the request of this raʾīs, al-Iṣfahānī sets out to reconstruct the original song list selected by Ishāq (al-Iṣfahānī 2000, vl.1, 16). In the preface, al-Iṣfahānī states that, for the description of musical settings, he uses Ishāq’s terminology for melodic modes, as opposed to that of Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī (162–224/779–839) (al-Iṣfahānī 2000, vl.1, 15–16). That is, the very raison d’être of al-Iṣfahānī’s compilation of the Aghānī is partly to do with Ishāq, and Ishāq’s nomenclature for musical modes lays the foundation for it (Kilpatrick 2003, 16–17).

Ishāq offers al-Iṣfahānī not only musical nomenclature but also a mine of information about music, musicians, and poets (Fleischhammer 2004, 89–91). Al-Iṣfahānī admires Ishāq’s versatility in various disciplines and asserts his nonpareil standing among musicians: His place in knowledge, adab, transmission, poetry, and the remaining commendable things is too well-known to need further illustration. As for music (al-gināʾ), it was the least remarkable expertise of his […] While there are his matches and equals in other fields of his learning, no one can be his match in this regard [music] (al-Iṣfahānī 2000, vl.5, 190).

In addition, al-Iṣfahānī’s veneration for Ishāq is also expressed in his preference for Ishāq’s madhab of musical performance over Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī’s. Baghdad in the ninth century AD was not only a flourishing centre of studies but also a land of opportunities for men of letters, poets, and musicians. In this context, Ishāq and Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī made their names for posterity as literati of versatile talents, above all in their musical achievements (Bencheikh 1975). Ishāq’s madhab adheres to the original performances of the composers and condemns any modification (al-Iṣfahānī 2000, vl.10, 59). On the other hand, Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī and his partisans,

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5 See also the impressive number of references to Ishāq in the indices: (al-Iṣfahānī 2000, vl.25, 45–46).
such as Muḥāriq or Šāriya, hold that they can alter the performance of the traditional songs (al-ʿgināʾ al-qadīm) in whatever way they like (al-ʿĪsfahānī 2000, vl.10, 59–60). Al-ʿĪsfahānī’s attitude towards the disputes between the two camps is clear: “He [Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī] is the first who corrupted the traditional songs. He paved the way for people to audaciously change them” (al-ʿĪsfahānī 2000, vl.10, 59). Al-ʿĪsfahānī criticised Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī’s innovation as follows:

He [Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī] found his supporters amongst those who want to ease the acquisition of songs, hate its hardship and its difficult particulars of compound modes (adwār), and opine, out of ignorance, that to learn the original performance of the refined songs is time-consuming (al-ʿĪsfahānī 2000, vl.10, 60).

As a result of Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī’s and his supporters’ innovation, al-ʿĪsfahānī laments, the traditional songs are modified generation by generation and are thus no longer performed in the original way (al-ʿĪsfahānī 2000, vl.10, 60). Despite Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī’s musical talents and extraordinary sound, al-ʿĪsfahānī is convinced that the victor of the competition between the two is Ishāq: “[…] Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī’s corpus is hardly known or transmitted, except for a few items. What he [Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī] said about the comparability of the modes (taḡnis al-ṣarāʾīq) is abandoned and Ishāq’s magḥab is followed” (al-ʿĪsfahānī 2000, vl.10, 124). As the authority of Ishāq’s magḥab, through the test of time, has been established, al-ʿĪsfahānī, with his use of Ishāq’s terminology, hides nothing of his affiliation with this musician.

As al-ʿĪsfahānī explicitly articulates his admiration for Ishāq and his approval of his magḥab, it can be argued that his fandom also determines his editorial decisions, especially when it comes to the alḥār disfavouring Ishāq. In what follows, we will see how al-ʿĪsfahānī, through juxtaposition and repetition of the reports, offsets the effect of the unfavourable account to leave Ishāq’s aura impeccable in the biography of Ibn Surayğ.

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE BIOGRAPHY OF IBN SURAYĞ**

ʿUbayd b. Surayğ, a mawlā of Turkish origin, was a Meccan singer, active from the time of ʿUṭmān (r. 23–35/644–655) to the reign of Ḥišām (r. 105–125/724–743) or until after the death of al-Walīd b. Yazīd (r. 125–126/743–744). His clientage (walāʾ) is disputed, but it is certain that he was associated with Qurašī notables, such as al-Ḥakam b. al-Muṭṭalib al-Maḥzūmī. He learnt singing from Ibn Miṣḡah and was the first singer to play Arabic music with Persian lutes. He is regarded one of the

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6 On the meaning of adwār, see: (Sawa 2015, 141-144).

7 On the meaning of "ʿginā", see: (Sawa 2015, 66-67).

The biography of Ibn Surayğ in the Agânî begins with genealogical information on the subject — the clarification of his wâla’ — as well as his physical appearance, and then proceeds to his professional career and his status amongst the musicians (al-Iṣfahâni 2000, vl.1, 194–207). A discussion between Iṣḥaq and Ibrâhîm b. al-Mahdi on the number of Ibn Surayğ’s songs is interposed, before the article returns to reports about the subject (al-Iṣfahâni 2000, vl.1, 208–211). Following this is Ibn Surayğ’s association with his contemporaries, most prominent of whom are ‘Umar b. Abî Rabî’a, Ġârîr, al-Âhwaṣ, al-Gârîd, Ma’bad, and two caliphs, al-Wâlid b. ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 86–96/705–715) and Yazid b. ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 101–105/720–724) (al-Iṣfahâni 2000, vl.1, 211–234). Then, the article focuses on the reception of Ibn Surayğ’s songs, with an emphasis on the legality of music (ruṣṣat al-mûsîqâ) (al-Iṣfahâni 2000, vl.1, 234–246). Finally, it ends with the account of Ibn Surayğ’s death and the story of two Marwânîd men visiting his tomb as an act of pilgrimage (al-Iṣfahâni 2000, vl.1, 246–249).

A notable feature in this article is the recurring reference to Ibn Surayğ’s singing style being imitated by Ma’bad, another renowned musician contemporary with him. There are four aḥbâr, scattered throughout this article, set in different contexts but all relating that, whenever Ma’bad performs well, he says: “I am Surayğî today (anâ al-yawm Surayğî!)” (al-Iṣfahâni 2000, vl.1, 196 [the first report], 214–215 [the second], 227 [the third], 228 [the fourth]) No doubt, this repetitive element reiterates Ma’bad’s reverence for Ibn Surayğ and, thus, underscores the latter’s musical proficiency and status. However, the function of this repetition extends beyond this and relates to a report concerning the debate between Iṣḥaq and Ibrâhîm b. al-Mahdi over whether Ibn Surayğ ever imitated Ma’bad’s style.

The third report in the biography of Ibn Surayğ, in which the key phrase “I am Surayğî today” is found, features in the debate narrated by Yûsuf b. Ibrâhîm (d. 265/879), the witness to the dialogue between Iṣḥaq and Ibrâhîm b. al-Mahdi. According to Yûsuf b. Ibrâhîm, Iṣḥaq once claimed that Ibn Surayğ imitated Ma’bad’s style in a melody (hâqî sawt qad tama’ bada fihi Ibn Surayğî). In response to Iṣḥaq’s statement, Ibrâhîm b. al-Mahdî refutes:

I cannot believe, O Abû Muḥammad [the agnomen of Iṣḥaq], with your mastery of music and your knowledge, that you just said that Ibn Surayğ imitated Ma’bad, while Ma’bad, whenever performing well, claims: “I became Surayğî.” God has made Ibn Surayğ too good to do that [that is, imitating Ma’bad] and elevated him above from such a thing. I seek the shelter of God
for you, who thinks like this concerning Ibn Surayğ (qad ağnā Allâh Ibn Surayğ ʿan hāḏā wa-rafaʿa qadrahu ʿan miḻihi wa-uʿḏuka bi-llâh an tastaṣʿ ir miḻluhu fi Ibn Surayğ).

In Yūsuf b. Ibrāhīm’s account, Ishāq did not defend himself nor rebut Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī’s response, and did not say anything more than: “This is what people said. I did not say that because I believe so, but spoke it as a custom” (al-Īsfahānī 2000, vl.1, 227).

The recurrent motif in all these four reports seems to confirm the prominent position of Ibn Surayğ, which is already accentuated in other reports (al-Īsfahānī 2000, vl.1, 197, 206, 225, 228–230, 234–235, 242–246). When read together with the debate between Ishāq and Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī — in which Ishāq is left defenceless in the face of Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī’s reprimand — it seems, at first glance, that al-Īsfahānī concurs with his idol’s opponent. That is, it is Maʿbad who imitates Ibn Surayğ, not the opposite, as Ishāq claims. As a result, Ishāq is wrong, and thus inferior to his interlocutor, Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī.

However, a careful examination of these reports, including their isnāds, reveals that Ishāq knows this fairly well. Ishāq is well-informed of the fact that Maʿbad used to exclaim “I am Surayğı today” when he was satisfied with his performance, because the first and second reports, in which this key phrase occurs, are narrated by Ishāq. By juxtaposing these two reports derived from Ishāq before the report by Yūsuf b. Ibrāhīm about debate between Ishāq and Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī, al-Īsfahānī stresses Ishāq’s awareness that Maʿbad is second to Ibn Surayğ and thus undermines the reliability of the third report by Yūsuf b. Ibrāhīm. In other words, given al-Īsfahānī’s admiration for Ishāq, as mentioned above, it may be argued that the placement of these reports is designed to mitigate the effect of Yūsuf b. Ibrāhīm’s account.

What further buttresses this interpretation is the fact that the narrator of the third report, Yūsuf b. Ibrāhīm, was an intimate friend of Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī (Fleischhammer 2004, 107). Al-Īsfahānī narrates via al-Ṣaydānī (d. 324/936) from Yūsuf b. Ibrāhīm, whose works include Ḥjbār al-ṭṭībāʿ and Ḥjbār Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī (Yaqūt 1936, vl.5, 154–160; Fleischhammer 2004, 66, 107; Ibn al-Nadīm 1988, 182). Given Yūsuf b. Ibrāhīm’s close association with Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī, the head of the magḥab of innovative musical style, as opposed to the traditional one advocated by Ishāq, according to al-Īsfahānī’s musicological epistemology, the third report in question seems to have a polemical purpose. That is, through Ishāq’s uncritical reception of the misconception and Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī’s rebuttal, Yūsuf b. Ibrāhīm is asserting the superiority of the latter. More importantly, al-Īsfahānī is perfectly aware of this and Yūsuf’s advocacy for Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī:
Yūsuf b. Ibrāhim spread reports about what happened between them [Iṣḥāq and Ibrāhim b. al-Mahdi]. I found that their [Iṣḥāq and Ibrāhim] words are embellished by Ibrāhim b. al-Mahdi and composed in his manner of speech (ja-ɰāqadtu kalāmahumā marsūfan rasf Ibrāhim b. al-Mahdi wa-manẓūman naẓm mantiqiḥi). In these [reports] are ferocious prejudice against Iṣḥāq (fiḥā tahāmul ‘alā Iṣḥāq ṣadīd) and stories whose transmitters reveal [their] ignorance of his [Iṣḥāq’s] proficiency (wa-ḥikāyāt yansuḥub man naqalahu ilā al-ġuhl bi-ṣināʿatihi). Iṣḥāq was far from being something like this. So, I knew that Ibrāhim made that up, fabricated [those stories, or reports] and ordered Yūsuf to spread them amongst people so that the memory that favours him was circulated in their [people’s] hands (wa-amara Yūsuf bi-naṣrīhi fi al-nās li-yadūra fi aydihim dīkr lahu yafḍulu bihi) (al-Iṣfahānī 2000, vl.10, 124).

Furthermore, there is a reference to al-Iṣfahānī’s disagreement with Ibrāhim b. al-Mahdi’s statement that Ibn Surayq was too good to imitate Ma’bad. When he later mentions this report, in which Ibrāhim b. al-Mahdi refutes Iṣḥāq, in the section on the song collection titled “Seven Songs of Ibn Surayq (Ṣabʿat Ibn Surayq)”, al-Iṣfahānī comments: “Abū Iṣḥāq Ibrāhim b. al-Mahdi did not do justice to Ma’bad in this statement, because Ma’bad, although revering Ibn Surayq and treating him rightfully, is neither lesser than him nor inferior to him” (al-Iṣfahānī 2000, vl.9, 206). Then, al-Iṣfahānī cites one example to demonstrate that Ibn Surayq did learn something from Ma’bad and availed himself of the latter’s style (al-Iṣfahānī 2000, vl.9, 206). That is, al-Iṣfahānī’s treatment of these reports in the article on Ibn Surayq not only defends Iṣḥāq’s dignity by discrediting the report from Yūsuf b. Ibrāhim, but also holds his readers back from accepting Ibrāhim b. al-Mahdi’s false claim that Ibn Surayq never imitated Ma’bad.

Finally, alongside use of repetition and juxtaposition, al-Iṣfahānī asserts the superiority of Iṣḥāq by his inclusion of the following report in the article on Ibn Surayq. According to Ḡaḥza, who heard the report from ‘Ali b. Yahyā al-Munaḡṭim, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn sent ‘Ali b. Yahyā al-Munaḡṭim to Iṣḥāq to ask whether the latter’s melody is better than that of Ibn Surayq for the poem, “ṭaṣkakā al-kumaṭ al-ḡary lamnā ḡahātduṭu”. Iṣḥāq said that he never reached the level of Ibn Surayq, in spite of all his efforts. ‘Ali b. Yahyā returned with Iṣḥāq’s reply, upon which Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn remarked: “By God, he does know that his melody is better, but he prejudices himself for the sake of Ibn Surayq (wa-laqad tahāmala li-Ibn Surayq ʿalā nafsīhi), as he does not let go of his partisanship for the old school (al-qudamāʾ)” (al-Iṣfahānī 2000, vl.1, 197). Then, Ḡaḥza states in his report that ‘ʿAli b. Yahyā commented:

Muḥammad was right, as it is seldom that a song is sung in two melodies with the better one being dropped. Today, what is in people’s hands is the melody of
Ishāq and Ibn Surayğ’s is left out. Few hear of his [Ibn Surayğ’s] melody except for the old women and the masters of singers (al-İsfahâni 2000, vl.1, 197).

The remarks of the protagonist in this report, Muḥammad b. al-Husayn, which assert Ishāq’s superiority over Ibn Surayğ, present a sharp contrast between this report and that of Yūṣuf b. Ibrāhīm. By including this report alongside the four reports with the recurrent motif, al-İsfahâni offsets the effect of Yūṣuf b. Ibrāhīm’s polemical account. Or, at least, he potentially makes all the reports less reconcilable and thus prevents his readers from being misguided by Yūṣuf b. Ibrāhīm’s report.

CONCLUSION

To sum up the results of the analysis above, although al-İsfahâni does not explicitly declare his favouritism towards Ishāq in the article on Ibn Surayğ, it seems likely that he makes an attempt not to leave readers with the impression of Ishāq as ignorant or inferior. This is achieved by the use of repetition and juxtaposition. By placing the first and second reports, which insinuate Ishāq’s awareness of the relationship between Ibn Surayğ and Ma’bad, before the propagandistic report from Yūṣuf b. Ibrāhīm, al-İsfahâni causes an inconsistence in the narratives, which, to a certain extent, impugns the validity of the third report. Furthermore, with the account that illustrates Ishāq’s supremacy over Ibn Surayğ, who is considered one of the founders of classical Arabic music, al-İsfahâni establishes his idol’s invincibility, despite Yūṣuf b. Ibrāhīm’s malicious report.

As Kilpatrick remarks on al-İsfahâni’s editorial hand, “[...] his placing of the material in the Ağañi is not necessarily arbitrary”(Kilpatrick 2003, 278). The article analysed in this study confirms that al-İsfahâni’s building up of narrative is meaningful and far from “arbitrary”. As shown above, one underlying leitmotif that governs al-İsfahâni’s editorial concerns — his fandom for the musician, Ishāq — indeed impacts upon his treatment of aḥbār. Ishāq’s influence can be extrapolated from his compelling presence in the Ağañi, whose compilation was initiated partly because of Ishāq and among whose sources Ishāq is a ubiquitous presence. In addition, al-İsfahâni explicitly expresses his admiration for this musician and prefers him over his opponent, Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī. The impact of his veneration of this singer can be perceived in the article on Ibn Surayğ, where al-İsfahâni subtly contextualises the report of the debate that presents Ishāq in a negative light. Disagreeing with the validity of Ibrāhīm b. al-Madi’s denial that Ibn Surayğ ever imitated Ma’bad’s style and aware of the tendentiousness of Yūṣuf b. Ibrāhīm’s narrations, al-İsfahâni, through repetition of a certain element and careful juxtaposition of reports, creates narrative incoherence. Thus, the authenticity of Yūṣuf b. Ibrāhīm’s account is tacitly cast into doubt. Furthermore, with the inclusion of the report that accentuates
Ishâq’s superiority over Ibn Surayğ, one of the founding fathers of Arabic classical music, al-Iṣfahânî not only presents Ishâq in a positive light but also reinforces his unfaîtering status in face of İbrâhîm b. al-Mahdî’s (via Yûsuf b. İbrâhîm) attempted sabotage.

This analysis illustrates how al-Iṣfahânî asserts his perspectives in the Ağaînî, specifically, his partisanship for Ishâq. By examining al-Iṣfahânî’s repetition and juxtaposition of material, this study not only reveals the authorial voice and its impact upon the text, but also a new perspective into this Diwân al-ʿarab. This approach – an examination of the compiler’s editorial activities – can be used to explore different perspectives in the Ağaînî, which is a work of multi-valence and multi-vocality, as well as other Arabic compilations (Su 2016, 133–250; Kilpatrick 1997, 94–128). Given the importance of the Ağaînî as a source for Arabic literature and history, it is crucial to recognise al-Iṣfahânî’s editorial concerns and principles, which need to be taken into consideration when we use it to reconstruct the past. Furthermore, a detailed investigation into how compilers in general represent and reconfigure the past will further our understanding of the nature of Islamic historiography and its development.

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