Lamiyya by al-Shanfarā and its Commentaries: 
Copies Available in the Holdings of the Institute 
of Oriental Manuscripts and the Oriental Department 
Collection, Gorky Research Library

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The article “Lāmiyya by al-Shanfarā and its commentaries: Copies available in the holdings of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts and the Oriental Department collection, Gorky Research Library” reviews the problem of studying and describing oriental manuscripts, which gains more relevance in recent times. This research presents life facts of the famous pre-Islamic poet al-Shanfarā and the features of his most famous work, Lāmiyya. The study focus on the copies of this work, as well as copies of its commentaries stored in the holdings of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts and the Oriental Department collection, Gorky Research Library, SPbSU. The poetry of al-Shanfarā is traditionally compared with classical muallaq, where the authors praise tribal patriotism against the main idea — a life in exile. Lāmiyya got its name for the special repetitive rhyme. Among European researchers, this qaṣīda is also known as “The Desert Song”. The authors analyze the features of various copies of al-Shanfarā’s work and discuss the most important aspects of various commentaries on his work. The article provides illustrations of some sheets of al-Shanfarā’s copies and copies of Lāmiyya commentaries. The writing by al-Shanfarā was subjected to extensive research by national, Western and Arab experts. Through analyzing the most well-known commentaries on Lāmiyyat al-arab, it is possible to evaluate exactly what features call the attention of scholars. In addition, copies of Lāmiyya commentaries stored in manuscript collections deserve an independent careful study and description.

Keywords: codicology, Arabic manuscript, copies, Arabic, pre-Islamic poetry.

The writings of pre-Islamic poets have always aroused persistent interest of researchers. The creative work of al-Shanfarā attracted special attention of European experts, despite the fact that lacking information about the poet in Arab sources until the second half of the 8th century often raised the question of authenticity and his works were suspected to represent the later fakes. Their authorship was occasionally attributed to Khalaf al-Ahnmar, the Iraqi medieval scholar and a connoisseur of ancient Arab poetry [1, p. 58]. However, their recent in-depth analysis made by I. Yu. Krakhkovsky, who referred to Arab sources as well, indicated the presence of extensive specific vocabulary, uncharacteristic of a town man, and therefore confirmed the ancient Arabic origin of qasidas.

No reliable data on al-Shanfarā’s biography is available; it is believed that he died in the first decade of the 7th century. The poet’s nickname Shanfara probably indicates the
exterior feature, i.e., thick lips. According to some sources, his real name was Sabit b. Aus and he belonged to the Azd tribe. Medieval Arabic tradition classifies al-Shanfara as “brigand poet”, calling such wanderers by a generic term suluk/sa‘ alik. Vagabond poets traditionally praised the Bedouin raids, which they took part in [2, p. 66].

Since almost nothing is known about the poet’s life, his name is associated with many legends. For instance, some Arab sources say that the father of al-Shanfara stole his mother from another tribe and was killed later by the Salaman tribe that raised the orphaned future poet. It is believed that al-Shanfara was banished from his tribe and spent his life wandering and struggling with many hardships that tempered his character.

According to another version, al-Shanfara was a slave of the Salaman tribe and once fled, vowing to kill a hundred people from this tribe. Over the long years of his wanderings, he took revenge on ninety-nine enemies and was killed in a battle after that. But the legend says that after his own death al-Shanfara killed the hundredth enemy, who died by tripping over the murdered poet’s skull [1, p. 36, 54].

Tā’abbata Sharran, a vagabond poet and al-Shanfara’s comrade-in-arms mourned the death of his friend in verse [1, p. 53].

Particular attention to the pre-Islamic poets emerged in the Middle Ages. For instance, al-Shanfara is mentioned in “The Unique Necklace” by Ibn Abd Rabbihi, the chapter “The Emerald. The Book of Valor”, where the author quotes the pre-Islamic poet about death on the battlefield: “Don’t bury me. Burying me is forbidden by custom. But be of good cheer, Umm ‘Amir. When my head is carried away, — oh hyena, Take the remains of the dust without fail” [3, p. 249]. In The Book of Misers, al-Jahiz quotes al-Shanfara’s (without mentioning his name) lines in one of the stories: “If my head is cut off, my best part, Other remains will have been left in the desert”. [4, p. 118]. Zakariya al-Qazwini also distinguished al-Shanfara among other poets of the Jahiliyyah period [5, p. 55].

The interest in al-Shanfara’s creative work has only increased over time. Thus, Ahmad Faris Shidyaq published a number of monuments of classical Arabic literature, including al-Shanfara’s writings with numerous interpretations [6, p. 243].

Al-Shanfara, the “exiled poet”, took preference in describing the Bedouin raids. By tradition, his poetry is compared with classical muallaq, where the authors praise tribal patriotism against the main idea — a life in exile [1, p. 36; 7, p. 239]. His most famous qasida Lamiyya includes 68 beyts, consists of several poetic pictures, is written in the tawil meter and reflects the commitment to Bedouin customs traditional for the pre-Islamic works. This work by al-Shanfara is viewed among the best examples of pre-Islamic poetry, as it provides a colorful description of the poet’s lonely life in the steppe, Bedouin raids, the author’s discontent with the doings of his former fellow tribesmen, and praising the free nomadic life.

The most famous al-Shanfara’s writing, Lamiyya got its name for the special repetitive rhyme in the letter “lam”. At the same time, the usual three-part writing style is not followed. It is dedicated to one theme, self-praise of a Bedouin lonely hero [8, p. 139]. Among European researchers, this qasida is also known as “The Desert Song”. The work was translated into European languages more than once; Russian translations were made by I. Yu. Krachkovsky, A. A. Dolmina and A. M. Revich. Al-Tantawi showed interest in al-Shanfara’s poetic works, as mentioned by A. E. Krymsky [6, p. 173].

1 In Arabic sources, the tribe is called Salaman, transcribed “Salman” into Russian.
Many Arab scholars addressed this work and commented on it; the most important are commentaries by medieval scholars, al-Zamakhshari and al-Ukbari.

The Institute of Oriental Manuscripts collection contains two Lamiyya copies (B 1496, sheets 28b–32a and C 780, sheets 76b–77a), as well as a copy of al-Ukbari’s work (B 92, sheets 86a–98a), which represents a commentary-explanation on the al-Shanfara’s qasida.

Fig. 1. Manuscript 1496, fragment (sht. 29b–30a)

Fig. 2. Manuscript 1496, fragment (sht. 30b–31a)
Manuscript B 1496 (sheets 28b–32a) represents a convolute of independent copies of eight different qasidas; one of these is Lamiyya by al-Shanfara. Manuscript size: 20.5*14 cm; the size of included copies (al-Shanfara and al-Ma’arri) is smaller, 18.5*13 cm. Manuscript binding: thin cardboard, glued paper inside. European filigree paper. Handwriting in all copies different, indicative of different calligraphers. Al-Shanfara’s copy in naskh handwriting, carry-over words absent. Copy text fully diacritized. Main body in black ink, some commentaries in red ink. Commentaries placed in margins and between lines.

Manuscript sheets 1a, 9b, 27b, 28a, 33b bear owner’s seal, inscription as follows:

هذا وقف الراجي
فيض الصمدي الشيخ أحمد صباح الدين بن مصطفى الخالدي... بعدما سمعه... علي الدين
1021

This is the property of Raja Fayd al-Samdi al-Sheikh Ahmad Sabah al-Din b. Mustafa al-Khalidi (unlegible) after he heard (unlegible) Ali al-Din 1201.

Copy title with grammatical error, masculine instead of feminine form:

قصيدة لامية للشنفرى وهو عظيم وله شروح كثير

Lamiyya qasida by al-Shanfara’s qasida is great, there are (exist) a lot of commentaries on it.

The text begins with the words:

هذه قصيدة عجيبة تعرف بالامية العرب للشنفرى رحمه الله تعالى وهو في اللغة عظيم الشفتين نقل ابن هشام في تلخيصه ان اسم الشنفرى ثابت بن جابر وانه احد خراب العرب اى لصوصهم والواحد خارب وقال...
This amazing verse named Lamiyyat al-Arab belongs to al-Shanfara, may God have mercy on him! Meaning of his name: thick-lipped. b. Hisham wrote in his work that al-Shanfara's name is Sabit b. Jabir and that he is one of the Arab wanderers. Literary scholars said: the first thing that the next (Arab) generations recognized unanimously was Lamiyyat al-Arab and seven muallaqs. They teach eloquence, educate and develop.

Then follows a reference to al-Zamakhshari’s commentary, who wrote that a proverb about al-Shanfara was created, noting the poet's capability to run fast:

أعدى من الشنفرى

Faster than al-Shanfara.

The colophon text reads as follows:

This impressive qasida (copied) by Ubeid Allah al-Sattar Mustafa Imad was completed when he served in a (land allocation institution) in (unlegible) 186.  

2 It means 1186 year.
The second copy of al-Shanfara's writing is placed in manuscript C 780 (76b–77a), also a convolute. Manuscript size: 22*13 cm. Manuscript binding: leather and cardboard. European paper, good condition, different shades: white and blue. All copies made by one hand, in *naskh* handwriting. Al-Shanfara's copy text fully diacritized; main body in black ink, diacritics in red ink, carry-over words present in all sheets.

The first manuscript page bears owner's seal, inscription as follows:

تملكه العبد الحقير محمد بن عبد الفتاح جميل الخط

*tmekte el-‘abd al-qāhir Muḥammad b. Abī ḥaḏrāt al-ḥāfiẓ*

Belongs to the lamentable slave Muhammad b. Abd al-Fattah — possessor of a beautiful handwriting.

The copy begins with the words:

وَهذِهُ الْقِصَيدَةُ الْمَسْمَىَ بِلَامِيَّةَ الْعَرَب

*waḥḍihi al-qasida masma‘ah li-Lamiyyat al-Arab*

And this *qasida* entitled *Lamiyyat al-Arab*.

Concluding text on sheet 77a not included in traditional colophon:

تمت القصيدة بحمد الله

*timt al-qasida bi-hamd Allāh*

Qasida is ended, thank God!
The first examined commentary on al-Shanfara’s work belongs to al-Ukbari. Abd Allah al-Ukbari (1143–1219 / 535–616 Hijri calendar) was born in the ancient city of Ukbara located near Baghdad. As a child, he suffered smallpox and lost sight, but this did not affect his crave for knowledge: al-Ukbari studied grammar, logic, fiqh, hadiths and tafsirs from famous scholars of his time. Al-Ukbari is the author of over thirty works, where commentary on al-Shanfara’s writing is of particular interest.

This is a linguistic commentary that presents an analysis of word forms used by al-Shanfara. Referring to the opinions of famous grammarians, such as Sibawayh and al-Ahfash, the author gives explanations for difficult words and parses toponyms, by analogy with the linguistic dictionaries principle.

Here, al-Ukbari takes the verses from the Quran as examples and also refers to verses by famous poets. Concise presentation makes the most striking feature of al-Ukbari’s commentary. Thus, the text of the commentary is not preceded by the traditional introduction; instead, it starts with the following: Al-Shanfara al-Azdi said … Al-Ukbari borrowed a lot from al-Zamakhshari’s commentary, that’s why we see so much in common between these works.

The manuscript B 92 contains the copy of al-Ukbari’s work (sheets 86a–98a) and is in convolute with copies of four other works. Manuscript size: 20*14.5 cm. Manuscript binding: leather, burgundy ornament. European paper, filigree, solid, smooth, flavescent. Naskh handwriting, carry-over words present. The first copy in the convolute probably made by another calligrapher, also in a neat beautiful naskh. All Lamiyya beyts, لاق verb and some grammatical features highlighted in red ink.

Copy text contains small number of margin commentaries in black ink.

Calligrapher’s name missing. Sheet 01 bears owner’s seal, inscription as follows:

Fig. 6. Manuscript 92 (86 a), fragment
Passed (this manuscript) by legal purchase thanks to God Almighty and his generosity into the hands of a poor slave through the kindness of his wealthy sayyid Muhammad Amin b. Ramadan b. Rajab in 1201.

The same sheet indicates:

This commentary on (the writing) Lamiyyat al-Arab belongs to the honorable noble Sheikh Abu al-Baqa al-Ukbari al-Misri. May God Almighty be merciful to him with great mercy. Amen. And may God bless and greet our sayyid — Muhammad, his family and his companions.

And further:

And the pearls (works) that were written on the commentary of Lamiyyat al-Ajam also (will be given) 13 sheets after.

This refers to another copy, Lamiyyat al-Ajam, also included in the convolute.

Then:

Abu Hazil al-Allaf said: It is impossible, neither in the pearls of speech, nor in the structure of nature, nor in love for size, feeling or opportunity or (unlegible) to escape the craving of a lover for a loved one.
وسلم
وصحبه
اله
وعلى
محمد
سيدنا
علي
الله
وصلى
العرب
بلامية
الموسومة
القصيدة
آخر
وهذا

1082
سنة
 أشهر
قدره
والمعظم
رمضان
من
عشر
ثامن
الثلاث
صحوة
واخرا
اول

م好运

This is the end of qasida called Lamiyyat al-Arab. And may God bless and greet our sayyid — Muhammad, his family and his companions. I thank God on the eighteenth day of Ramadan, in the great month, in 1082.

Three copies of Lamiyyath commentaries authored by al-Zamakhshari (780), al-Mubarrad (781) and al-Turki (739) are stored in the Oriental Department collection, Gorky Research Library, SPbSU.

Abu al-Qasim Mahmoud b. Umar b. Muhammad b. Umar al-Hoarizmi al-Zamakhshari was born in Zamahshar in 1075 (469 Hijri) into a poor family. He attended primary school and also studied under the guidance of his father. Already in his early years, al-Zamakhshari wrote several philological works. Al-Zamakhshari visited Iraq, Syria, Khorasan, had a large number of students. The scholar died in Khorezm in 1144 (538 Hijri) after returning from Mecca [9, p. 197].

Al-Zamakhshari’s commentary on the writing of al-Shanfara is considered the most complete work of this kind. The author carefully analyzes the grammatical and morphological features of the text, taking the famous verses, ayats from the Quran, as well as the most common proverbs as examples. It is noteworthy that al-Zamakhshari used in his interpretations not only the literary Arabic, but also its dialects. The scholar referred to the writings of Sibawayh, al-Ahfash, al-Mubarrad, and others. Moreover, al-Zamakhshari made a phonetic analysis of Lamiyya’s text, among other things.
The copy of al-Zamakhshari's works is included in Manuscript 780 (44 sht.). Copy title:

اعجب العجب في شرح لامية العرب للزمخشري

Most surprising in the interpretation of Lamiyyat al-Arab (authored) by al-Zamakhshari.


Sheet 1, colophon:

هذا كتاب أعجب العجب في شرح لامية العرب لاستاذ الزمان وفريد العصر والاوان فخر خوارزم محمود بن عمر الزمخشري رضي الله عنه وارضاه وجعل الجنة منقلبه ومثواه امين

This book is the most amazing (among) commentaries on Lamiyyat al-Arab. It belongs to the only master of his era, the pride of Khorezm, Mahmud b. Omar al-Zamakhshari. May God be pleased with him and grant him a place in Paradise. Amen.

Copying date(s) and calligrapher name not specified.

I. Yu. Krachkovsky notes that despite the fact that the main text was made by other person, commentaries' comparison and extraction were made by al-Tantawi, as evidenced by the respective notes [10, p. 106].
Al-Zamakhshari focuses on the grammar and syntax of al-Shanfara’s writing, using diverse examples from the Quran.

Al-Mubarrad refers to the most prominent representatives of the Basri school of grammar; he is the author of the famous “al-Kamil” book dedicated to Arabic linguistics. Abu al-Abbas Muhammad b. Yazid b. Abd al-Akbar, or al-Mubarrad, was born in Basra in 826 (210 Hijri) and died in Baghdad in 898 (286 Hijri). He studied with the outstanding scholars of his time, first in Basra and later in Kufa. Most of his activities relate to commenting on Sibawayh’s works. Al-Mubarrad was highly esteemed by his contemporaries who called him the most knowledgeable grammarian next to Sibawayh; al-Hamawi noted his excellent knowledge of grammar, eloquence and calligraphic handwriting. A long-lasting dispute between al-Mubarrad and Tallab, his opponent from Kufa, developed into a traditional rivalry between the Basri and Kufi schools of grammar.

Al-Mubarrad focused on the interpretation of words in al-Shanfara’s beyts, completely avoiding grammatical and morphological problems. Moreover, the authorship of Lamiyyath commentary, attributed to al-Mubarrad, is questioned by the experts.

Fig. 12. Manuscript 781, fragment

Al-Mubarrad’s copy is contained in Manuscript 781 (sht. 9). Manuscript in good condition, size: 24*17.5 cm. Binding: soft cardboard. European paper, with filigree. Text in black ink, Lamiyya beyts highlighted in red ink and numbered. Handwriting mixed, naskh (prevailing) and rukaa (ruq ʿah). Carry-over words present. Margin commentaries in black and red ink.
Fig. 13. Manuscript 781, fragment

Fig. 14. Manuscript 781, fragment
This is a commentary on the Lamiyyat al-Arab by scholar linguist Abu al-Abbas Muhammad b. Yazid, known as al-Mubarrad, may God be merciful to him with great mercy.

Then follows a few poetic beyts authored by al-Mubarrad.

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 15. Manuscript 781, last sheet

I. Yu. Krachkovsky notes that “this copy served as the core source for publication of al-Shanfara’s poem in The Arabic Reading Book compiled by V.F. Girgas and V.R. Rosen” [10, p. 106].

The third manuscript copy (739, 28 sht.) containing Lamiyya commentary by Muhammad b. al-Hussein b. Lajik al-Turki3 is also stored in the SPbSU library collection.

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3 No data on al-Turki were found.
The most notable features of Lamiyya commentary by al-Turki, is that maximum attention is paid to the interpretation of difficult words: al-Gharib (Difficult words) section provides descriptions of birds, animals, etc., whose names are found in al-Shanfara’s writing; the meaning of each beyt is explained in al-Ma’na (Meaning) section. Unlike other commentators, al-Turki refers to scholars’ works only rarely and gives almost no example.
citations from famous poems. The author provides some grammar notes, antonyms, but only occasionally.

Manuscript size of: 22.5*16.5 cm. Thin leather binding. European filigree paper, flavescent. Main text in black ink, some words in red ink. Naskh handwriting, carry-over words present. Copy text diacritized. Main body in black ink, some commentaries in red ink. Commentaries placed in margins.

Sheet 1 shows two poetic beyts by Shams al-Din Muhammad b. Afif al-Din Suleiman b. Ali al-Tilimsani, a famous wit of that time:

الشاب الظريف ابن العفيف التلمساني
يا ساكنا قلبي المعني وليس فيه سواك ثاني
لأي معنى كسرت قلبي وما اتقن فيه ساكنان

Oh you living in my tired heart
There is no one but you in it (heart)
Why did you break my heart?
Two did not meet in it.

Sheet 1b begins with the traditional basmala:

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
قال الشيخ الإمام العلامة محمد بن الحسين بن لاجك التركي عفا الله عنه وغفر له امين
الحمد لله رب العالمين . وصلى الله علي سيدنا محمد وعلي اله وصحبه اجمعين. وسلم تسليما كثيرا الي
يوم الدين اما بعد فاني لما رأيت الناس اجمعوا على تفضيل القصيدة المعروفة بالدم العرب وقد اعتني بشرحها

4 Al-Tilimsani was a Cairo-born poet, lived and died in Damascus (1263–1289). His father was also a poet from Tilimsan city in Algeria.
End.

This commentary is completed successfully thanks to God and His help.

Information on calligrapher name and copying date absent.

The writing by al-Shanfara was subjected to extensive research by national, Western and Arab experts. Through analyzing the most well-known commentaries on Lamiyyat

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5 This refers to Lamiyyat al-Arab.
Fig. 20. Manuscript 739, fragment

Fig. 21. Manuscript 739, last sheet
al-arab, we can evaluate exactly what features are the most intriguing and call the attention of scholars. In addition, copies of Lamiyya commentaries stored in manuscript collections deserve an independent careful study and description.

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известного произведения — Лямийа. Основное внимание уделяется спискам этого сочинения, а также спискам комментариев на него, хранящимся в фонде Института восточных рукописей и в собрании Восточного отдела библиотеки им. Горького СПбГУ. Поэзия Аш-Шанфары традиционно противопоставляется произведениям авторов классических муаллак, вспевающих родовой патриотизм, из-за основной идеи — жизни в изгнании. Лямийа приобрела свое название благодаря особой повторяющейся рифме. Среди европейских исследователей получило распространение и другое название касыды — «Песня пустыни». Авторы проводят анализ особенностей различных списков сочинения аш-Шанфары, а также рассматривают наиболее важные моменты различных комментариев на его произведение. В статье приводятся иллюстрации некоторых листов списков сочинения аш-Шанфары и списков комментариев на Лямийу. Несмотря на то что сочинение аш-Шанфары уже неоднократно подвергалось исследованию отечественных, западных и арабских специалистов, анализ наиболее известных комментариев на Лямийат ал-араб позволяет оценить, какие именно особенности привлекали внимание ученых. Кроме того, хранящиеся в рукописных фондах списки сочинений-комментариев на известное произведение аш-Шанфары, сами по себе служат тщательного изучения и описания.

Ключевые слова: кодикология, арабская рукопись, списки сочинения, арабский язык, доисламская поэзия.

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