

This is an English translation of a wonderful and rare primary source identified by Eric Schluessel, a professor at George Washington University. It is a poem by one of Albert von Le Coq's Muslim guides in praise of his leadership of the expedition, thus making it an extraordinarily rare example of the "voice of the voiceless." I am including the original introduction provided by Dr. Schluessel when he used this source in his own course.

## “A Poem of Praise for the Expedition, by Obulmahdi of Karakhoja”

From Albert von Le Coq, *Sprichwörter und Lieder aus der Gegend von Turfan mit einer dort aufgenommenen Wörterliste* (Baessler-Archiv. Beiträge zur Völkerkunde, Beiheft 1; Leipzig und Berlin: B.G.Teubner, 1911), 68–78. [Digitized by the Tōyō Bunko](#). Translated by Eric Schluessel. (Most recent draft: February 10, 2021.)

### Introduction by the Translator

I ran across this poem while combing through the Albert von le Coq materials in preparation for our “Graverobbers” class. As far as I know, no scholar has mentioned it in the 110 years since Albert von le Coq published it, and you are the first people to read it in English.

This poem was penned by Mullah Obulmahdi (< Arabic *Abū 'l-Maḥdī*), a Turkic-speaking Muslim man from Karakhoja in the oasis of Turfan. Today, we would describe Obulmahdi as an “Uyghur.” He referred to himself simply as a *Musulmān*, literally meaning “Muslim.” Albert von le Coq employed Obulmahdi as a tutor to help him learn to read and write the local language. Again, we would today refer to this language as “Uyghur,” but Von le Coq and Obulmahdi called it “Turkī,” “the language spoken by Turks.” You can see an image of the original poem, as it was written, on the last page.

Obulmahdi wrote this poem for Von le Coq, who later included it in a collection of proverbs and poems from the region, along with a German translation. I have included Von le Coq's own translation notes here where they are relevant—they are in the footnotes in [square brackets].

Consider Obulmahdi's perspective in this poem, what he expresses, and who his intended audiences might be. What can we infer from this text? How does it relate to the characterization of the explorer-worker relationships in *The Compensations of Plunder* and *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road*? It may be helpful to read the poem twice.

The existence of this poem, incidentally, is a special surprise for me. In the summer of 2014, during a month of research at the Institute for Oriental Manuscripts (*Institut Vostochnix Rukopisie*) in St. Petersburg, Russia, I noticed a short, rough manuscript on Russian notebook paper written in vernacular Turkic. It had evidently been on the shelf since 1913, and it turned out to have been fundamentally misidentified in terms of its contents and even its title. As it happened, this notebook contained the autobiography of a man named Obulmahdi from Karakhoja, Turfan. This Obulmahdi described his own experiences of the Qing reconquest of 1877, the destruction and poverty that followed, and the personal successes and tragedies that followed, including the tribulations of a series of marriages that created a large, unruly blended family. To be honest, for a long time, I thought it might be a work of fiction—Obulmahdi described himself as a half-educated con man with a bad attitude who only gradually grew out of his youthful rebellion, and even then fell into debt and found himself in prison. It just seemed a bit outlandish. However, given the circumstances of his life, his rather uncommon name, and certain idiosyncracies in the writing, I think that Von le Coq's tutor must be the same individual.

### Translation

1 The king of the country called Berlin  
Sent to Turfan three esteemed persons

Their leader is called Doctor Efendi<sup>1</sup>  
Who collects papers and paintings everywhere

5 They call him “Le Coq *Beg*”<sup>2</sup>; he’s a great man—  
Taking pictures and papers is his service to the king.

When he takes him paintings, and papers and frescoes,  
The king will grant a great crown<sup>3</sup> upon his head.  
His guns are loaded; he understands shooting perfectly.  
10 He cannot bear to pass a moment in idleness.

Every day he hires fifteen men to labor  
Carrying their hoes and spades to a ruined city<sup>4</sup>  
While the man named Johann—he’s the cook—stays behind  
The workers take their money and make the evening last

15 The people of this country, we’re baffled by this behavior  
Having taken such pains to seek out paintings and papers  
Some days he fills several crates up with paintings  
Wherever he went, we went with, and returned with

We asked, “Hey, Efendi! What are you going to do with these pictures?”  
20 Said he, “If we get them pictures, they will make me lord of someplace.”  
By day, he seeks out pictures; by night, he writes things down  
Getting snags and tears on all the clothes he wears

We thought he might be a Russian, but now we know he isn’t  
“Russia is close,” he says; “Our country is far,” he says.  
25 When we asked, “Where are you from?” “From a place near Rum,”<sup>5</sup> he says.  
If we find a painting, he takes it. “We have need of these,” he says.

The King of Germany, he won’t kill a criminal.  
If he keeps collecting like this, nothing will remain in the ruined cities.  
With paper and paintings, forty whole trunks were filled  
30 Paper and paintings, he cannot have his fill of them!

As for Le Coq *Beg*, he’s a kind and friendly man  
Who has the keys to the treasure in his hand  
If he likes the paper you give him, he will give you money for it  
If he doesn’t like the paper, he will give it back.

35 If you labor to locate ten paintings,  
He will choose one and leave nine.

Doctor Le Coq *Beg* is wise and learned  
For all his learning he knows every language  
Persian, Arabic, and English encyclopedically he learned

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<sup>1</sup> *efendi*: A term of respect for a gentleman. Particularly common in the Ottoman Empire, but also used in East Turkestan, mainly for foreigners.

<sup>2</sup> *beg*: “lord”; a term of respect indicating low-level nobility

<sup>3</sup> *tumaq*: literally “hat”

<sup>4</sup> *kona shahar*: literally “old city”

<sup>5</sup> *Rūm*: Literally “Rome,” but in the sense of Constantinople and, later, Istanbul.

40 Now he's come to Turfan, the Turki tongue he learned

The clothes that he wears are kingly  
All the ancient idol-temples in Decius City  
Taking idols and papers is for them an excuse/pretext/motive/entertainment<sup>6</sup>  
Why would one ever exert themselves so, oh dear heart?

45 We filled forty cases with them, frescoes and paintings  
His king has given him a six-month deadline  
So day and night he labors tirelessly, suffering  
If he can get these to his land, then he will find fortune

What's inside the chests—it's paintings, isn't it?  
50 Watching the hours, working, that's a deadline, isn't it?  
Wielding the hoe into the night, that's labor, isn't it?  
When his service comes to his king, that's fortune, isn't it?

Now he builds more chests, with an axe  
He's gone several days to the Pass [of Sängim], with Bartus  
55 The Doctor and Bartus came back, with a chest of gold  
Several guns loaded and no fear of robbers

He accounts the expenses, the slave named Johann,  
With many boxes full of it, paper money called coins,  
The coins, they are an inexhaustible credit, this money;  
60 With pen it writes, ceaselessly, this hand.

He exchanges his coins, for yambus<sup>7</sup> and deposits  
He gives not a half-penny to a lazy, useless man  
When they see it, they're surprised, the coins from the [ruined] city  
If people find some papers, they sell them to him, for the cash

65 These men passed a day for ten silver  
Loaded forty crates with paintings, for a thousand silver  
These crates were built with hundreds of inches of board  
The frescoes he has smeared with glue and bound up each in boards

When he finds a big painting, he says, "That won't fit in the crate!"  
70 "Is there a picture, a paper?" he says, not resting even a moment.  
He will not mix up the paintings and the papers.  
When he gives a patient medicine, he gives it freely, he will not sell it.

Bartus chops with his hoe, until the evening he tires not.  
If they keep taking paintings like this, in the ruined city, nothing will remain.  
75 This has cost them thousands of silver—they will not let it go to naught  
You can't buy them for money around here, the things they have taken.

See, oh people, these things they did in vain.  
In vain they passed a winter of life.

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<sup>6</sup> *bahāna*. Le Coq's own footnote on this line wonders about this word, which has multiple possible meanings. He speculates, "Does Obulmahdi mean to say the excavation is 'an excuse for espionage?'"

<sup>7</sup> *yambu*: From Chinese *yuanbao* 元寶, a specially-shaped ingot of gold.

With sweetmeats and sugar, until evening, they will make their meal.  
80 They paid every man two *mithqals*<sup>8</sup> for a day's labor.

From Berlin they came carrying a singing-box.  
When we Muslims saw it, we were amazed.  
As its trumpet played, we drew nearer.  
What one says, it says it, too. All of us folk went to see.

85 He came from his country, through Khoqand,  
And then *we* came up over, through Yarkand.<sup>9</sup>  
And he came along with Bartus, for all tasks.  
When we saw him, he went about with grandees.<sup>10</sup>

As soon as he came to Turfan, the Wang<sup>11</sup> was informed  
90 Therefore all of their matters were set in place  
“Take him to the ruined city,” the Wang said, setting him two escorts.  
From Turfan he went swiftly,<sup>12</sup> and reached the old city.

Now he reached the old city.  
He came to the inn<sup>13</sup> and has his things unloaded.  
95 He said, “I’ll pay any good man.”  
We folks looked at the old plaster<sup>14</sup> [and thought],  
For the fresco paintings, no one had ever paid a cent!

The great Beg came himself and met with them  
And with kindly rewards they spoke a while  
100 And talked about what was needed in this place.  
Then the Wang Beg returned to his palace.

A command came down to the dorgha<sup>15</sup> at Yamshi,  
Riding hard along the road, barely making it,  
It reported the high station of this guest to the dorgha,  
105 And when the dorgha heard this command, he hurried away.

They had a place to stay at the ruined city.  
The great Beg gave them two runners<sup>16</sup> to serve them

These two runners stayed in his service for two months  
And in confusion struck the people with whips  
110 They acted like they were kings  
Active day and night, never sleeping

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<sup>8</sup> *mithqāl*: A small unit of weight, in this case referring to an amount of silver.

<sup>9</sup> Von le Coq notes that Obulmahdi has mistaken the expedition's route—they did not come via India and Yarkand, but through Russia *via* Tarbaghatai.

<sup>10</sup> *dawlātī arkān*: literally “pillars of state,” referring to high officials. If anyone has a better translation for this phrase, I would love to hear it.

<sup>11</sup> The Wang was the hereditary ruler of part of the oasis of Turfan. He held an official rank in the Qing empire.

<sup>12</sup> *dingma*: I am uncertain what this word means, and so was Von le Coq. It is probably a loan from Chinese. In the one other source in which I can locate this word, it seems to mean “swiftly.”

<sup>13</sup> <*dand*> = [*dan*] < Chinese *dian* 店

<sup>14</sup> <*and*>: probably < Persian *andā* “plaster”

<sup>15</sup> *dorgha*: An old Mongol title *darughā*, basically meaning “superintendent.”

<sup>16</sup> *yayi* 衙役: A “*yamen* runner,” one of the low-ranking functionaries of the local Qing or Chinese government.

When Doctor Johann had just come, before Bartus  
He had several hundred bottles of pills with him

In these bottles there were pills of every color  
115 Small and large they were, each for a different ailment  
And he has employed a scald-head,<sup>17</sup> too, with a salve and medicine for him.  
Many fresco paintings have come out; Le Coq Beg has medicine.

When they finished at the ruined city, they went on to Murtuq.  
Getting paintings from Murtuq, they had many results.<sup>18</sup>  
120 Thirty days going to Murtuq, they had not a drop of trouble  
And these events we poecized, recounting them in a *nazm*.<sup>19</sup>

Were we to recount everything, it would not fit upon the page.  
Murtuq is thirty stages away, and you cannot hitch during the day.  
In service of the king, one cannot rest for a moment.  
125 All the paintings from one day cannot fit into the crates.

He gave me paper and said, “Write a *nazm*!”  
In a dozen days I wrote it, “But about what?”<sup>20</sup>  
I wrote a *nazm* from what I knew—what to do about what I didn’t?  
“If it’s bad, I shall turn to the Efendi and say,  
130 “I have made this *nazm* in vain—and must beg the Efendi’s forgiveness.  
“You showed me kindness, but then after, what else will I do to eat?

“If you would have me in your service, then I would come every day;  
“And beg in hope from the Efendi the equipment that I need.  
“If he should grant me one unused bit of equipment  
135 “Then I should accept it with a thousand<sup>21</sup> praises.

“If he were to give me some equipment, I would take it in joy  
“If not, I shall despair, and disappear.”<sup>22</sup>

I wrote this *nazm* in a letter, with a sigh of regret.  
May its meaning be understood at the right time.

140 There was another *nazm*, but it would not fit on the paper, and was poor.  
This inoffensive *nazm* was completed in twenty days.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *taz bash*: Meaning “fool.” The “scald-head,” medically speaking a “sufferer of ringworm,” was a frequent object of ridicule in East Turkestan.

<sup>18</sup> ? *iyān*

<sup>19</sup> *nazm*: A kind of poem.

<sup>20</sup> ? *Az ma qil*

<sup>21</sup> *toqquz toqquz*: Literally “nine nines,” meaning “a great many things given as a gift.”

<sup>22</sup> *oshalurmän*: Probably *och*- “to disappear”

<sup>23</sup> ? Le Coq translates this as “on the twentieth day (of the third month),” and its composition did take place in March. But grammatically, it says “twenty days.”

