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Part 2
Mediaeval and Modern Persian Studies

Edited by
Charles Melville

WIESBADEN 1999
DR. LUDWIG REICHERT VERLAG

SOCIETAS IRANOLOGICA EUROPAEA

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

B.L.	British Library, London
BSOAS	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
CAJ	<i>Central Asiatic Journal</i>
CHI	<i>Cambridge History of Iran</i>
EI ²	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> , 2nd edition
EIr	<i>Encyclopaedia Iranica</i>
IJMES	<i>International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies</i>
I.O.	India Office, London
IQ	<i>Islamic Quarterly</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JESHO	<i>Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JRAS	<i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>
JSAI	<i>Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam</i>
MIDEO	<i>Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales du Caire</i>
REI	<i>Revue des Études Islamiques</i>
ZDMG	<i>Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>

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AMBIGUITY IN MEANING: THE *VAKĪL* IN 18TH AND EARLY 19TH-CENTURY IRAN

Christoph Werner

Probably everyone dealing with Iranian administrative history - whether as a main subject or merely as a sideline - will sooner or later stumble over terminological problems. Quite often there are terms which won't allow a consistent interpretation, presenting instead a fuzzy image of vagueness. The traditional approach to solving these problems has been philological - comparing the contexts in various sources, eliminating contradictions and variants and presenting a somehow convincing and practicable explanation. It is characterised by an unshakeable faith in the stability of what is signified, deliberately ignoring the possibly intentional use of such terms as surrogates or their possible reflection of actual administrative conditions and circumstances, which might themselves be rather vague and undetermined.

The present article tries to combine some general reflections on the nature of these problems with the discussion of one specific example: the polysemic character of the term *vakīl* in its usage during the 18th and early 19th century in Iran. The sources not only use this term to denote quite different offices, but also as an honorary title. A *vakīl* can therefore assume the identity of a highranking provincial official (similar to or replacing a provincial vizier or *mustawfi*), of a financial administrator of lower rank or an appointed arbitrator in urban society. But nevertheless the basic meaning of *vakīl* as "representative" or "attorney" is always present in these definitions, creating a situation where meaning is continuously oscillating between its basic level and its concrete shapings.

GENERAL REFLECTIONS

Historians depend for their work on sources, which are - not in all, but in a vast majority of cases - almost exclusively of a written kind or, to use a term gaining currency, "texts". These can be divided into two broad categories: "remnant texts", usually archival sources or any kind of material not originally composed with a regard to posterity; and "tradition", comprising various productions of the

historiographical genre. In both cases the historian is confronted not only with problems of interpretation, but prior to this with the more fundamental difficulties of understanding the basic meaning of the text. This involves the mastery of imposed diachronic challenges as well as unfamiliar contexts, being further intensified if the language and culture of his research are not his own.

Central to all these problems are questions of terminology, whether one is concentrating either on intellectual or on social history. But whereas in intellectual history the elucidation of terminology serves primarily the process of interpretation, in social and - what concerns us here - administrative history quite often the technical terms used in the text themselves become the focus and actual subject of research.

Of major importance in this context are key terms designating offices, organisations, and administrative functions, as well as juridical, fiscal and economic transactions. In order to reconstruct a comprehensive picture of actual administrative conditions one is bound to concentrate on the definition and interpretation of such key terms. But this approach is not unproblematic: a reconstruction based primarily on fragmented single term definitions might not be very convincing; on the other hand, single terms might not be so easy to define without a preconceived general understanding of their context - a well-known hermeneutic problem.

In many instances one encounters terms which seem to be unruly and reticent, forcing the historian to differentiate between a wide range of obviously contradictory possibilities. The established philological approach quite often leads into an impasse where it seems impossible to rearrange all the painfully ascertained alternative meanings. It is an approach regarding language as directly related to a reality external to itself, but frequently results in the frustrating experience that the text and the reality looked for will not match.¹

¹ For the current discussion among historians working on western history concerning this topic, see the introductory chapter "Historians and language" by P.J. Corfield in *idem* (ed.), *Language, history and class* (London 1991), 1-29, and the debate in the third number of the *American Historical Review* for 1989 (with articles by D. Harlan and D.A. Hollinger, *AHR-Forum*, pp. 581-626). For a conservative position compare B. McCullagh, Can our understanding of old texts be objective?, *History and Theory* 30 (1991), 302-23, who answers his title question in the affirmative while rejecting the influx of modern literary and linguistic theory in the historical sciences.

THE VAKIL IN THE SOURCES

One such term is *vakil*. In addition to its juridical use,² it can not only denote various offices but may moreover be used as an honorary title. I first came across the question of what a *vakil* might be while dealing with a series of documents and biographies incorporated in the *Tārīkh-i Tabrīz* written by Nadir Mirza at the end of the 19th century. In these texts a great number of persons were called *vakil*, in some instances without any further elaboration, sometimes with the additional attribute of *vakīl-i ra'īyat* (deputy of the people) or *vakīl-i māliyat* (tax-deputy). Whereas the office and the function of the *vakil-i ra'īyat* has been described extensively by John Perry as an appointed arbitrator - an ombudsman - in urban society,³ the role and function of a *vakil-i maliyat* or a *vakil* without further denotation seemed to be more obscure.

In early Safavid times the viceroy of Shah Isma'īl was known as *vakil* (short for: *vakīl-i nafs-i nafs-i humāyūn*), but already in the latter part of his reign this high office lost his outstanding singular importance and the position of *vakil* was increasingly confounded with that of the central vizier and other offices. From the period of Shah 'Abbas onwards there is no further mention of a *vakil* in the central administration.⁴

But beside this central position we encounter already in Safavid times the denomination *vakil* for provincial officials. The only scholar who has tried to analyse the signification of *vakil* in this context is Roger Savory, who after a long discussion comes to the following conclusion:

The use of the term *wakīl* in regard to some provincial officials further complicates an already obscure situation. Although in some instances the *wakīl* of a provincial governor is also his *wazīr*, the fact that in other instances an official is simply referred to as the *wakīl* of a provincial governor at least suggests that the provincial *wakīl* had an independent existence, and some function distinct from that of the provincial *wazīr*.⁵

² For a short summary of the concept of *wikāla* see J. Schacht, *An introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford 1964), p. 120.

³ J.R. Perry, Justice for the underprivileged: The Ombudsman tradition of Iran, *JNES* 37 (1978), 203-15. The term is also found as *wakīl al-ra'āyā*.

⁴ R.M. Savory, The Principal offices of the Šafawid state during the reign of Isma'īl I (907-30/1501-24), *BSOAS* 23 (1960), 91-105 (pp. 93f.); *idem*, *Iran under the Safavids* (Cambridge 1980), p. 47.

⁵ *Idem*, Some notes on the provincial administration of the early Šafawid empire, *BSOAS* 26 (1964), 114-28 (p. 127).

In documents from the 18th and early 19th century the situation is complicated further. Karim Khan Zand and later on Fath-‘Ali Shah conferred the office of *vikālat-i māliyāt-i ulkā-yi Āzarbāyjān* or in the latter case simply *vikālat-i kull-i mamlakat-i Āzarbāyjān* on a certain Mirza Muhammad Rafi‘, an urban notable from an influential Tabrizi family.⁶ This description points to an independent and high-ranking provincial office, incorporating in its range the whole province of Azarbayjan and being obviously designed for only one specific person. The importance of this office is further enhanced by the financial benefits bestowed on it: a yearly salary of 100 *tūmān* is not a small amount in the early Qajar period.

In an Afsharid chronicle, the *‘Ālam-ārā-yi Nādirī*, reference is made to a certain Allahverdi Beg Harati as having been the *vakīl-i māliyāt-i dīvān*.⁷ From the immediate context of this reference it is to be understood without doubt that he was a personality with great influence and powers in the Herat of that time.

In other documents from Gurjistan the *vakīl* (without further connotation) is regularly listed among other notables in the *farmans*’ final admonition, following immediately after the governor and preceding the provincial vizier: “*bēglarbēgī va vakīl va vazīr va ‘ummāl-i ulkā-yi Gurjistān*”.⁸ This strongly supports the assumption that a province could furnish the independent office of a financial *vakīl* belonging obviously to the administrative “top-management”.

But regarding other biographies given by Nadir Mirza I came across many other contemporaries also mentioned as *vakīl-i maliyat*. Not all of them could have held the same high office assumed above. The term *vakīl-i maliyat* obviously seems to have been used also as a collective description for financial officials and functionaries of lower rank.

In another *farman* this is explicitly formulated: “... *pānšad nādirī az vukalā-yi māliyāt-i dīvānī va ‘ummāl-i ulkā-yi mazbūr bāzyāft namūda*” (... he shall receive 500 *nādirī* from the deputies of the tax-department and the tax-agents of the mentioned district).⁹ The *vukalā* addressed only collectively in this context are mentioned together with the *‘ummāl* of the province. Whether they really formed a

⁶ Nadir Mirza Qajar, *Tārīkh va juhrāfi-yi dār al-saltana-yi Tabrīz*, ed. Gh. Tabataba‘i Majid (Tabriz 1373/1994): decree by Karim Khan Zand dated Safar 1180 (July 1766), pp. 219f.; and decree by Fath-‘Ali Shah dated Sha‘ban 1214 (December 1799/January 1800), pp. 347f.

⁷ Muhammad Kazim Marvi, *‘Ālam-ārā-yi Nādirī*, ed. M.A. Riyahi (Tehran 1364/1985), p. 994.

⁸ M.A. Todua and I.K. Sams, *Tbilisskaja kollekcija persidskich firmanov* (Tbilisi 1989), p. 280. See also V.S. Puturidze, *Persidskie istoriceskie dokumenty v knigočraniliscach Gruzii* (Tbilisi 1977), p. 35: *‘ālījāh amīr al-umarā al-‘izām bēglarbēgī va vakīl va vazīr va rīsh-sifīdān [...]*. Both documents were issued by Nadir Shah.

⁹ Puturidze, *Persidskie dokumenty*, p. 63: decree issued by Nadir Shah.

distinct group of their own or the designation *vukala* is to be thought of only as synonymous with *‘ummal* cannot be finally decided. This double use and understanding of *vakil* as a highranking single-office on one hand and as a generalised designation in the plural on the other, is certified in another document by Nadir Shah, where both uses of *vakil* are combined. It is addressed to the *vakil* of Erivan, Muhammad Taqī Beg, who is called upon to support the *vukalā-yi māliyāt* in every respect: “*ba-khuṣūṣ-i [...] tamshiyat-i umūr-i muta‘allaq ba-vikālat-i Īravān dar har hāb ba-vukalā-yi māliyāt i‘ānat va imdād-i lāzima namūda.*”¹⁰

As mentioned before, in addition to the *vakil* who was part of the financial and fiscal provincial administration either as the head of a department or as an agent of lower rank, there existed the office of *vakil-i ra‘iyat* (Ar. *wakīl al-ra‘āyā*). In Tabriz this office had been hereditary, remaining almost exclusively in one family. It coexisted beside the aforementioned *vakil-i maliyat* and to judge from the appointed salary it is to be classified as having been on a similar level of prestige and importance. But in addition to this hereditary post there also seem to have been *ad hoc* installments if required by special circumstances. In a decree (dated 1229/1814) ‘Abbas Mirza announces the appointment of Mirza Faraj-Allah as *vakil-i ra‘iyat* following the summoning of a city-council in order to stop the recurring disputes and clashes between the troops residing in the town and the population.¹¹

Beside these distinct uses of *vakil* to denote more or less specific offices, there are of course further uses of this term. One is the traditional use of *vakil* in its juridical sense as proxy in all sorts of legal affairs and transactions. The conferring of personal rights to a chosen deputy (quite often a near relative) has been common practice and is to be encountered regularly in contracts of sale, lease and division of property.

Another is its use as an honorary title as ascertained in a document by Shahrukh Afshar, where a tribal leader of Qaraja-Dagh, Muhammad Kazim Khan, is

¹⁰ “He shall lend the *vukala-yi maliyat* in every respect the necessary help and support with regard to the promotion of the affairs belonging to the Erivan *vakil*-office”, in Todua & Sams, *Tbilisskaja kollekcija*, p. 280.

¹¹ Nadir Mirza, *Tārīkh-i Tabrīz*, p. 375. It might be interesting to note that the understanding of *vakil* as representative of the people is an inherent part not only of the designation of the *vakil-i ra‘iyat*, but also of the *vakil-i maliyat*. This is shown in the descriptions given by Nadir Mirza: whereas the *vakil-i ra‘iyat* had to give his opinion in the affairs of the state’s subjects and his advice was considered to bear authority (*hujjat būd*), the *vakil-i maliyat* had to give his opinion concerning tax assessments in order to avert injustice and oppression from the population (*ki bar mardum hayf va zulm naravad*); *ibid.*, p. 95.

also addressed as *vakil* although there is no reason to believe that he held any of the above mentioned offices.¹² This understanding of *vakil* as a title is also stressed by a list of *laqabs* compiled by I'timad al-Saltana in his *al-Ma'āthir wa'l-āthār*, where the titulation of *vakil* is to be found in various combinations, interestingly enough also in the combination as *wakil al-ra'aya*.¹³ And finally there is Karim Khan Zand - himself the epitome of the *vakil* in the 18th century - who chose the title of *vakil* deliberately as a symbolic statement.¹⁴

THE TERM VAKIL AS A "WILD-CARD"

Following the preliminary results of what we characterised as the philological approach at the beginning, we might divide the different meanings of *vakil* as belonging to three major semantic fields: the juridical, following the traditional definition of the jurists as an agent or proxy especially in legal affairs; the honorary, where *vakil* is used simply as a title, referring to the respective person as representative of either the monarch, the state or the people in numerous metaphorical variants; and the administrative, to denote various - mainly provincial - offices and functions.

It would be easy to terminate the discussion at this point with the conclusion that any *vakil* one encounters in the sources can - with regard to the specific context - be classified and arranged according to the principal possibilities presented above.

But these semantic fields are not to be separated and made distinct so easily. They are not to be understood simply as homonyms, having in fact numerous intersections in common. The actual meaning of a specific "*vakil*" can only rarely be derived from only one field: more often semantic traces of all fields have to be taken into account. A *vakil* primarily denoting an office can easily be construed as an honorary title and vice versa, an arbitrariness which seems to be not wholly void of a meaning of its own.

Especially if the term *vakil* is used in the plural without any further elaborations its concrete meaning seems somehow to evaporate. To give a further example, Rustam al-Hukama describing a court-assembly enumerates the courtiers

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 362f.

¹³ I'timad al-Saltana (Muhammad Husayn Khan), *al-Ma'āthir wa'l-āthār* (Tehran 1306 h.q./1888-9), p. 242.

¹⁴ Perry, "Justice for the underprivileged", pp. 211f.; and *idem*, *Karim Khan Zand. A history of Iran 1747-1779* (Chicago and London 1979), p. 215.

present as follows: “*umarā va vuzarā va vukalā va bāshīyān va muqarribān va mustawfiyān va munshiyān va sardārān [...] har kasī, ba tartīb va niẓām, ba-jā-yi khud īstāda.*”¹⁵ Who may the *vukala* mentioned here have been? Is it justified to assume real officials behind this general listing? As in other instances its principal meaning is probably that everybody belonging to the court was attending. The only concrete information to be obtained from this reference is that there must have been courtiers who were not so easily to be assigned to other categories.

This is important because it might confirm the assumption that the term *vakil* is used quite often as a “wild-card”, a substitute to name someone - or more abstractly - some office or post, otherwise impossible to describe. This surrogate-function of the term *vakil* is not accidental but an inherent part of its basic semantic value. In its lexical core a *vakil* is someone entrusted with a commission, an authorised representative, an agent or proxy. This original meaning is to be found mostly unchanged in the aforementioned legal field. What is fascinating though, is that this basic semantic content is present in all the other fields as well - in the honorary as well as in the administrative. In fact even in its most concrete form as a single *vakil-i maliyat* of a province we can experience a situation where the basic meaning as representative or deputy is not only shimmering through, but forms an indispensable part of how the term is understood as a whole. Understanding might then be conceived in terms of a process where meaning is continuously oscillating between its basic level and its concrete shapings - a process in which actual meaning is constantly deferred.

THE VAKIL AS A PRODUCT OF THE “MIRZA’IC DISCOURSE”

It might therefore be useful, to regard the nature of terminological problems like the one encountered in the case of the *vakil* from a wider background. Many historians fall prey to a general tendency to create a direct link between the actual reality they strive to reconstruct and the textual sources. Sources are seen as a one-to-one representation of reality, as a mirror of facts, and the difficulties to be encountered as only due to the fact that there are not enough references. Such a positivist view denies the possibility that even remnant-sources - like archival material - might be misleading. Despite their given documentary character, they might like all texts

¹⁵ Muhammad Hashim Asaf (Rustam al-Hukama), *Rustam al-tāwarikh*, ed. M. Mushiiri (Tehran 1348/1969), p. 110.

tend to create a reality of their own, perhaps completely independent of the reality one is apt to look for.

But quite apart from the different intent in the writing of 'documentary' material and historiographical works, these texts have something fundamental in common. In both cases their authors usually belong to the small social group often named as "men of the pen". Of course not every bureaucrat participated in the literary or historiographical arena, but on the other hand a great number of those active in the field belonged to the bureaucratic class in one way or another. They not only shared a certain social status and ranking but - what is seminal for the present discussion - a language or a discourse of their own. It is therefore not surprising that the style typical for Persian chancelleries is to be encountered regularly in historiographical works. This language is often conceived as extremely stylised, redundant and flowery, avoiding direct statements or hiding them behind a veil of highly elaborated stereotyped phrases. The historian tends to read these texts - whether documents or chronicles - in search of exactly that type of concrete information which the texts tend to deny.

It might then be another approach to understand these texts as a product of a highly developed discourse which might be labelled a discourse of bureaucrats, of those identified in the 18th and 19th century by the title *mīrzā*; a "Mirza'ic Discourse", not only incorporating a special technical language but also shared forms of communication, values and interests. A discourse forming a closed system comprising certain rules and procedures which enabled its participants to formulate and construct a certain reality or world of experience, while at the same time restricting certain modes of expression.

Such a discourse might also be thought of as incorporating further unpronounced functions which go beyond its immediate communicative intent. Its manifest function of course was to provide a fixed set of linguistic conventions in order to record administrative transactions and orders in an unmistakable and constant way. Its latent functions are more difficult to define because they are linked in an indissoluble connection with various aspects of domination, self-assertion and enclosure. The questions to be asked would then be how to define these latent functions, or more precisely to identify how the specific language of the discourse worked in order to uphold and strengthen these latent functions. By decoding the terminology we would be able not only to find out what the documents might tell us, but equally what meanings and interpretations they are denying.

To take up our example again, the use of terms such as *vakil* might not only reflect a conceptual vagueness in administrative structures and transactions but might also display an unconscious but yet deliberate attempt to present conditions in a certain way. In this instance the use of the term *vakil* allows the covering up of an administrative situation which was not as organised and structured as it should have been in comparison with Safavid conditions, given the fact that those were certainly still present knowledge in the period under discussion, furnishing an unreflected blue-print for the perception of contemporary administrative reality.

Among the latent functions of the “Mirza’ic Discourse” in the post-Safavid period we might then count the tendency to disguise the actual decline of state bureaucracy, the diminution of staff and the merging of offices and functions. Disguising realities provided a certain sense of stability and safety if not for the ordinary population as a whole, then at least for the members of the administrative stratum, the actual participants of the discourse. Its latent function as seen from this perspective seems to be have been primarily self-assurance.

The example of the *vakil* presented here might be regarded as a special case as its usage seems to be regionally restricted, references are scarce and the ambiguity in its meaning is obvious. To develop and prove the above considerations for other more common terms like *mustawfi* or *vazir* is certainly more difficult, but might nevertheless prove to be fruitful and rewarding.