

# Arabic Literature

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## *The Arabic Language*

Of the ancient middle Eastern Semitic family, the only surviving languages are Arabic, Hebrew and Amharic (the last-named being spoken in Ethiopia). They are related to the extinct but historically significant Aramaic, Phoenician and Syriac; more distantly to the Ancient Egyptian of the Pharaohs. An appreciable literature has survived from all these Semitic tongues, as from Himyaritic or South-Arabian, not to be confused with Arabic.

The subject under consideration is the literature preserved in the Arabic language; it is not the literature of the Arabs any more than Latin is necessarily that of the Romans, though originally so. The language in question is Classical Arabic, not to be confused with any of the varieties of spoken Arabic which extend from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf.

Theoretically, Arabic literature commences with pre-Islamic poetry; in practice, Western and Eastern scholars have rejected much of this as a subsequent forgery. The language of Classical Arabic is based on that of the Quran, or Muslim scripture, representing the revelations of the Prophet Muhammad early in the seventh century. The text of the Quran, first memorised and only later recorded, was regarded as sacred: the Divine Word spoken through the mouth of

the messenger was flawless and untarnished, therefore the language in which it was revealed must serve as a pattern of perfection in style.

Some pursued this argument to such lengths that they concluded Arabic must be the only language understood in heaven; others codified the grammar, deducing rules to be observed on the basis of the Quranic text. Within a century of Muhammad's death, his followers had extended the sway of Islam from an obscure Arabian village to an empire stretching from Spain and Morocco in the West to the frontiers of China in the East, embracing a population of Spaniards, Berbers, Syrians, Persians and others.

## *The role of the Persians*

At the time of the Islamic conquest, there were two great powers in the Western world, Byzantium and Persia; by mid-seventh century, the latter was a part of the Islamic Empire, and has been a Muslim country ever since. It only took a century for the axis of the new empire to need removal from the Byzantine to the Iranian sphere of influence, as the capital was transferred from Damascus to Baghdad, where it remained for five centuries.

The desert Arabs, suddenly finding themselves faced with the administrative problems of a vast and multi-racial em-

pire, were obliged to look to their more experienced subjects of alien race for help and orientation. Especially after the transfer to Baghdad, a new city founded in 762, which became the greatest metropolis in the world outside Byzantium, and the wealthiest, the Persian element gained the ascendancy over the political and administrative life of the empire: apart from the all-powerful Caliph, an Arab ruler of the Prophet's family, in whom spiritual and temporal authority were fused, the chief offices went to Persians, who often directed imperial affairs with little interference even from the Caliph himself.

The new subjects had had to make an effort of adjustment, adapting themselves to the new culture based on the Quran and having its roots in Arabia. The Persian language of the time, otherwise called Pehlevi, disappeared to rise from its ashes metamorphosed into Arabic script with a host of alien terms and expressions, remaining nevertheless utterly distinct from Arabic in all its basic forms. For a long time, the language of literature and administration continued to be Arabic, which also had to make adjustments to meet the demands of a complex society far removed from the world of the desert, of tribal vendettas, camels and date-palms. It became enriched by terminology of Persian and Greek origin, being in its nature sufficiently flexible to integrate these expressions and evolve new concepts.

It was, however, not only in language itself that hybrid twins emerged from the daily contact of Arabs and Persians: the Persians were obliged to express themselves in Arabic, so that their works might be read throughout the empire and not merely in a province. A similar situation prevailed in Spain and elsewhere. So it came about that many of the great works of Arabic literature were in fact written by non-Arabs, and the race which had provided the initial impetus contributed only a small part of the literature published in its own language.

### *Connection between Language and Religion*

I have indicated a parallel with Latin, since the language of the Romans came to be the medium of cultural exchange of all the races of Europe, and remained so long after the Romans had vanished from the stage of history. This is however a poor analogy, since in Europe it was the exception, aristocrat or cleric who studied Latin; in the Muslim Empire, Arabic was the sacred tongue of almost the entire population irrespective of race. Even those who could not understand it committed scripture to memory, and they were required to pray in it daily. Only a small minority of the conquered population failed to accept the new faith; the extent of the Islamic Empire was virtually identical with that of the faith, and few Muslims resided outside it until comparatively recently.

In time, portions of the empire asserted their independence and national literatures re-emerged within the world of Islam. This was especially true of the humanistic field: Persian poetry attained a production which was no whit inferior to the output in Arabic, whether quantitatively or in quality. Subsequently the Turks and others made their contributions, but even they usually considered it more elegant to compose in Persian. Arabic remained the language of religion, and continued to be used by Persians and Turks until quite recently for religious and scientific purposes, while all the Islamic peoples used the Arabic script exclusively until the twentieth century.

### *Unfamiliarity with Arabic Literature*

When one reflects that literature was being produced over so wide a portion of the earth's surface for so many centuries by such varied races at the height of a great civilisation, it becomes clear that the amount of books written in Arabic must have been very great indeed. Why then

is this literature comparatively so little known in the West?

Three main reasons may be adduced, as follows:

- 1) The destruction caused by the Mongols;
- 2) Presentation of the literature with an Islamic slant;
- 3) Cost of publication and translation.

When the Mongols invaded the Middle East, mosques were used as stables for their horses, while paper from books served for their bedding. Even the human holocaust is beyond computation; how much worse must have been the fate of libraries in cities razed to the ground?

Many books published by Muslims viewed the world with a specifically Islamic *Weltanschauung*, which can both perplex and repel the would-be European reader; he may often need a basic understanding of Islamic civilisation and custom to appreciate the unfamiliar presentation.

It was not until 1726 that a religious dignitary in Istanbul gave his solemn and considered verdict that the printing press was not dangerous and diabolical. Prior to that time, and often even later, books had to be copied out laboriously in manuscript; apart from their implied scarcity, this also meant frequent errors and variants. The establishment of a critical text entails a great deal of labour, collating far-flung manuscripts; when the work is published, whether in the original or in translation, it is often of interest only to specialists. Without the sponsorship of funds or philanthropists, prospects of remuneration proportionate to the labour involved are discouraging for editor, translator and publisher.

It follows therefore that much literature has vanished, that more lies unknown in manuscript form scattered through the libraries of the world, and that what had been published has often never been translated into a European language.

### *Literature of the Jāhiliyya*

Although we have no evidence that the numerous pre-Islamic poems were committed to writing until some generations after their composition, it would be a mistake to dismiss the entire complex of this literature as forgery; especially since many Eastern nations have maintained a strong tradition of oral literature and the Arabs were famous for their memories as for their appreciation of this poetry. Further, it cannot have sprung ready-formed into the light of history with the appearance of Islam. Whether one can be so certain as to the identity of a given poet is another matter, since plagiarism was no rarer then than elsewhere.

The pre-Islamic age, which of course includes the existing literature in the days of the Prophet, is referred to as the *Jāhiliyya*, or the days of ignorance. As in so many other world literatures, we note the earliest surviving compositions were poetical, already in an advanced state of development. In fact, the sixth century poets are today considered to be the greatest in the entire literature; probably however they have survived in somewhat adulterated form. They were all *qasidahs*, odes more complex in nature than the early Greek epics. Strict rules governed not only the metre but also the successive references to various themes. They expressed intensely personal sentiments, though the limited horizons of the desert offered few subjects. Poems could be panegyric, satirical or erotic, and the satires of tribal poets were much feared by other tribes, since the desert Arab was hypersensitive about his honour and dreaded ridicule.

The most famous of these early poems were the seven *Mu'allaqāt*, said to have been hung in golden letters on the walls of Mecca's chief shrine. Traditionally, the most outstanding poet was *Imrūl Qays*. These early odes have been translated into several foreign languages.

Following this poetry came the Quran, a collection of utterances of the Prophet Muhammad while in an inspired state. They were spread over several years, dealing with a variety of subjects; revelation was appropriate to the needs of the Prophet and the community. Eventually the Quran ('recitation') was collected into a book which paid scant attention to the chronological order of the revelations.

The Quran exerted a far greater influence on the development of the Arabic language and literature than did Shakespeare on that of England or Dante on Italian. This scripture was held to contain everything worth knowing; the comprehension of its allusions and obedience to its prescriptions entailed investigation of history, geography, astronomy and other sciences. From the Quran alone, there developed a whole corpus of theological sciences; nevertheless, this aspect of Arabic literature, important as it is to the Muslims, is that which appeals least to other readers.

### *The Golden Age of Islam*

It was not until the establishment of the new capital of Baghdad, 130 years after Muhammad's death, that great secular literature made its appearance in Arabic. It rapidly developed in the late eighth century into a cosmopolis of wealth and learning. Greek science, long lost to the Western world slumbering in the Dark Ages, was translated, often from Syriac, the empire was scoured for great works and even the Emperor of Byzantium was asked to seek for them. Among by-products with world-wide consequences, we may briefly mention that these Arabic translations found their way to Córdoba in Spain; that city was under a Muslim ruler the most enlightened in ninth century Europe, and Christian princes came to study in its universities the lost learning of the Greeks in Arabic versions. A direct consequence was the European Renaissance.

Meanwhile, in both Baghdad and Córdoba, the two great cultural centres of the Arabic-speaking world, original production kept pace with the flood of translations; it found its inspiration in the blend of Islamic and Hellenistic impulses, in the co-operation of men of many races and religions, in an atmosphere of enlightenment which (especially in Córdoba) had no parallel for centuries to come.

When Baghdad was at its zenith, and especially during the reign of Harun al Rashid (786-809), literary activity included the systematisation by the Basra school of Arabic grammar, the codification of the four schools of Islamic law, and the development of new styles in poetry. These last derived from the economic and social consequences of the new city life, with the emergence of an affluent and sophisticated cosmopolitan population. The *ghazal* was invented at this time: this is a new form of love poem, distinguished from the *qasidah* by its shortness.

Although the Abbasid Dynasty had ousted its predecessors on the basis of their impious materialism, Islamic society in the capital of Harun al Rashid was characterised by fondness for the delights of this world, its poets were licentious, and the greatest of them, Abu Nuwās, boon-companion of the Caliph himself, immortalised the delights derived from wine, slave-girls and beautiful youths. He also satirised the traditional tendency to celebrate the glories of a distant desert, no longer relevant to the society of the time. By thus breaking completely with tradition, he took an important step forward, creating a style of poetry which had its roots in the life of the Islamic metropolis, not in that of the pre-Islamic desert.

Harun's half-Persian son Ma'mun was of a more serious turn of mind and gave the chief encouragement to philosophical debates, to scientific investigation and to the study of foreign works. In the religious field, we note two divergent cur-

rents: fashions in orthodoxy which changed with the Caliphs and often made it dangerous to support theories no longer in favour; and *Sufism*, an anti-intellectual reaction, which sought direct spiritual experience as an antidote to hair-splitting theorizing. It was this new and popular movement that led later, especially in Persia, to the greatest creations of Islamic literature. These do not however occupy so prominent a place in the writings of the Arabs.

### *The Writing of History*

Certain forms of literature are quite unfamiliar among the Arabs: these include the novel and the drama, which did not develop because they did not fit in with the social concepts deriving from the religious orientation of society. Nor was there any financial encouragement for the composition of a novel, as writers often depended for their existence on the ability to attract the patronage of a ruler they laboured to flatter. This helps to explain why literary output was often greatest when political rule was fragmented: there were more petty princes or potential patrons.

For history there was always an incentive: not only was it necessary to situate the cosmic event of the Prophet's mission within the perspective of human endeavour; it later became lucrative to chronicle for petty princes (or great ones) the glories of their dynasties. History has in fact always appealed to the Muslim mentality, Sir Muhammad Iqbal having qualified it as one of the three ways of understanding the manifestation of a divine plan in the material universe.

The Muslim writers were indebted to the Persian chronicles of the Sassanian kings, since these viewed history in terms of events during individual reigns. Christian influences have also been noted, though of rather hagiographic nature. In addition, biographical compendia were much in fashion, describing the lives of

poets, saints or learned men. Arab writers and their hearers were perhaps unduly pre-occupied with the strange and miraculous; in consequence, these pen-pictures often omit important details at the expense of those which strike the imagination forcefully.

A peculiarity of the Arab historians is their tendency to collect anecdotes as fully as possible without any attempt at collation; these are thus presented successively from different sources, all their contradictions and inconsistencies being left for the reader to weigh up for himself. The most famous of these histories, that of the Persian Tabari, attempts a study of the world from the creation, naturally devoting most space to the history of Islam when that period is reached. It contains a great deal of information on the pre-Islamic semi-legendary history of Persia. In general, such works maintain high standards of scholarship and accurate reporting.

### *Scientific Literature*

In this article, one can only hint at the breadth of the scientific field covered. Medical literature included the works of al-Rāzi (Rhazes), whose output was staggering, including well over a hundred different medical treatises. He is generally regarded as the greatest of the physicians, and his writings on both alchemy and medicine were avidly studied in translation in Renaissance Europe. Among the other great authors in the field, it is necessary to mention Ibn Sīna, more familiar in Europe under the name of Avicenna. He was however first and foremost a philosopher.

In the field of philosophy, the Arabic writers were basically influenced by the ancient Greek authors, whose work was presented in Arabic in a cast acceptable to the Islamic and Eastern mentality. Aristotle was the dominant influence, and among the great Arabic philosophical treatises, those of al-Kindi and al-Fārābi

stand out in addition to the previously mentioned Ibn Sīna. Al-Kindi was something of a polygraph, concerning himself in addition with optics, alchemy and astrology. Both of these philosophers wrote works on music also. Al-Fārābī is important as a writer on political theory, inspired by the works of both Plato and Aristotle.

It is well known that modern astronomy and chemistry have developed out of astrology and alchemy. Those mediaeval sciences were originally philosophical systems which attempted to understand the basic harmony of the cosmos. Only later did they degenerate into materialistic superstitions. The chemical terminology and the names of many stars in the English language today reveal the enormous debt of Europe to Arabic science and research in these fields. The astrologers had here also availed themselves of the earlier work of the Greek Ptolemy. A noted writer on astronomical and mathematical subjects was al-Bīrūnī; it is less well known in the West that the Persian poet Umar Khayyam is in fact regarded in his native land chiefly as a scientist. Many wrote far greater poetry.

Al-Jāhiz, a 9th-century Persian from Basra, was among the most fertile of all writers, and there was hardly a subject with which he did not concern himself. He hired bookshops and spent the entire night in them satisfying his avid intellectual curiosity. One of his many famous works, the *Kitāb ul Hayawān*, or Book of the Animals, is not as its name suggests primarily a work on zoology, but rather a compendium of information about every conceivable creature, designed to point out to the reader the majesty of the Creator.

#### *Literature after the Mongols*

Despite the havoc they wrought in Asia, the Mongol invasions did not directly affect the Muslim kingdoms in Africa. One consequence of their occupation of

Persia was that that country, now definitively cut off from the Arab lands, saw a national renaissance in which all literature was composed in Persian. Not long afterwards, the Ottoman Turks took over control of most of the Muslim world, and they too preferred literature in Persian or even Turkish, when religious issues were not involved.

It is of interest that probably the greatest Arabic writer after the Mongol invasion was a North African, Ibn Khaldūn of Tunis. A fourteenth century Arab who received his education in the brilliant Far Western capital of Fez, he grew up in almost the only Muslim cultural centre that had remained Arab, unaffected by Persian or Turkish culture. He is famous as sociologist, historian and philosopher. His wide knowledge was acquired by travels far afield to Cairo and Granada. He is most well known for his *Muqaddima* or Introduction to a World History. This is generally recognised as the first attempt by anyone to produce a work on the philosophy of history. It reveals him as a remarkably clear thinker. Apart from this famous work, which is largely concerned with sociological issues, his writings include a *History of the Berbers*.

The economic conditions deriving from changed international relations, and the rise of European international maritime trade, are reflected in the great poverty in Arabic literature right up to the nineteenth century. Subsequent production came under European influence, which began with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt. A new generation of Arabic writers emerged a century ago from the American University of Beirut, and a new style in literature developed; this was perhaps as alien to classical Arabic literature as Italian writings are to the spirit of Ancient Rome. Despite the brilliance of the modern writers, from Syria and the Lebanon and later from Egypt, these have been ignored here, since they belong to another world.