

ARABIC BOOKS AND LIBRARIES IN THE UMAIYAD PERIOD

RUTH STELLHORN MACKENSEN

With the murder of ʿAlī, the fourth caliph, and the establishment of the Umayyads at Damascus, the capital of Islam moved into a country which had been predominantly Christian for centuries. This fact was to have an influence both in the development of life and religion at the court and in the homeland. Despite prejudices against the Umayyads on the part of many of the devout, Medina was not cut off entirely from the political capital. Some would have no dealings with the caliphs of Damascus, whom they regarded as godless impostors, and accordingly the interests and studies of this party had a backward look. Others, however, accepted the Umayyads as the legitimate heads of Islam, asking only that the rulers pay outward homage to the religion of the Prophet; this group was willing to serve them. An intermediate position held it to be the duty of every Moslem to support the head of the state, however unworthy he might be, for the unity of Islam must be preserved at all costs.¹ Hence scholars and poets passed back and forth between the Hijāz and Syria, to some extent bridging the gap between the uncompromising position of the devout of Medina and the freer ways and outlook of those attached to the court at Damascus.

It is exceedingly difficult to deal justly with the Umayyads, for most of the extant Arabic literature comes from a day when their names were anathema. The Abbasids not only sought to exterminate every surviving member of the previous dynasty but were determined to destroy their very memory. When that was impossible they were portrayed in a most unfavorable light. Their inscriptions were defaced, and those who dared to speak a word in their praise were subject to persecution. The scheme succeeded all too well, for it is impossible to write anything approaching an adequate history of the Umayyad period. Except for ʿUmar II (caliph from 99–101/717–20),

¹ A. Guillaume, *The Traditions of Islam* (Oxford, 1924), pp. 44 ff.

Arabic writers have seen little to praise in the personal lives of these caliphs. Their military and political achievements are acknowledged, for they left obvious results which are to the glory of Islam, but in general the Umayyads are represented as irreligious, loose-living, and uncultivated. Poets flourished at their courts, but otherwise the arts and learning languished. On the whole, Islam has accepted this picture of the dark days preceding the glorious era of the early Abbasids.

Shiites have agreed with the orthodox estimate of the Umayyads, or rather gone one better, for they look upon ʿAlī as the first scholar of Islam and on his brief caliphate as witnessing the beginning of true Moslem learning. Hence a modern Moslem writer, the late Amīr ʿAlī, who spoke of the fourth caliph as the “beloved disciple” and the “scholar,” referred to the accession of the Umayyads as a “blow to the progress of knowledge and liberalism.”²

To the orthodox as well as to many Occidentals, Moslem learning and the arts of civilization begin with the Abbasids. But recently there has been some tendency to discount the prejudices of most Arabic authors and to give attention to any fragmentary evidence which presents the Umayyads in a more favorable light. Fortunately, not all Arabic writers fell in line with the official policy. Aḥmad ibn Hanbal, founder of one of the four great schools of Moslem law, impartially reported traditions favorable to the claims of the Umayyads and the house of ʿAlī as well as to the Abbasids. However, except for slight traces, the Syrian tradition is lost to us. Wellhausen held that the best acquaintance with the spirit of the Syrian tradition was to be gained from Christian chronicles, particularly the *Continuatio* of Isidor of Seville, where the Umayyads appear in a very different and more favorable light than that in which they are customarily presented.³ Furthermore, the anecdotal character of much Arabic writing and the tendency to quote earlier authors extensively have preserved fragmentary evidence which often contradicts the general point of view.

On the literary side the Umayyad period, except for a widespread love of poetry, is poor compared to the one which followed. Neverthe-

² *Spirit of Islam* (rev.; London, 1922), p. 363.

³ J. Wellhausen, *The Arab Kingdom and Its Fall*, trans. M. G. Weir (Calcutta, 1927), pp. xiv f.

less, it was not as utterly barren as would appear both from the small number of works which have survived and from the remarks of historians. The lack of literary remains from the early days of Islam is to be accounted for in part by the prevalent use of papyrus following the conquest of Egypt. Climatic conditions in Syria, Iraq, and Persia are not conducive to the preservation of that fragile material, and the earliest Arabic papyri from Egypt are chiefly documents, private letters, and accounts.⁴ Becker says that the earliest book manuscript which survives is a twenty-seven-page papyrus book dated 229/844. It is interesting that this is in codex rather than roll form.⁵ At any time, of course, earlier material may be found, for literary papyri have not yet received as much attention as non-literary. It is difficult, however, to account for the imposing lists of authors from the end of the second century on, unless one supposes modest beginnings in preceding years.

One must use allusions to early authorities with caution, for it is often difficult to distinguish between quotations of oral traditions and those taken from books. It is very likely, however, that some were taken from written sources. I believe there is sufficient evidence for the existence, in Umayyad times, both of the beginnings of a prose literature and of an interest in books and book-collecting.

First of all, what precisely is meant by a book at this time? According to all reports, Zaid's first edition of the Koran consisted of leaves (*ṣaḥīfa*; pl. *ṣuḥuf*) kept together in some fashion, which were intrusted to the safekeeping of Ḥafṣa, ʿUmar I's daughter. It is uncertain how precise the order was in which they were kept, for at the time of the preparation of the ʿUthmānic Koran there was some disagreement on the arrangement of the *sūra*'s. After that the order was fixed. Both *ṣaḥīfa* and the more common word for book (*kitāb*; pl. *kutub*) refer primarily to pieces of paper, skin, or other materials on which are or may be writing. The terms often refer merely to loose sheets, documents, or letters, but they may also apply to books in the ordinary sense of the word. The Koran was considered a book, the record of separate revelations which are united by common authorship and ultimate purpose. Mohammed himself was aware of the

⁴ D. S. Margoliouth, *Catalogue of Arabic Papyri in the John Rylands Library, Manchester (Manchester, 1933)*, p. xiv.

⁵ C. H. Becker, *Papyri Schott-Reinhardt (Heidelberg, 1906)*, I, 8 f., MS P.S.R. 22-49.

existence of books. The last verse of *sūra* 87 refers to the books (*ṣuḥuf*) of Abraham and Moses, and any religious group possessed of sacred books was called the people of Scripture, or "book-people" (*ahl al-kitāb*).

Accordingly it is often impossible to tell whether *ṣuḥuf* and *kutub* are to be understood as books or merely as loose sheets or pages of writing. For example, suppose for the moment the historicity of a tradition to the effect that Anas ibn Mālik (d. 92 A.H.) handed his students writings (*kutub*), containing sayings of the Prophet. Did he have formally published books, or merely loose leaves of notes? Probably the latter. The great canonical compilations of traditions, prepared in the Abbasid period, appear to have been preceded by informal private collections for the use of scholars and their disciples. These are more akin to the notes of a lecturer or the notebooks of his students than to books, as the term is usually understood. But they indicate an appreciation of the value of written records and the tendency to fix oral tradition in a permanent form. According to a report, which occurs in but one version of the *Muwattaʿ* of Mālik ibn Anas, the Umayyad caliph ʿUmar II feared that valuable traditions might be lost and ordered one who had known the prophet to gather and commit them to writing. Guillaume and others doubt the trustworthiness of the report on the ground that none of the later writers on tradition refers to such a compilation, and the occurrence of the report in but one version of the *Muwattaʿ*.⁶

There are many reports of learned men in the early days of Islam who committed their collections of traditions to writing, often merely for their own use. Some, having memorized them, destroyed them or ordered this to be done after their death. Years ago Sprenger collected a number of such anecdotes, some of which are probably apocryphal, but in general they represent a prevalent custom. Al-Ḥasan

⁶ Guillaume, *op. cit.*, p. 19; al-Shaibani's version of the *Muwattaʿ*, p. 389; see Sprenger, "Origin and Progress of Writing Down Historical Facts," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, XXV (1856), 303 ff. and cont. 375 ff.; Khuda Bukhsh's translation of von Kremer's *Kultur-Geschichte des Orients*, under the title of *The Orient under the Caliphs* (Calcutta, 1920), pp. 373 ff.; I. Goldziher, *Mohammedanische Studien* (Halle, 1888-90), II, 210. Horowitz, on the other hand, apparently accepted this as authentic; see "The Earliest Biographies of the Prophet and Their Authors," *Islamic Culture*, January, 1928, pp. 24 f., citing Ibn Saʿd, *Biographien Muhammads, etc.* (Leyden, 1905-28), IIb, 134, and Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-Bari bi Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Cairo, 1901-11), XII, 39, as saying that Abū Bakr ibn Mohammed ibn ʿAmr, judge at Medina (d. ca. 120), was so requested by ʿUmar II. If such a book was written, it was short-lived, for, when asked concerning it, Abū Bakr's son ʿAbd Allāh admitted it was lost (Ibn Hajar, *ibid.*).

of Baṣra (d. 110/728) had a great mass of notes which he directed to be burned after his death, and he was accused of passing off as oral traditions information which he had really drawn from books.⁷ Mūsā ibn ʿUḳba said that a client of Ibn ʿAbbās, Kuraib (d. 98 A.H.), possessed a camel-load of the writings (*kutub*; again probably the notes) of Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68), a companion of the Prophet. Whenever his grandson ʿAlī ibn ʿAbd Allāh (d. 113) wished to refer to any of them, he wrote for such-and-such a page (*ṣahīfa*) to the owner, who would send him a copy.⁸ Kuraib left these books to Ibn ʿUḳba, and both he and ʿIkrima utilized them. There are numerous references to students who wrote down the words of their teachers on pages, rolls, tablets, or even on their shoes. Saʿīd ibn Jubair (d. 95 A.H.) is reported to have said, "In the lectures of Ibn ʿAbbās, I used to write on my page [or roll: *ṣahīfa*]; when it was filled, I wrote on the upper leather of my shoes, and then on my hand." Of the same student it is said that he used to write on his shoes, literally feet, and the next morning copied his notes.⁹ Two other sayings seem to indicate that such books or notes had market value. "My father wrote to me when I was at Kūfa, 'Buy books [*kutub*] and write down knowledge, for wealth is transitory, but knowledge is lasting'"; and another: "My father used to say to me, 'Learn by heart, but attend above all to writing, when you come home [probably from lectures] write, and if you fall into need or your memory fails you, you have your books.'" ¹⁰

Ibn Khallikān's remarks on Abū ʿAmr ibn al-ʿAlāʾ (d. 154/770) are suggestive as to the nature of books collected by early scholars.

The books [*kutub*] containing the expressions he had written down from the lips of the purest speakers among the Arabs of the desert nearly filled one of his rooms [or his house] up to the ceiling, but when he took to reading [the Koran], that is, when he commenced the practice of devotion, he threw them away; and when he returned to the study of his old science, he possessed nothing of it except what he had learned by heart.¹¹

⁷ De Goeje, art. "Tabari and Early Arabic Historians," *Encyc. Brit.* (9th ed.), p. 2.

⁸ Sprenger, "Origin and Progress, etc.," *op. cit.*, p. 325; and *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammed* (Berlin, 1861-65), I, xciv; Horovitz, *op. cit.*, p. 167; Ibn Saʿd, V, 216 (quoting Ibn ʿUḳba).

⁹ Sprenger, "Origin and Progress, etc.," *op. cit.*, p. 321.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 324. These sayings may be genuine, although they smack of controversy.

¹¹ *Biographical Dictionary*, trans. De Slane (Paris, 1843), I 400 = Arabic text (Cairo, 1310 A.H.), I, 387. Margoliouth's remarks in *Lectures on Arabian Historians* (Calcutta, 1930), p. 97, on Abū ʿAun ibn al-ʿAṭaʾ, sound like a confusion of names, for the dates and details are the same.

Abū ʿAmr was a philologist and Koran reader, but it is probable that the books (*kutub* or *ṣuḥuf*) of traditionalists were similar collections of notes they had taken down.

As late as 400 A.H. an eccentric scholar of Bagdad, Abū Ḥaiyān al-Ṭawḥīdī, destroyed his books, and, being reproved by the judge Abū Sahl ʿAlī ibn Mohammed, wrote a letter of apology which Yāqūt preserves in full. He defends his act by citing the example of men of the past who had done likewise. He says Abū ʿAmr and Dāūd al-Ṭāʾī burned their books, Tāj al-Amma flung his into the sea, Yūsuf ibn Asbāṭ hid his books in a cavern in the mountains (the entrance to which he blocked), Sulaimān-al-Dārānī put his into an earthen oven and baked them, Sufyān tore up a tremendous number of pages and tossed them to the wind, and, finally, Abū Ḥaiyān's own teacher, Abū Saʿīd al-Sīrāfī, bequeathed books to his son, with the stipulation that they be burned "if they betray you."¹²

Although it appears that such notes and books were intended merely for the private use of their owners, some crystallized into more formal books and were in a sense published either by repeated dictation to students who thereby multiplied copies or by permitting them to be read and copied. These methods of publication of manuscript books continued in Islam, being augmented later by the custom of having copies multiplied by professional scribes. Many who could not afford the services of a copyist borrowed books or used copies in libraries and made copies for their own use.

We shall never know the extent of the publication of formal works on traditions produced in pre-Abbasid days: only one such work has survived, a small collection known as the *Book of Asceticism* (*Kitāb al-Zuhd*) by Asad ibn Mūsā (d. 133/749).¹³ It is curious that although no work on tradition from the pen of Mohammed ibn Sīrīn (d. 110/728), an authority on the subject, has remained, his work on divination of dreams (*Kitāb al-Ghawāmiʿ*) is still extant.¹⁴

Traditions of a distinctly Shiite complexion were circulating and perhaps had begun to be gathered in this period, although the canonical Shiite texts came into being even later than the orthodox. ʿAlī

¹² Yāqūt, *Biographical Dictionary* ("Gibbs Series" [Leyden, 1907-27]), V, 389.

¹³ This work is not yet published (Berlin MS 1553). See Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur* (Weimar, 1898, 1902), I, 66; Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (London, 1907), p. 247.

¹⁴ Brockelmann (*op. cit.*) mentions another work by Ibn Sīrīn. On his reputation as a legalist and interpreter of dreams see Ibn Khallikān (De S.), II, 586 ff.

is frequently spoken of as "the scholar of God in this [Moslem] community,"¹⁵ and he is said to have been one of the few of the Quraysh who could write in the earliest days of Islam. The Prophet is reported to have declared that "if all the learning of the Arabs were destroyed it might be found again in 'Alī as in a living library."¹⁶ There are traditions to the effect that 'Alī had a special copy of the Koran on which were marginal notes of his own, preserving explanations he had received from Mohammed in conversation. This has grown in Shiite tradition to a mysterious book, the *Jafr*. But al-Bukharī and others say that 'Alī disclaimed having a special book, rather that the writings consisted merely of simple regulations for the community. "In it are instructions about the wounded, what to do with the older camels, and the extent of the sacred territory about Medina."¹⁷

It is not improbable that 'Alī had a written record of some instructions given him personally by the Prophet. However, its growth into a document "seventy cubits long as measured by the arm of the Prophet," containing everything "permitted and forbidden" and "everything necessary for mankind," "the knowledge of the prophets and the reports of the prophets and the scholars of the Beni Israel," is typical of the tendencies of traditional literature.¹⁸ The same Shiite writer who describes the *Jafr* in such glowing terms reports that before his death 'Alī gave the sacred books and his armor to his son Ḥasan with regulations as to their subsequent disposal.¹⁹

Popular story-tellers and poets who sympathized with the house of 'Alī made so much of the tragedy of Kerbela and other episodes in the history of the blessed family that the caliphs of Damascus were forced to deal with them, either courting their favor and thereby rendering them harmless or, when this failed, silencing them by imprisonment or death. Apparently Shiite tradition had become sufficiently widespread and dangerous to call for official censorship. Al-

¹⁵ D. M. Donaldson, *The Shi'ite Religion* (London, 1933), p. 46, from al-Ḥasan of Başra as preserved by al-Ḳālī, *Kitāb al-Amālī* (Bulaḡ, 1324/1906), III, 173 and 198.

¹⁶ L. Twells, *Life of Dr. Edward Pococke*, Preface to *Theological Works of the Learned Dr. Pococke* (London, 1740), I, 9.

¹⁷ Al-Bukharī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (Leyden, 1862-68, 1908), II, chap. lviii, §§ 10 and 17; Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 47 f. The author of the *Fihrist* (written 987 A.D., see pp. 40-41) says he saw autographs of 'Alī and other of Mohammed's scribes, and of 'Alī's sons, Ḥasan and Ḥusain in the library of a devout Shiite bibliophile.

¹⁸ Al-Kulainī (d. 328 or 329/939) *Kāfi fī 'Ilm al-Dīn* (Teheran, 1889), p. 85, as translated by Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 48; see the following pages for other elaborate descriptions of the supposed writings of 'Alī; also art. "Djafr," by Macdonald, in *Encyc. Islam.*

¹⁹ Al-Kulainī, *op. cit.*, p. 110; Donaldson, *op. cit.*, pp. 67 f.

Ṭabarī says that Muḳāwīya ordered the suppression of all traditions favorable to the house of ʿAlī to be replaced by declarations of the glory of the family of ʿUthmān, the third caliph and ʿAlī's predecessor.²⁰ This would indicate that the caliphs recognized the value of traditions for propaganda purposes. It also falls in line with other indications that a body of distinctly Umayyad traditions once existed. Remnants of the Syrian tradition are to be found especially in statements which emphasize the sanctity of Jerusalem as a place of pilgrimage at least equal to Mecca and Medina.²¹ Al-Zuhrī, of whom more will be said presently, is reported to have confessed "these princes [the Umayyads] have compelled us to write *ḥadīth*,"²² and there is every reason to suppose that he was among those who felt no scruples against serving the "godless caliphs."²³

A most interesting character who flourished under the Umayyads was the learned lawyer and traditionalist, al-ʿAḳmash abū Mohammed Sulaimān ibn Mihrān, who was born in 60 or 61/680 and died in 148/765. The caliph of the time, Hishām ibn ʿAbd Allāh, wrote a letter to him requiring that he compose a book²⁴ on the virtues of ʿUthmān and the crimes of ʿAlī. Al-ʿAḳmash, after reading the note, thrust it into the mouth of a sheep, which ate it up, and said to the messenger, "Tell him I answer it thus." The latter, terrified because he had been told that his life would be forfeited if he returned without a written answer, solicited the aid of the friends of al-ʿAḳmash, who finally prevailed on him to send a written reply, which was couched in the following terms: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Clement! Commander of the Faithful! Had ʿUthmān possessed all the virtues in the world they had been of no utility to you; and if ʿAlī committed all the crimes of which the human race is guilty, they had done you no injury. Mind the qualities of your own little self, and adieu!" Ibn Khallikān's sketch of this man bespeaks a vigorous and refreshing personality in whom the independent spirit of the desert Arab was still alive, possessed of a salty wit and a sharp tongue,

²⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, ed. De Goeje (Leyden, 1879-1901), II, 112; Guillaume, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

²¹ Guillaume, *loc. cit.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 50; Muir, *Life of Mahomet* (ed. 1861), I, xxxiii, as from Ibn Saʿd, II, 135.

²³ Cl. Huart, *History of Arabic Literature* (New York, 1903), pp. 61 f.; Nicholson, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

²⁴ So trans. by De Slane, Ibn Khallikān, I, 588 = Arabic text (Cairo ed.), I, 213, lit.: "Write for me the virtues." The letter devoured by the sheep was on papyrus (*ḳirtās*).

a lack of awe for position and authority, and a sense of justice. The caliph apparently appreciated this exhibition of the ancient virtues which the Umayyads admired, for there is no mention that he punished the audacity of al-ʿAʿmash. One may perhaps be pardoned a digression to recount two other anecdotes concerning this interesting character. Some students went to him one day to learn traditions. Greeting them, he announced, "Were there not in the house a person [meaning his wife] whom I detest more than I do you, I should not have come out to you." On another occasion a man followed him as he took a walk and saw him enter a cemetery and lie down in a newly dug grave. As he came out he shook the earth from his head and exclaimed, "Oh, how narrow the dwelling!"²⁵

Among the devout there seems to have been a quite sincere feeling that the desire to write books was based on sinful pride, and they sought to avoid the appearance of producing anything which might detract from the unique position of the Koran. This applied to the writing of traditions more than to any other type of literature, probably owing in part to the fact that traditions contained words of the Prophet, which might easily be regarded as of equal interest and authority with those of the sacred book. This attitude continued far down in the history of Moslem literature.

As late as the middle of the fifth century after the Hijra a learned Shāfiʿite doctor of Bagdad, al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), refused to publish any of his works, which, however, he kept together in a safe place. As death approached he said to his confidant:

The books in such a place were composed by me, but I abstained from publishing them because I suspected that, although my intention in writing them was to work in God's service, that feeling, instead of being pure, was sullied by baser motives. Therefore when you perceive me on the point of death and falling into agony, take my hand in yours, and if I press it, you will know thereby that none of these works have been accepted by me; in this case you must take them all and throw them by night into the Tigris, but if I open my hand and close it not, that is the sign of their having been accepted and that my hope in the admission of my intention as sincere and pure has been fulfilled. "When al-Māwardī's death drew near," said the person, "I took him by the hand and he opened it without closing it on mine, whence I knew his labors had been accepted and I then published his works."²⁶

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 225.