

# EBN AL-MOQAFFA', ABŪ MOḤAMMAD 'ABD-ALLĀH RŌZBEH

**EBN AL-MOQAFFA', ABŪ MOḤAMMAD 'ABD-ALLĀH RŌZBEH** b. Dādūya/Dādōē (b. Gōr, the present Fīrūzābād, Fārs, ca. 103/721, d. Baṣra ca. 139/757), chancery secretary (*kāteb*) and major Arabic prose writer. Ebn al-Moqaffa' was of noble Persian stock and bore the name Rōzbeh/Rūzbeh before his comparatively late conversion to Islam from Mani-chaeism. He was the son of an Omayyad tax-collector named Dādūya, named Mobārak on conversion and nicknamed "the cripple-handed" (*al-moqaffa*), whose disability was said to have resulted from torture for embezzlement (Sourdel, p. 308). While in Baṣra, Dādūya had his son soundly schooled in literary Arabic by two notable mentors, and the young man soon moved in literary circles. By 126/743 Ebn al-Moqaffa' was an Omayyad *kāteb* in Šāpūr, Fārs, where he became embroiled in hostilities between his master, the governor Masīh b. Ḥawārī, and the man sent to replace him, Sofyān b. Mo'āwīa Mohallabī. Ebn al-Moqaffa' next appeared in Kermān as a man of substance and the *kāteb* of the last Omayyad governor there. After the fall of the Omayyads, he cultivated the Banū 'Alī, paternal uncles of the first two 'Abbasid caliphs, and was in due course employed as *kāteb* by 'Īsā b. 'Alī. He lived mainly in Baṣra, which from 133/751 to 139/757 was governed by 'Īsā's brother, Solaymān (Sourdel, pp. 308-11)

Ebn al-Moqaffa' seems to have been a fastidious man of refined manners, steeped in the traditional culture of the old Persian nobility, yet ever observant of the values of Arab society. In the purity of his Arabic he outshone members of the Arab ruling class, and in generosity and hospitality he seems to have tried to outdo them. Though witty and entertaining in company of his liking, he could be arrogant and offensive to those for whom he cared little, and he was apt to belittle and ridicule those who displeased him. Among the victims of his derision and aggression was Sofyān b. Mo'āwīa, whose chance for revenge came when Ebn al-Moqaffa' offended the caliph al-Manṣūr. 'Abd-Allāh b. 'Alī, brother of Solaymān and 'Īsā, had rebelled against al-Manṣūr, but, when defeated, had been allowed to live unmolested with Solaymān. Once the caliph was in a stronger position, he decided to end this arrangement. When the apprehensive Solaymān requested free pardon (*amān*) for 'Abd-Allāh, al-Manṣūr immediately replaced him as governor of Baṣra by Sofyān (Ramazān 139/February 757). On behalf of the Banū 'Alī, Ebn al-Moqaffa' drafted the text of an *amān* for the caliph to sign. The caliph was furious at what seemed to him to be the presumptuousness of this document, and, deaf to all entreaties from Solaymān and 'Īsā, allowed the vengeful Sofyān to have Ebn al-Moqaffa' put to death, allegedly by torture (Sourdel, pp. 313-18). Perhaps al-Manṣūr saw in Ebn al-Moqaffa' the brains behind the Banū 'Alī's political ambitions. Ebn al-Moqaffa's supposed *zandaqa* (heresy, apostasy) had little or nothing to do with his downfall. Manichaeism "was not yet as heretical as it became from the reign of al-

Mahdī...The need for administrative cadres was...greater than the need for orthodoxy” (van Ess, p. 161).

*Works.* 1. Translations and adaptations. Ebn al-Moqaffa' left behind a sizable body of prose writings, both translations and original works. He is best known today for *Kalīla wa Demna*, his translation of a Middle Persian collection of animal fables, mostly of Indian origin, involving two jackals, Kalīla and Demna. The Middle Persian original, now lost but thought by de Blois to have been entitled *Karīrak ud Damanak* (p. 12), was written by one Borzōē/*Borzūya*, a Persian physician attached to the Sasanian court in the 6th century. Prefaced by a putative autobiography of Borzūya and an account of his voyage to India, the full work was done into Arabic by Ebn al-Moqaffa', who introduced it with a prologue of his own and may have been responsible for four added stories. From Ebn al-Moqaffa's Arabic rendering of Borzūya's work are descended not only all later Arabic versions of *Kalīla wa Demna*, but also one of two Syriac versions (the other one is pre-Islamic and crucial to any attempt to form an idea of the Middle Persian original) and the medieval Greek, Persian (6th/12th century), Hebrew, Latin, and Castilian versions. Though there are many Arabic manuscripts of *Kalīla wa Demna*, Ebn al-Moqaffa's version is not among them, and the oldest dated copy (poorly edited by 'A.-W. 'Azzām, Cairo, 1941; repr. 1973) was written almost five centuries after his death. Moreover, they differ so widely in wording and content that “we cannot truly say that what we possess today is Ebn al-Moqaffa's translation but rather a variety of Arabic texts derived in one way or another from it” (de Blois, p. 3). That he aimed at an idiomatic rather than a slavishly literal rendering is generally agreed, and all indications are that he achieved clarity of expression by simplicity of diction and plain syntactical structures. As no medieval Arab critic seems to have impugned his style, it was evidently pleasing and well suited to the taste of his Arab readers.

Ebn al-Moqaffa's translation of *Kalīla wa Demna* was not a conscious attempt to start a new literary trend; it was clearly just one of several works of old Sasanian court literature which Ebn al-Moqaffa' introduced to an exclusive readership within court circles, its function being to illustrate what should or should not be done by those aiming at political and social success. *Kalīla wa Demna*, nonetheless, served as a stimulus to the development of Arabic prose literature and inspired imitators, artists, and poets. A prose Persian translation of the Arabic text was available as early as the 10th century, of which a versified version was made by Rūdakī (d. 329/941-42). Both versions are lost except for a few lines of Rūdakī's poem preserved in other sources. A later prose translation was rendered by Abu'l-Ma'ālī Naṣr-Allāh b. Moḥammad Šīrāzī and dedicated to the Ghaznavid Bahrāmšāh (r. 512-52/ ; ed. M. Mīnōvī, 2nd ed., Tehran, 1345 Š./1966).

Ebn al-Moqaffa' is thought to have produced an Arabic adaptation of the late Sasanian *Xwadāy-nāmag*, a chronicle of pre-Islamic Persian kings, princes, and warriors. A mixture of legend, myth, and fact, it served as a quasi-national history inspired by a vision of kingship as a well-ordered autocracy with a sacred duty to rule and to regulate its subjects' conduct within a rigid class system. Interspersed with maxims characteristic of *andarz* literature, the narrative also offered practical advice on civil and military matters. Ebn al-Moqaffa' is known to have modified

certain parts of the original and excluded others, possibly to make it intelligible to his Arab Muslim readers. He is thought to have inserted an account of Mazdak, from which later Perso-Arab historians derived much of their knowledge of the Mazdakite movement. Like its Middle Persian original, Ebn al-Moqaffa's Arabic version is not extant. The *Oyūn al-aḳbār* and the *Ketāb al-māāref* of [Ebn Qotayba](#) (d. 276/889) may preserve fragments of it; certainly the *Sīar al-Ajam* (Ebn Qotayba, I, pp. 117, 178), quoted by Ebn Qotayba without ascription, renders the *Xwadāy-nāmag*.

Ebn al-Nadīm (ed. Tajaddod, p. 132, tr. Dodge, p. 260) attributes several other Arabic translations of Middle Persian works to Ebn al-Moqaffa, namely *Ā ĩn-nāma* (q.v.), *Ketāb al-tāj*, and *Ketāb Mazdak*. Ebn Qotayba is thought to have preserved parts of the *Ā ĩn-nāma*, for in his *Oyūn* a number of passages are quoted, albeit without ascription, with the opening words "I have read in the *Ā ĩn* (or *Ketāb al-ā ĩn*"; I, pp. 8, 62, III, pp. 221, 78, IV, p. 59). The quotations bear on topics such as court manners and customs, military tactics, divination and physiognomy, archery, and polo—subjects typical of various works on Sasanian institutions, protocol, entertainment, general *savoir faire*, and so on. Also in the *Oyūn* are extracts from a *Ketāb al-tāj* (I, pp. 5, 11). Ebn al-Nadīm describes this book as a biography of Ḳosrow I Anōšīrvān (q.v.), but Ebn Qotayba's extracts mostly pertain to Ḳosrow II Parvēz and suggest a "mirror for princes." The subject of the *Ketāb Mazdak* was, as its title implies, the leader of the revolutionary religious movement whose activities led to his execution in 531. The work was neither a factual biography nor an account of Mazdak's tenets but a piece of disparaging historical fiction (*Camb. Hist. Iran* III, p. 994). A better product of Ebn al-Moqaffa's translation activities is the *Nāma-ye Tansar*, a political work taking its name from its putative author Tansar (Tōsar), the Zoroastrian priestly adviser to the first Sasanian monarch, [Ardašīr I](#) (r. 224-40). Ebn al-Moqaffa's Arabic version is lost, but Ebn Esfandīār's Persian rendering of it, made in the early 7th/13th century and embodied in his *Tārīḳ-e Ṭabarestān*, reveals its content (summary in Boyce, pp. 4f.). Apart from adding "various illustrative verses, some...in elegant Persian," Ebn al-Moqaffa evidently inserted Koranic and Biblical quotations, presumably as a concession to Muslims. Be that as it may, his Sasanian text is still Iranocentric: "...we are the best of Persians, and there is no quality or trait of excellence or nobility which we hold dearer than the fact that we have ever showed humility and lowliness...in the service of kings, and have chosen obedience and loyalty, devotion and fidelity. Through this quality...we came to be the head and neck of all the climes" (ed. Mīnovī, p. 74, cf. tr. Boyce, p. 52).

2. Original works. Two preceptive works in Arabic are ascribed to Ebn al-Moqaffa, [al-Adabal-kabīr](#) and [al-Adab al-saḡīr](#), but only the first, now known as *Ketāb al-ādāb al-kabīr* (Kord 'Alī, pp. 40-106), can be accepted as his ('Abbās, p. 578). The first of its four parts is a very brief rhetorical retrospect on the excellence of the ancients' legacy—clearly Sasanian—of spiritual and temporal knowledge. The second is a miniature mirror for princes. The addressee, seemingly the caliph's son, is apostrophized as one in pursuit of the rule of seemly conduct (*adab*). He is to give strict priority to the mastery of fundamentals, examples of which are given along with illustrations of the ways in which they can be applied. The author then turns to pitfalls before a

prince—e.g., the love of flattery and the fault of allowing others to detect it. More positively, he urges the prince to cultivate men of religion and moral perfection as potential aides and intimates, to take advice, even if unpalatable, from those best qualified to give it, to keep abreast of his officials' conduct, to be sparing with his favors, and so on. Having defined, very much in a Sasanian vein, the bases of kingship, he discusses particular circumstances calling for caution and prudence. After exhortation to seemly conduct and sundry observations on statecraft he ends by stressing the pivotal role in government of power and a seemly public image. The *Ādāb*'s third part, longer than the second, is a pragmatic guide to survival for a ruler's intimates and highly, but precariously, placed officers of state. It offers advice in a high moral vein, but it rests on no philosophical, ethico-religious, or spiritual basis: it rests on familiarity with age-old vagaries of oriental despots and their entourages. The fourth and longest part of the *Ādāb* treats of a man's relations with colleagues in what we may take to be the secretarial fraternity. The main theme is friendship and the avoidance of enmity. For Ebn al-Moqaffa, the ideal is a permanent relationship, sustained by fidelity, loyalty, and devotion, and proof against all corrosive forces. As always, his treatment of the subject is didactic and heavily dependent on aphorisms. He remains pragmatic: A friendship should be formed, not with an inferior, but with a superior, for to make friends of inferiors bespeaks envy, which is reprehensible. To shed a friend is a threat to honor—unlike a divorce. To women and their allure he makes certain disparaging references, but they are only incidental to his main interest—promoting companionship and amity in the circles that concern him. One can detect in the *Ādāb* as a whole certain ideas known to Sasanian Persia from pre-Islamic translations of Greek works (Abbās, pp. 545 f.). The *Ādāb* is cast in the parallelistic mode of expression born of the early *koṭba* and expanded and elaborated in Omayyad hortatory compositions, unembroidered with contrived rhyming of the sort found in later 'Abbasid prose literature. To point contrasts and enforce parallels, full use is made of devices well known to the ancient schools of rhetoric (Latham, pp. 63f.).

The *Resāla fi'l-ṣaḥāba* (ed. and tr. Ch. Pellat, Paris, 1976) is a short but remarkably percipient administrative text. In less than 5,000 words, he discusses specific problems facing the new 'Abbasid regime. The unnamed addressee is identifiable as al-Manṣūr, who may never have seen it. There is no logical arrangement. After an opening eulogy, purposefully complimentary but devoid of extravagant panegyric, he discusses the army, praising the Khorasanis in Iraq but suggesting that, as an ethnically mixed body exposed to heterodox thinking, they should be taught only the tenets of a clear, concise religious code issued by the caliph. Concern for the army's standing, morale, and future loyalty leads him to suggest reforms, including the removal of fiscal duties from the military, officer recruitment from the ranks based on merit, religious education, inculcation of integrity and loyalty, regular pay linked to inflation, and maintenance of an efficient intelligence service throughout Khorasan and peripheral provinces, regardless of cost. He calls for vigilance and good intelligence in Iraq to counter discontent in Baṣra and Kūfa and pleads for deserving Iraqis to be afforded scope for the exercise of their talents in government service. In view of wide divergences in legal theory and practice, born of local precedents or flawed personal reasoning, he suggests to the caliph a scrutiny and resolution of all conflicts of law by his own command and the imposition of unity by a comprehensive enactment. He

recommends cautious clemency for the conquered Syrians, the recruitment from among them of a hand-picked caliphal elite, the lifting of ruinous economic sanctions, and fair distribution of foodstuffs in the Syrian military districts. At long last, he comes to the caliph's entourage, which, though introduced in glowing terms, can be perceived as far from ideal. In the past, ministers and secretaries—the approach is tactful—brought the entourage into disrepute: men unworthy of access to the caliph became members to the exclusion of, for instance, scions of the great families of early Islam. The caliph should now remedy the situation by taking account of claims to precedence and singling out for preferment men with special talents and distinguished service records, as well as men of religion and virtue and incorruptible and uncorrupting men of noble lineage. Also, the caliph's kin and princes of his house should be considered. In a section on land-tax (*karāj*) the author focuses on the arbitrary exploitation of cultivators and recommends taxation governed by known rules and registers. After a few lines on Arabia he closes with a proposal for mass education aimed at achieving uniformity of orthodox belief through a body of paid professional instructors. This would make for stability, and trouble-makers would not go unobserved. The *Resāla* ends with an expression of pious hopes and prayers for the caliph and his people. Stylistically, the work markedly differs from the *Ādāb* in certain important respects (Latham, pp. 71f.), the reason for which may be the subject-matter.

Of the various works attributed, rightly or wrongly, to Ebn al-Moqaffa', there are two of which we have only fragments quoted in hostile sources. One, posing a problem of authenticity, may be described as a Manichaeian apologia (Latham, pp. 72 ff.). The other is the *Moāraḏat al-Qorān*, which Josef van Ess—inclined to accept the ascription (p. 161)—sees not as anti-Islamic, but rather as an exercise designed to show that in the author's time something stylistically comparable to the Koran could be composed (p. 160). Other compositions and occasional pieces attributed to Ebn al-Moqaffa' are contained in Kord 'Alī's *Rasā'el* (pp. 107-16, 135-72). Of these the *Yatīma ṭānīa*—a short, sententious epistle on good and bad rulers and subjects—may be authentic, though the long *resāla* entitled *Yatīmat al-soltān* and the collection of aphorisms labeled *Ḥekam* certainly are not. A doxology (*Taḥmīd*, in Kord 'Alī, pp. 135-44) is almost certainly spurious, though a series of passages and sentences that follow it may have come from the lost *Yatīma fī'l-rasā'el*.

For various reasons (loss of texts, contamination, etc.) Ebn al-Moqaffa's literary achievement defies precise evaluation. Yet there is nothing to suggest that Gabrieli exaggerates in writing, "His works, both as translator and original writer, soon became classic in the great 'Abbasid civilization and, by their form as well as their subject-matter, exerted an influence that cannot be exaggerated on the cultural interests and ideals of the succeeding generations" (Gabrieli in *EI* <sup>2</sup>III, p. 885).

*Bibliography:* (For cited works not given in detail, see "Short References.")

All original works written by, or attributed to, Ebn al-Moqaffa', apart from fragments of the *Mo'arāzat al-Qor'ān* (on which see van Ess), are contained in Kord 'Alī, ed., *Rasā'el al-bolaḡā*; Cairo, 1365/1946, pp. 1-172.

Ebn al-Moqaffa', *Kalīla wa Dimna*, ed. L. Cheikho, Beirut, 1905 (with many later editions); ed. 'A.-W. 'Azzām, Cairo, 1941, repr. Algiers, 1973; tr. A. Miquel, Paris, 1957 (on other modern translations into European languages see Brocklemann in *EI*<sup>2</sup> p. 504, and de Blois, p. 4, n. 2).

An important early translation is in J. Alemany Bolufer, ed., *La antigua versión castellana del Calila y Dimna colejada con el original árabe de la misma*, Madrid, 1915.

E. 'Abbās, "Naḡra jadīda fī ba'ḡ al-kotob al-mansūba l'Ebn al-Moqaffa'," *Revue de l'Académie Arabe de Damas* 52, 1977, pp. 538-80.

Ā. Āḡarnūš and 'A. Zaryāb, "Ebn-e Moqaffa" in *DMBE* IV, pp. 662-80.

A. F. L. Beeston, *Samples of Arabic Prose in its Historical Development*, Oxford, 1977, pp. 7-11.

F. de Blois, *Burzōy's Voyage to India and the Origin of the Book of Kalilah wa Dimnah*, London, 1990.

M. Ben Ghazi, *Un humaniste du IIe/VIIIe siècle. Abd Allāh ibn al-Muqaffa*; unpubl. Ph.D. diss., University of Paris, 1957.

C. E. Bosworth, in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature. Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. A. F. L. Beeston et al., Cambridge, 1983, pp. 487-91.

C. Brockelmann, "Kalīla wa-Dimna" in *EI*<sup>2</sup> IV, pp. 503-06.

*Camb. Hist. Iran* III, index, s.vv. *Ā'īn-nāma*, Ibn al-Muqaffa', *Khwadāy-nāmag*, Mazdak, Mazdakism, *Mazdak-nāmag*, Tansar/Tōsar, and "Tansar, The Letter of." P. Charles-Dominique, "Le système éthique d'Ibn al-Muqaffa' d'après ses deux épîtres dites 'al-Ṣaḡīr' et 'al-Kabīr'," *Arabica* 12, 1965, pp. 45-66. P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, Cambridge, 1980, pp. 69 f. (on the *Ṣaḡāba*).

Ebn Esfandiār, *Nāma-ye Tansar*, ed. M. Mīnovī, Tehran, 1354 Š./1975; repr. with commentary, Tehran, 1354 Š./1975; tr. M. Boyce as *The Letter of Tansar*, Rome, 1968.

Ebn Qotayba, *Oyūn al-aḡbār*, 4 vols., Cairo, 1383/1963. 'A. Eqbāl, *Ṣarḡ-e ḡāl-e Abd-Allāh b. Moqaffa*; Berlin, 1926.

Idem, "Kalīla wa Demna," in *FIZ* 19, 1352 Š./1973, pp. 19-48.

J. van Ess, "Some Fragments of the *Mu'araḍat al-Qur'ān*," *Studia Arabica et Islamica. Festschrift for Ihsān Abbās*, ed. W. Qāḍī, Beirut, 1981, pp. 151-63.

F. Gabrieli, "L'opera di Ibn al-Muqaffa," *Rivista degli studi orientali* 13, 1931-32, pp. 197-247.

Idem, "Ibn al-Muqaffa" in *EI* 2 III, pp. 883-85.

H. A. R. Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, ed. S. J. Shaw and W. R. Polk, London, 1962, pp. 63-65, 67, 117, 261.

S. D. Goitein, "A Turning Point in the History of the Muslim State," in *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions*, Leiden, 1966, pp. 149-67 (on the *Ṣaḥāba*).

M. Guidi, ed. and tr., *La lotta tra l'Islam e il manicheismo. Ketāb al-radd alā ... Ibn al-Muqaffa*; Rome, 1927.

J. D. Latham, "Ibn al-Muqaffa' and Early 'Abbasid Prose," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature. Abbasid Belles-Lettres*, ed. J. Ashtiany et al., Cambridge, 1990, pp. 48-77 (but what is said on page 50 about *Kalīla o Demna* and the Pañcatantra requires revision).

M. Mīnovī, "Maktūb-ī ba 'Abbās Eqbāl Āštīānī," *Yāghmā* 15, 1341 Š./1962, pp. 69-78; repr. in idem, *Naqd-e ḥāl*, 3rd. ed. 1367 Š./1988, pp. 9-30.

J. Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, Oxford, 1950; repr. 1964, index, s.v.

Ibn Muqaffa'. D. Sourdel, "La biographie d'Ibn al-Muqaffa' d'après les sources anciennes," *Arabica* 1, 1954, pp. 307-23.

(J. Derek Latham)

Originally Published: December 15, 1997

Last Updated: December 6, 2011

This article is available in print.

Vol. VIII, Fasc. 1, pp. 39-43

**Cite this entry:**

J. Derek Latham, "EBN AL-MOQAFFA, ABŪ MOḤAMMAD ʿABD-ALLĀH RŪZBEH," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, VIII/1, pp. 39-43, available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ebn-al-moqaffa> (accessed on 30 December 2012).