



## ‘ABD-AL-ḤAMĪD B. YAḤYĀ

‘ABD-AL-ḤAMĪD B. YAḤYĀ B. SA‘D (d. 132/750), an important figure in the development of Arabic epistolary style, especially in the establishment of chancery style during the Omayyad period. The details of both his birth and death are in dispute; he was probably a native of Anbār on the Euphrates and may have been a descendant of a Persian captive at the battle of Qādesiyya who became a *mawlā* of the Qorašī clan of the Banū ‘Āmer b. Lo‘ayy. Some accounts, however, make the less likely claim that he was of this clan, hence of pure Arab descent. Beginning as a wandering teacher, he received his first chancery experience under Sālem, Caliph Hešām’s chief secretary and *mawlā*. He is best known, however, as the chief secretary of the last Omayyad caliph, Marvān b. Moḥammad (126-32/744-50), to whom he had become attached before the latter’s rise to the caliphate and with whom he is said to have been slain at Būṣīr in the Fayyūm district of Egypt in 132/750. Other accounts say that he took refuge with his disciple Ebn al-Moqaffa‘ (thus further linking him with Persian influences on early Arabic style) but was traced, seized, and put to death. Still another account has him tracked down and brutally executed at the command of the first ‘Abbasid caliph, Saffāḥ. His son, Esmā‘īl, also became a noted secretary, and his descendants, known as Banu’l-Mohājer, lived in Egypt and served in the chancery of Aḥmad b. Ṭūlūn (r. 254-70/868-84).

To Ta‘ālebī is ascribed the epigram, repeated in most of the traditional biographies, “[Arabic] epistolary style began with ‘Abd-al-Ḥamīd and ended with [Moḥammad b. al-Ḥosayn] Ebn al-‘Amīd [d. 360/970].” Although it is said that he wrote over 1,000 pages of formal *rasa‘el* (epistles) and documents, the



texts of only six of the former and a few documents and private letters survive. The many innovations in chancery style with which he is credited include an increase in length of documents by the supplying of elaborate introductory and closing formulae and the writing of more complex sentences with lengthy sequences of qualifying clauses. While H. A. R. Gibb (in *EI*<sup>2</sup> I, p. 65) sees in this latter feature traces of Greek influences in the Omayyad secretariat, most Arab writers attribute this change in style, unusual in earlier and later Arabic writing, to the writer’s Persian background.

His most elaborate surviving *resāla*, the “epistle of advice to the heir apparent,” was addressed to the son of his patron Marvān, the prince ‘Abdallāh. This epistle, written in the guise of a father’s advice to his son, was composed in 129/747, when ‘Abdallāh was sent to battle against the Kharejite rebel, Ḥaḥḥāk b. Qays Ṣaybānī in the area of Mosul. An early “mirror for princes,” the epistle begins with a description of the Kharejites and the dangers of rebellion, goes on to describe the qualities desirable in an effective ruler, and continues with an outline of the education which develops those qualities. The second part of the epistle deals with warfare, imparting counsel on military command. Notable is the stress placed on the protection that should be given both to non-Arab Muslims (*mawālī*) and to non-Muslim subjects (*ḍemmī*). Gibb sees in this *resāla* a mixture of maxims borrowed from Sasanian court ceremonial and Greek military tactics, the latter derived either from literary sources or from actual experience of war against the Byzantines.

The second lengthy *resāla* still extant is his “epistle to the secretaries,” in which special emphasis is placed on the various fields of learning a secretary should master in order to carry out his task properly. Gibb states flatly that this work was clearly inspired by the tradition of the Sasanian secretariat, justifying the statement by ‘Askarī (d. 395/1005; cf. *Dīwān al-ma‘ānī*, Cairo, 1352/1933-34, p. 89) that “‘Abd-al-Ḥamīd extracted from the Persian tongue the modes of secretarial composition ... and transposed them into the Arabic tongue.” Brockelmann (*GAL* S. I. p. 105), citing the same author’s *Ketāb al-ṣenā‘atayn*, p. 51.9, sees in his *rasā’el* something closer to translations of Pahlavi political rhetoric. ‘Abd-al-Ḥamīd thus stands at the critical juncture in the development of the Arabic literary language at which the first full impact of foreign influences was felt, and he played an important role in the assimilation of those influences. His work is cited by numerous later writers in the diverse areas of *adab* and of chancery manuals, such as Jāḥeẓ and Qalqaṣandī.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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