



ABJAD

ABJAD “alphabet,” a word formed from the first four letters of the Semitic alphabet. In particular, it refers to the use of letters as numbers (*hesāb-e abīad*), the numerical values of the letters following the original letter sequence found in the older Semitic alphabets. This sequence, with minor variations, is remarkably stable from the earliest known listings in Ugaritic and Phoenician to Hebrew and Aramaic. Arabic script was developed from the Nabatean variety of Aramaic script; but, due to the coincidence in shape of several letters and their subsequent differentiation by means of diacritical points, the traditional order was replaced by a new one, in which letters with the same basic design were grouped together. The numerical values are shown in [Table 1](#).

For the sake of memorization the letters are grouped together in pronounceable, but meaningless, words: *abīad havvaz ḥoṭṭ kalamān safaš qarašat takkaḍ žazaḡ*. Because the origin of this order of letters had been forgotten in medieval times, fantastic explanations have since been offered by certain authors (see, e.g., *Fehrest*, tr. Dodge, I, pp. 6f.). The additional letters of the Persian alphabet (p, č, ž, and g) have no numerical value. Numbers are combined in descending order from right to left: *ʔzḡ*, “1911,” *blq* “132.” To distinguish numbers from ordinary words a line is often put above the former.

With the introduction of Indian numerals, use of the letters gradually declined; it persisted mainly in astronomical tables (*ziḡ*), in astrological horoscopes, and in death, composition, or regnal chronograms (see below) till the beginning of the modern age. The present use of letters in the *abīad*



sequence for numbering pages in the introductions to books is analogous to the use of Roman numerals in the West.

The numerical value of letters is also important in magic squares, talismans and other forms of letter magic (*sīmīā*; see, e.g., Ebn Kaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, tr. F. Rosenthal, New York, 1958, III, pp. 171f.). Of symbolic significance may be the numerical value of proper names, as shown by I. Mélikoff, *JA* 250, 1962, pp. 435-45. As a means to interpret the Word of God and to construct a mystical cosmology, the numerical values of letters were exploited in extreme fashion by the **Ḥorūfi** sect, which owes its name to the Arabic word for letter (*ḥarf*, pl. *ḥorūf*).

In the post-classical period it became fashionable to date major events in poetic chronograms (*tārīk*, pl. *tavārīk*); great ingenuity was used to match the value of the letters of part of the last line of a poem (mostly the last hemistich) with the required date. The following examples are taken from an extract of *Haft qolzom* by Ġāzī-al-dīn Ḥaydar (given in Rückert, *Grammatik*, pp. 238, 268). On the death of the Mughal emperor Akbar:

Fawt-e Akbar šah az qazā-ye Elāh gašt tārīk-e fawt-e Akbar šāh. “The death of Akbar Shah,” through divine decree, became the date of the death of Akbar Shah. The value of the letters of the first three words gives the correct date, 1014/1605. Note that, to achieve this numerical total, *šah* must be written in shortened form without an *alef*. As an added difficulty, the date may be given in the form of a riddle (*mo‘ammā*). Thus we read on the death of a vizier: *Faryād bar ār o gūy tārīk faqr-e vozarā’ az-īn jahān šod.* Raise a lament and speak the date: the glory of ministers has gone from this world. Since “raise” also means “take out,” the reader is thus directed to subtract the value of “lament” from the numerical total of the second hemistich: 1525 – 295 = the date 1230. For further examples of chronograms, see Browne, *Lit. Hist. Persia* III, p 512; D. C. Phillott, *Higher Persian Grammar*, Calcutta, 1919, p 32-33; and Q. Ahmad, “A Note on the Art of Composing Chronograms,” *Islamic Culture* 46, 1972, pp. 163-69.

The numerical valuation of letters also made it possible to establish numerical equations between terms and entities, e.g., a person’s name and his epithet. For an example in verse, see Browne, *Lit. Hist. Persia* III, p. 47. See also Ḥesāb-e jommal and **Mādda tārīk**.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

See also *ET*² I, pp. 97-98; and Dehkoda, s.v. *Ḥesāb-e jommal*, pp. 526-27 and the references given there.