



CORRESPONDENCE II. IN ISLAMIC PERSIA

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ii. In Islamic Persia

In Islamic Persia letter writing (Ar.-Pers. *tarassol* < Ar. *r-s-l* “to send”) developed into a genre of great literary, historical, and social importance. With the establishment of Omayyad rule in 41/661 *tarassol* began to develop as an integral part of the administrative system. As in other affairs of state, the first caliphs followed the models and traditions of the Sasanian and Byzantine empires and depended on the expertise of Christian and Zoroastrian officials. In Syria and Egypt Greek remained the language of the state secretaries for several decades (the words *resāla* “letter” and *tarassol* apparently translating Greek *epistolé* and **epistolographía* < *epistellō* “to send” [a message or order]). Similarly, Persian was the prevailing language in the chancelleries and financial offices of Iraq and Persia, though correspondence between the court and subject provinces was written in Arabic. The caliph Moʿāwīa (41-60/661-80) established *dīvāns* (administrative offices), including the *dīvānal-rasāʾel* (office of correspondence), the officials of which were responsible for drafting letters and presenting them for comments and approval. Once a letter was in final form, it was reread, scaled, and dispatched, and a copy was preserved in the *dīvānal-kātam* (office of the seal) as a check against forgery or alteration (cf. Jahšīārī, pp. 24-25).



By the time that the 'Abbasids came to power (132/749) and moved the capital from Damascus to Baghdad Arabic had replaced Greek and Persian as the official language of administration, and non-Muslim scribes and officials had largely been replaced by Muslim scribes (*kātebs*), most of them *mawālī* (clients) and very often of Persian origin (Browne, *Lit. Hist. Persia* I, pp. 204-06). Under the caliph al-Manṣūr (136-58/754-75) the *dīvānal-rasā'el* and the *dīvānal-kātam* (which had become the *dīvānal-tawqī'* "office of decrees") were combined in the *dīvānal-rasā'el wa'l-serr* (office of correspondence and confidential records).

In the early 'Abbasid period *tarassol* developed into a literary genre. 'Abd-al-Ḥamīd Kāteb (d. 132/750), secretary to the last Omayyad caliph, Marwān II (127-32/744-50), had addressed an epistle to his colleagues in which he enumerated the requisite moral and professional qualifications for training as a *kāteb* and described the ideal curriculum (Jahšīārī, pp. 73-79; Qalqašandī, I, pp. 85-89). 'Abd-al-Ḥamīd, like his famous colleague Ebn al-Moqaffa' (d. 145/762), was acquainted with pre-Islamic Persian culture and had translated a collection of epistles from Pahlavi into Arabic (Brockelmann, *GAL*, Suppl. I, p. 105). His elegant style and polite phraseology became the model for later generations of scribes. At the hands of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, Ebn al-Moqaffa', and others who emulated their standards, the terse and simple diction of earlier *tarassol* evolved into a more ornate style. Persian influence was so conspicuous that Jāḥeẓ bitterly denounced the secretaries for neglecting Muslim traditions and even the Qur'ān in favor of the "outlandish" wisdom of the Persians (von Grunebaum, p. 255). By 377/987, when Ebn al-Nadīm compiled his *Fehrest*, many collections of letters and several treatises on epistolography and style were available. He devoted a large chapter (2nd *fann* of the 3rd *maqāla*) to the *kātebs* and their works and enumerated the various categories of personal and official correspondence.

Ebn al-'Amīd (d. 359/970), *dabīr* (secretary) and vizier of the Buyid ruler of Jebāl Rokn-al-Dawla (335-66/947-77), raised Arabic *tarassol* to a high degree of sophistication; it was commonly believed that "the art of epistolography began with 'Abd-al-Ḥamīd and ended with Ebn al-'Amīd" (Nicholson, p. 267; Hitti, p. 250), though in fact it continued to develop in Egypt and other Arabic-speaking countries.

With the rise of local dynasties in eastern Persia during the 9th and 10th centuries, Persian began to emerge as the language of the court and literature. Although letters to Baghdad and to Arab governors had to be written in



Arabic, correspondence between the courts and provincial amirs was in Persian (Bahār, *Sabk-šenāsī* I, p. 236). From this pattern it may be concluded that after the Arab conquest Persian continued to be the language of written communication among Persian-speaking people and that in the northern provinces local dialects were used in the correspondence of local rulers. The existence in northern Persia of Pahlavi inscriptions dating from the 11th century (Henning, “Mitteliranisch,” pp. 50-51) and the fact that most surviving literature in Pahlavi was written during the 9th century are evidence that it was used among Zoroastrians (and perhaps non-Zoroastrians) for bookkeeping, contracts, and correspondence.

Under the Ghaznavids (366-582/977-1186), Saljuqs (429-590/1038-1194), and K̲v̲ārazmšāhs (ca. 470-628/ca. 1077-1231) the *dīvān-e resālat* was one of the most important state institutions. The chief secretary (*dabīr-e k̲āṣṣ*) was head of the chancellery and in touch with all the secret matters of the kingdom. In that period Persian epistolography was developed by writers like [Abū Naṣr Moškān](#) and his pupil [Abu'l-Faẓl Bayhaqī](#) (d. 470/1077), the secretaries of the Ghaznavid sultans Maḥmūd (388-421/998-1030) and Mas'ūd I (421-32/1030-41) respectively; Rašīd-al-Dīn Vaṭvāt (d. 578/1182) and Montajab-al-Dīn Badī' Jovaynī, secretaries of the Saljuq sultan Sanjar (511-52/1118-57); and Bahā'-al-Dīn Baġdādī, head of the *dīvān-al-enšā'* (chancellery) and later vizier for 'Alā'-al-Dīn Takeš K̲v̲ārazmšāh (567-96/1172-1200). Such men were indispensable to the state, not only because of their literary qualifications and competence in handling diplomatic correspondence, but also because of their technical knowledge of finance and administration.

The abundant literature in Persian on the epistolary arts falls into two categories: one consisting of essays and treatises on the principles of epistolography and the qualifications and training of secretaries and the second consisting of collections of sample letters to serve as models. Sometimes the two types were combined in a single work, in which theoretical points might be illustrated by sample letters. The earliest work on principles was *Zīnat al-kottāb* by Bayhaqī (now lost; Ebn Fondoq, p. 175). The *Qābūs-nāma* of Keykāvūs b. Eskandar (comp. ca. 475/1082) and the *Čahār maqāla* of Neẓāmī 'Arūẓī (comp. ca. 550/1082) each contain a chapter on epistolography; according to Moḥammad 'Awfī (*Lobāb*, pp. 78-80), Montajab-al-Dīn (see below) wrote *Roqyat al-qalam* on the duties and qualifications of secretaries. The letters of famous scribes, among them Rašīd-al-Dīn Vaṭvāt, Montajab-al-Dīn (*al-Tawassol ela'l-tarassol*), and Bahā'-al-Dīn (*Atabat al-kataba*) were collected.



Letters written by Sufis, philosophers, and scholars to their fellows and disciples or in reply to questions put to them are of a similar nature. Noteworthy among them are letters by Abū Ḥāmed Moḥammad Ġazālī, Sanā'ī Ġaznavī, 'Ayn-al-Qoḏāt Hamadānī, and Kāqānī Šervānī (see bibliography).

The *Dastūr-e dabīrī* of Moḥammad Meyhanī (mid-12th century) begins with instructions on penmanship, characteristics of good style, models of address, greetings and conclusions, benedictions, and the formal structure of the text. The second half of the work consists of models of personal (*eḵwānīyāt*), official (*solṭānīyāt*), and legal (*maḥāẓer*) letters. Personal letters might be sent for [congratulation](#) (*thanīat*), condolence (*ta'zīat*), gratitude (*šokr*), invitation (*da'wat*), complaint (*šekāyat*), and so on, either initially (*keṭābī*) or in reply (*jawābī*) to other letters. The tone and phraseology, as well as the wording of the address (*'onwān*), opening (*eftetāḥ*), and closing (*kātema*), differed according to the ranks and positions of the writer (*kāteb*) and the addressee (*maktūb 'alayh*) and the relationship between them. Official correspondence included royal orders (*tawqī'āt, farāmīn*), deeds of appointment (*manāšīr*) and investiture (*kal'at, taqlīd*), treaties (*'ahd-nāma*), announcements of victory (*fath-nāma*), and the like (Meyhanī, pp. 1106-15; Montajab-al-Dīn, *passim*). They were issued by and recorded in the chancellery. Official letters always began with an introduction (*eftetāḥ*), which usually consisted of an invocation to God, chosen to suit the occasion, and the name and titles of the addressee (*'onwān*). Legal letters included deeds of purchase (*qabāla*), depositions (*šahādat-nāma*), marriage contracts (*'aqd-nāma*), protests (*šekāyat-nāma*), wills (*wašīyat-nāma*), and similar documents that had to be sealed, signed, and witnessed.

Except for literary style and calligraphic variation (e.g., *nask, ta'līq, šekasta*; see [calligraphy](#)), until recent times the external forms and internal structure of Persian epistolography remained essentially unchanged. The use of the *toḡrā* (royal emblem) at the tops of letters issued by the *dīvāns* was introduced by the Saljuqs and K̲v̲ārazmšāhs. Under the Safavids it was replaced by the royal seal, which, however, sometimes appeared at the bottom (for specimens, see Martin, pp. 171-206, 246-54).

During the Mongol period (mid-13th to late 14th century) a number of new terms and expressions (mostly Mongol and Turkish) were introduced into the *dīvān* literature, for example, *yā'ārlīq* (decree), *soyūrḡāl* (hereditary grant), *toyūl* (officeholder's fief), *parvāṇčī* (officer in charge of minor appointments), *īlčī* (ambassador; Bahār, *Sabk-šenāsī* III, pp. 97-99). Colored inks and rich



decorations were employed in state correspondence, and even the seals were stamped in different colors (*Taḍkerat al-molūk*, tr. Minorsky, pp. 21, 24, 40; Spuler, *Mongolen*², p. 293).

The use of different seals for different documents was fully developed in the Safavid chancellery; the names of the twelve Shi'ite imams were inscribed on the large seals that were often stamped at the tops of letters. The rather complex organization of the Safavid *dār al-enšā'* (secretariat) was inherited by subsequent dynasties. The director, *monšī al-mamālek*, supervised a large staff of *monšīs* (secretaries, redactors) and *moḥarrers* (clerks; *Taḍkerat al-molūk*, pp. 61-62). Less important letters were prepared by the *wāqe'a-nevīs*, and high state officials also maintained secretariats. Each letter was subject to a long process of registration in different *daftar*s of the royal cabinet (*daftar-kāna-ye homāyūn-e alā*), under the direction of the *mostawfī al-mamālek*; several signs, seals, and flourishes had to be added before it was delivered.

The simple prose of such early secretaries as Abū Naṣr Moškān and Abu'l-Faẓl Bayhaqī did not suit the sophisticated tastes of later generations. The prose style of the 12th and 13th centuries was characterized by long and complex sentences, a high proportion of Arabic words, and such rhetorical embellishments as rhyme (*saj'*) and parallelism (*mowāzana*). According to Bahā'-al-Dīn (p. 9), the ornate style and the use of rhymed prose in Persian *tarassol* had been introduced by Rašīd-al-Dīn Vaṭvāṭ in imitation of Arabic epistolographers (cf. Bahār, *Sabk-šenāsī* II, p. 248). The intention was partly to reflect glory on the royal patron and partly to demonstrate the *dabīr*'s own erudition and refined style. Bahā'-al-Dīn, though himself a distinguished representative of this new tendency, nevertheless criticized the excessive use of rhetorical devices (pp. 9-10).

Čengīz Khan, who understood only the simplest spoken Persian, ordered his secretary to write a letter in plain, direct language; as he was unable to do so, he was punished and dismissed (Montajab-al-Dīn, I, pp. 25-26; Bahār, *Sabk-šenāsī* III, pp. 168-69). The effect of the early Mongols' preference for simplicity can be seen in the letters (*monša'āt, rasā'el*) of the Il-khanid minister Rašīd-al-Dīn Faẓl-Allāh (d. 718/1318); Moḥammad b. Hendūšāh Naḵjavānī, better known as Šams-e Monšī (late 14th century), who wrote *Dastūr al-kāteb fī ta'yīn al-marāteb*, one of the most comprehensive works on Persian *tarassol*; and Abū Bakr b. al-Zakī al-Šadr (late 13th century), who was attached to the court of the Saljuqs of Rūm and compiled *Rawżat al-kottāb wa ḥadiqat al-albāb*, a collection of his own letters, mostly *eḳwānīyāt*. All these writings were in a



fluent language, precise, eloquent, and generally free of rhetorical embellishments. This style persisted in all kinds of correspondence under the Timurids, but the polished, coherent, and lucid language of earlier writers was gradually being lost. The change can be observed in letters collected in *Farā'ed-e ḡiāṭī*, compiled by Jalāl-al-Dīn Yūsuf Aḥl (mid-15th century), the *Šaraf-nāma* of 'Abd-Allāh Morvārīd, and the *Nāma-ye nāmī* of the historian Ḡiāṭ-al-Dīn K̲vāndamīr (first half of the 16th century). The specimens produced and collected in books like *Enšā'-e Māhrū* by 'Ayn-al-Molk Māhrū (14th century), *Rīāz al-enšā'* by K̲vāja Moḥammad Gāvān (vizier of the [Bahmanids](#); d. 886/1481), and *Badāye' al-enšā'*; or *Enšā'-e Yūsufī*, by Ḥakīm Yūsufī, the *monšī* of the Mughal emperor Homāyūn (937-62/1530-55), show a parallel development in the style of Persian epistolography in India during this period (see [iii](#)).

The deterioration of style that had set in during the late Mongol period became more obvious in the works of the *monšīs* of the Safavids and their successors (Bahār, *Sabk-šenāsī* III, pp. 265-66). Formal correspondence between personalities of equal rank or from an inferior to a superior usually began with a long introduction (*eftetāḥ*) in Arabic, in which the full name of the addressee was preceded by a long chain of titles (*alqāb*), epithets (*no'ūt*), and detailed benedictory formulas (*do'ā'* and *salām*). Sometimes a letter might open with poetry in Arabic or Persian, designed to eulogize the addressee, characterize the writer's feelings, or prefigure the contents. The text (*matn*) was full of Arabic expressions, quotations from the Qur'ān and Hadith, and difficult words used synonymously and in rhymed and cadenced sentences. The meaning was often obscured by verbosity, recondite constructions, and far-fetched figures of speech. What could be said in a few lines was extended to much greater length, with repeated interruptions for Arabic and Persian verses. A similar trend may be observed even in friendly and informal letters (*maktūbāt*, *roqa'āt*, *raqīmāt*) written by educated people (for specimens of different types, see *Tadkerat al-molūk*, ed. Minorsky; ('Alī b. Ḥosayn Kāšefī, *Maḳzan al-enšā'*, ms. 3931, Malek library, Tehran; Qā'em-maqām; Navā'ī).

Only in the 19th century did Persian epistolography begin to break free from the mannerisms of earlier writers, especially in the works of such *monšīs* as Fāẓel Khan Garrūsī (d. 1253/1838), 'Abd-al-Wahhāb Našāṭ (q.v.; d. 1244/1829), and Mīrzā Abu'l-Qāsem Khan Qā'em-maqām, the most distinguished representative of this reform (see [bāzgašt-e adabī](#)), which reflected partly a conscious "return" to pre-Mongol stylistic and literary principles (a movement that had already started in poetry) and partly the introduction of printing, the



development of journalism, and the growth of literacy in Persia, all of which encouraged a more precise, lucid, and straightforward language. The introduction of a modern bureaucracy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries put an end to the old system of *dīvāns* and related institutions.

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