



FEHREST I. THE AUTHOR AND HIS WORK

i. THE AUTHOR AND HIS WORK

LIFE OF THE AUTHOR

Abu'l-Faraj Moḥammad b. Abī Ya'qūb Eshāq al-Warrāq al-Nadīm, wrongly but almost invariably called Ebn al-Nadīm (the correct form is simply al-Nadīm; see Ebn al-Nadīm, tr. Dodge, p. xv-xvi; Maškūr, pp. 343-46), was born probably in Baghdad ca. 320/932 and died there on Wednesday, 20 Ša'bān 380/12 November 990. Some scholars regard him as a Persian (Gray, p. 24; Nicholson, p. 362), but this is not certain. However, his choice of the rather rare Persian word *pehrest/fehrest/fehres/fahrasat* (cf. comments by W. Henning quoted in *Borhān-e Qāte'*, ed. M. Mo'īn, p. 1509, n. 1) for the title of a handbook on Arabic literature is noteworthy in this regard.

Like his father, Ebn al-Nadīm earned a living by copying and selling books, hence his *nomen professionis* of AL-FEHREST al-warrāq, or occasionally *al-kāteb* (Ebn Abī Oṣaybe'a, p. 91). Both father and son were men of considerable distinction and social standing. Ebn al-Nadīm's large bookstore in Baghdad appears to have been a popular meeting place for scholars. Having acquired an unusually extensive education, he cultivated ties with the luminaries of Baghdad learned society, counting among his teachers and informants such savants as the poet 'Alī b. Hārūn Monajjem, the anthologist Abu'l-Faraj



Eṣfahānī (q.v.), the Jacobite Christian philosopher Yaḥyā b. ‘Adī, the grammarian Abū Sa‘īd Sirāfī, the literary historian Abū ‘Obayd-Allāh Marzobānī, and the logician and translator of philosophical books from Syriac into Arabic Ḥasan b. Sowār, known also as Ebn al-Ḳammār (see Ebn al-Nadīm, ed. Tajaddod, index). He heard hadith from Esmā‘īl Ṣaffār and was also a friend of the philosopher Abū Solaymān Moḥammad b. Ṭāher b. Bahrām Manteqī Sejestānī, whom he addresses as “our master” (*ṣaykonā*) or simply as “the master” (*ṣaykò*). The priest Yūnos Qass gave the author of the *Fehrest* (Ebn al-Nadīm, ed. Tajaddod, p. 25) information about the Christian scriptures, and so did Abu’l-Ḥasan Moḥammad b. Yūsof [Nāqet] ‘Āmerī Nīšāpūrī (q.v.), a scholar of Arabic and Greek, who was in Baghdad when the *Fehrest* was begun (ibid., pp. 27-28). It was probably Ebn al-Nadīm’s association with the logician ‘Īsā b. ‘Alī, the son of the vizier ‘Alī b. ‘Īsā (q.v.) in Baghdad, or his attendance at the court of Nāṣer-al-Dawla (d. 358/968), the ruler of Mosul, which brought him the title *al-nadīm*, “the companion.” Reynold A. Nicholson’s suggestion (p. 362) that this may signify his family ties with Eṣḥāq b. Ebrāhīm Nadīm Mawṣelī was rejected by Johann Fück (*EI*² III, p. 895).

Although broad-minded and careful in religious matters, Ebn al-Nadīm preferred Imami Shi‘ism, and—not unusual for the times—was also an advocate of the Mu‘tazilite doctrine (Yāqūt, *Odabā’* VI, p. 408; Ebn Ḥajar, V, p. 72), to which he devoted a large part of the fifth chapter of the *Fehrest*. He was the author of another book, now lost, entitled *al-Awṣāf wa’l-taṣbīhāt* (Yāqūt, ibid; Ebn al-Nadīm, ed. Tajaddod, p. 14), on the merit of books and on writing and its instruments.

THE BOOK

The *Fehrest*, intended to be a catalogue including all books, lecture notebooks, papers, etc., available in the Arabic language at the time of the author, developed into a unique specimen of literature, an encyclopedia or a compendium of the knowledge possessed by a learned Muslim in 10th century Baghdad. Not only is it a valuable reference source for the culture of medieval Islam and the literary men who represented it, but it also gives precious information about the heritage of antiquity available to the Muslims. The *Fehrest* contains miscellaneous pieces of rare information. In many cases, our only information on certain early authors and their works comes from this book. Often blank spaces have been purposely left in the text for later additions, with a request addressed to the readers to add whatever information the author might have overlooked (Ebn al-Nadīm, ed. Tajaddod, p.



244).

The collected notes were arranged thematically and in chronological sequence in ten discourses (*maqālāt*), each subdivided into several sections: (1) on the revealed Scriptures of Muslims, Jews and Christians, with an emphasis on the Qur'ān and Koranic sciences; (2) on Arabic grammarians and philologists; (3) on historians, biographers, epistolographers, and genealogists; (4) on poetry and poets; (5) on theology and Muslim sects; (6) on jurisprudence (*feqh*), legal authorities, and hadith; (7) on philosophy, logic, mathematics, astronomy and medicine; (8) on legends, fables, charms, conjuring, magic, sorcery, talismans and the like; (9) on the doctrines of the non-monotheistic religions (Sabians, Manicheans, Mazdakites and other dualists) and the creeds of India, China, and other countries; and (10) on alchemy.

Following the historical methodology current at the time, Ebn al-Nadīm looked for the origin of each science he dealt with and continued its history up to his own period. His introductory remarks on the art of writing reveal his attempt to be exhaustive, and present a fascinating model of conciseness and research on the distribution, history and characteristics of languages and scripts of different peoples (Ebn al-Nadīm, ed. Tajaddod, pp. 7-23). Each discourse begins with a general introductory survey, as on the early stages of Arabic grammar (*ibid.*, pp. 45-47), or the beginnings of philosophy (*ibid.*, pp. 299-303). Generally, a short biographical notice on the authors is followed by a list of their works. Ebn al-Nadīm attempts to give an objective picture of the authors he names, making detached observations based on reliable material. Occasionally a list is dedicated to publications on a particular theme, as for example the literature on Koranic exegesis (*ibid.*, pp. 36-37), on love stories (*ibid.*, pp. 366-67), or on fairy tales (*ibid.*, p. 375). In the ninth *maqāla*, a treatise on the history of religion, the bibliographical announcements occupy only a minor place. Curiously he left out Mazdaism altogether, although his discussion of Old Iranian writings shows that he was familiar with Mazdakite sources. The last four discourses focus on the Arabic translations from Greek, Persian, Syriac and other languages, together with books composed in Arabic on the model of these translations. These sections are detailed enough to be considered a veritable history of literature.

Some information about the sources of the *Fehrest* may be extracted from the book itself. Apparently several such “catalogues” on specific topics or the works of individual authors had been in circulation prior to Ebn al-Nadīm. Among these he names a *fehrest kabīr* and a *fehrest ṣaġīr* that Jāber b. Ḥayyān



had made of his writings (Ebn al-Nadīm, ed. Tajaddod, pp. 421-23), a *fehrest* by Yaḥyā b. ‘Adī of Aristotle’s books (ibid., pp. 311, 312), another by Moḥammad b. Zakariyā Rāzī of his own works (ibid., pp. 357-59) and an inventory Ḥonayn b. Eshāq had penned of his own translations from Galen’s writings (ibid., p. 353; this has survived, see *EI2*, s. v. “Ḥunayn b. Ishāq al-‘Ibādī”). Works of this kind had until then been mostly restricted to collections of biographies of authors and poets, such as the *Ketāb al-mo’allefīn* (Ebn al-Nadīm, ed. Tajaddod, p. 163) of Ebn Abī Ṭāher Ṭayfūr, *Ketāb aḵbār al-šo’arā al-kabīr* of Hārūn b. ‘Alī b. Yaḥyā (ibid., p. 161), or the *Aḡānī* (ibid., p. 128) of Abu’l –Faraj Eṣfahānī. Ebn al-Kūfī, whom the *Fehrest* mentions as a source many times, may have composed a list of authors using preliminary work done by Ebn al-Kalbī and Madā’eni (see Lippert, p. 155). Ebn al-Nadīm had probably examined personally many of the books which he records, though at times he also furnishes the names of his trustworthy informants.

Later bio-bibliographical authors such as Yāqūt, Ebn al-Qeṭṭī, Ebn Abī Oṣaybe’a, Ebn Kallekān, Kotobī, and Ḥājji Kālifa are all heavily dependent on the *Fehrest* for information. Yāqūt (*Odabā’* VI, p. 197) averred that he used a copy of the *Fehrest* in the handwriting of Ebn al-Nadīm himself and also an expanded copy provided by Wazīr Abu’l-Qāsem Maḡrebī. The material in the *Fehrest* dating after the year 380/990 (e.g., Ebn al-Nadīm, ed. Tajaddod, pp. 95, 146, 149, 195) very likely originated from the pen of Maḡrebī.

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