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Introduction to the study of Ibn Qutayba's 'Uyūn al-Akḥbār

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ABSTRACT

Ibn Qutayba (828-889) is one of the most important writers of medieval Arabic literature. He is the author of several books of Adab, a classic genre of prose cultivated among the Arabs in the Middle Ages. This paper refers to this outstanding figure of medieval times and is an approach to the study of one of his main works: the compendium of Adab (belles-lettres) entitled as 'Uyūn al-Akḥbār (Sources of information). It includes some preliminary notes by way of introduction about the life and the work of the author, a special reference to the cited book, and an appendix with the English translation of an Arabic text selected and taken from the 'Uyūn al-Akḥbār.

Keywords: Ibn Qutayba. Adab. Medieval Arabic Literature. Classical Arabic Prose. Abbasid times.

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Introduction

Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh b. Muslim b. Qutayba Al-Dīnawarī, known as Ibn Qutayba (Kūfa, 828-Baghdād. 889) is one of the most important writers of medieval Arabic literature. This distinguished Iraqi author of the 9th Century, who lived in the golden period of the Abbasid times [2], was a theologian and, above all, an author of *Adab* (belles-lettres) [3], a classic genre of prose cultivated among the Arabs in the Middle Ages, of which he is the highest representative together with Ibn Al-Muqaffa’ (c.720-c.757) [4] and Al-Jāḥiẓ (776-869) [5].

There are many gaps about his life and some details of his biography are really conjectures, and so must be considered with caution. It seems that, in addition to writer, he held a public career in the Abbasid administration: he was, for example, judge in Dīnawar from 851 to 870. In any case, he was linked to the new political forces of the moment displayed by the *sunni* ideology, such as the vizier Abū I-Ḥasan ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Yaḥvā b. Khāqān, who was one of the architects of the new political changes and of who Ibn Qutayba was Maecenas until the death of Abū I-Ḥasan in 877.

It seems clear that Ibn Qutayba put his literary talents to the *sunni* restoration carried out by Al-Mutawakkil, Abbasid caliph from 847 to 861, and his followers, i.e., the most of his works were intended to present a political and religious doctrine in the ideological line of the Sunna, in front of the *shī‘i* ideology that was dominant for one century.

In this golden age of the Abbasid period in which Ibn Qutayba lived, flourished philologists who sought to establish the rules of the Arabic language. There were three leading schools: those of Baṣra, Kūfa and Baghdād. The school of Baghdād is considered founded by Ibn Qutayba.

As writer, Ibn Qutayba was influenced by three figures: the theologian Al-Ḥanzalī (d.circa 851); and the philologist Al-Riyāshī (d.871), who was the transmitter of the work of Al-Aṣma‘ī (d.828),

Abū ‘Ubayda (d.circa 826) and other pioneers; and the philologist Al-Sijistānī (d.864).

Ibn Qutayba's reputation is based mainly on his quality as an author of *Adab*, getting to reconcile Arab culture with that of Persian or Sassanid secretary and doing of his literary production the manual of the perfect bureaucrat [7].

One of his most prominent disciples was Al-Sukkārī (d.935). Ibn Qutayba's sons Aḥmad, who was his main pupil, and ‘Abd Al-Wāḥid were both in charge of transmitting most of their father's works in the West, through Abū ‘Alī Al-Qālī (d.967), but the diffusion of his literary production into al-Andalus was made by the remarkable Qāsim b. Aṣḥab in 887 [8].

The literary work of Ibn Qutayba is very wide. Most certainly, he is the author of sixteen works to have to be added other seven books that have been attributed to him, besides some others of doubtful authenticity as well as the *Aprocrypha*.

Ibn Qutayba, who knew both Ibn Al-Muqaffa’ and Al-Jāḥiẓ’s works and was notably influenced by them, is considered as the third great Arab prose writer.

Among his books stand out *Kitāb al-Ma‘rifa* (Book of knowledge), a manual of history, and *Kitāb Adab al-Kātib* (Book of the secretaries culture), a manual of philology for the use of the secretaries with an interesting introduction of high political and religious value; and, above all, *Kitāb ‘Uyūn al-Akḥbār* or, merely, *‘Uyūn al-Akḥbār* (Sources of information), his most important work, which is a voluminous compendium of *Adab* on various topics, with an important introduction [9].

The literary genre of *Adab* and the *Kitāb ‘Uyūn al-Akḥbār*

The *Adab* or prose of secretaries had known under the Umayyads a moment of splendor, but it is now, in the initial period of the Abbasid times, when it reaches its highest level. In this aspect, stands out Ibn Al-Muqaffa’, before-mentioned, who consecrated most of intellectual activity to the translation into Arabic of the main Pahlavi works, although he also wrote original oeuvres.

The translation of the title of two of his books, *al-Adab al-Kabīr* (Big Literature) and *al-Adab al-Ṣaghīr* (Small Literature), gave rise to the name of this classic genre of Arabic literature, with the meaning of all the necessary disciplines that provide general knowledge to get on in life. The *Adab* suffered a noteworthy evolution in the early ninth century, when the influence of the Sassanid culture received an important advance to be known the scientific and philosophical translations from Greek made by the House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-Hikma*) in Baghdād.

The principal representative of the new current and the creator of a type of prose capable of competing with poetry is Al-Jāhīz, before-mentioned, who together to Ibn Al-Muqaffa' left a marked influence on Ibn Qutayba that some call even plagiarism.

The writing way by Ibn Qutayba, which includes ethics and culture of all the intellectual movements set in the Abbasid society of the early 9th Century, is identified with a certain humanism. Indeed, the culture that emanates from his work is an amalgamation of the four major intellectual movements of his time: 1) the Arabic current that covers the religious, the philological and the historical sciences; 2) the Indo-Iranian current that provides an administrative culture and a specific conception of society; 3) the Judeo-Christian current that brings a spiritualist character; and, 4) the Hellenic current that supplies the taste of the logic and the experimental knowledge.

After the pompous prose of mid-eight century and the brilliant but difficult style of Ibn Al-Muqaffa' and Al-Jāhīz, Ibn Qutayba inaugurated an easy and simple prose but always cultured. In effect the educated language of Ibn Qutayba is of simple style, without too many linguistic weirdness or grammatical complications.

Kitāb 'Uyūn al-Akḥbār (Sources of Information) is perhaps the best known and most relevant work of Ibn Qutayba. It is a voluminous compendium of *Adab* on various topics that is written with the linguistic style of this literary genre and contains an introduction and ten

books, subdivided into chapters of variable length. The tenth book, entitled *Kitāb al-Nisā'* (Book of Women), is the most significant of them.

There are diverse editions of the Arabic text of this work, such as Aḥmad Zakī Al-'Adawī [10], Yūsuf 'Alī Ṭawīl [11] and Mufīd Muḥammad Qumayḥa [12]; as well as some partial translation from Arabic to European languages, such as to English [13] and Spanish [14].

'Uyūn al-Akḥbār includes stories, traditions, hadiths, legends, episodes and anecdotes that revolve about a central subject, according to the book's chapter in which they are located. The narrations are of variable length and they refer to different famous people of Islam, from the Prophet Muḥammad and his wife Aixa, until caliphs, governors, judges, poets, writers and figures of military, political and social renown, as well as to unknown people or without historical significance. Also, there are references to distinguished people from the pre-Islamic era and from other cultures and civilizations, especially the Sassanid one.

Reading this encyclopedic book allows us to do a fairly accurate reconstruction of early and classical Arabic and Islamic society, as well as of the pre-Islamic times, in significant issues such as, for example, marriage, divorce, sex, role of women, and the religious, social and political customs. And within these topics underlie, various other issues such as homosexuality, adultery, and hostility between tribes and clans, etc.

Appendix

This section includes the English translation of an Arabic text from the *Kitāb 'Uyūn al-Akḥbār* contained into the 10th book, entitled *Kitāb al-Nisā'* (Book of Women), within the chapter on the, ugliness and the deformity.

The selected text, which is taken from the edition made by Mufīd Muḥammad Qumayḥa (pp.4041), just cited, refers to the great Arab poet Dhū l-Rumma (d.circa 735) [15] and his beloved Mayya, and it is as follows:

Abū I-Muhalhil Al-Hudā'ī related what follows: "I traveled to Raml seeking Mayya, the Dhū I-Rumma's beloved, and I did not cease in the effort until was shown me the right way. Behold that I found with a big *khayma* at whose door stood a toothless old woman. I greeted her and asked her: "Where is Mayya's house?" And she answered: "I am Mayya". I was surprised and said: "I wonder Dhū I-Rumma and how much he talked about you". She replied: "Do not be surprised. I will make you understand his compliments". Then she called up: "Fulana!" And a young girl with well-formed breasts, wearing her face covered by a veil, left the *khayma*. The old woman ordered her to take off the face veil. And when she took off it, I was stunned by her beauty and distinction. Then the old said to me: " Dhū I-Rumma loved me when I was her age".

Conclusion

These pages are an example of Ibn Qutayba relevance in the history of both Arabic literature and culture; and his work entitled *Kitāb 'Uyūn al-Akḥbār*, as representative of *Adab*, takes a very prominent place in the field of medieval literature.

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