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Adab Reinterpreted

Adab is not a very much studied subject in the history of Arabic literature. Much research has been conducted by the French, and among them the greatest merit goes to Charles Pellat, the author of numerous studies on al-Ġāhiz¹. Later the subject was continued by his pupils and followers — Gérard Lecomte and André Miquel.

It is curious enough that the study of adab mostly concentrated on the 9th century literature, and the authors taken into consideration were al-Ġāhiz and Ibn Qutayba. This, of course, lead to distortion of the reality of adab, not only because both authors were not the sole representatives of adab at that time, but also because adab had a history of its own quite longer and more complicated. And this is the subject which should be thoroughly studied, since *adab* — to quote F. Gabrieli — “reflects, parallel to and even better than the history of the words ‘ilm and dīn, the evolution of Arab culture from its pre-Islamic origins to our own day”².

All the studies of adab — beginning with Nallino and ending with Miquel — permitted to categorize this notion as a type of culture, and although the term “culture” appears only lately in Miquel’s work³, it was always present, probably only superficially, in all earlier works on adab. It has, however, to be remembered that adab was commonly identified with literature; it was E. von Grunebaum who persisted that adab is knowledge organized around belles-lettres⁴, a highly intuitive definition, though not lacking some precision.

The main task of Pellat’s work was to record the history of literary adab.

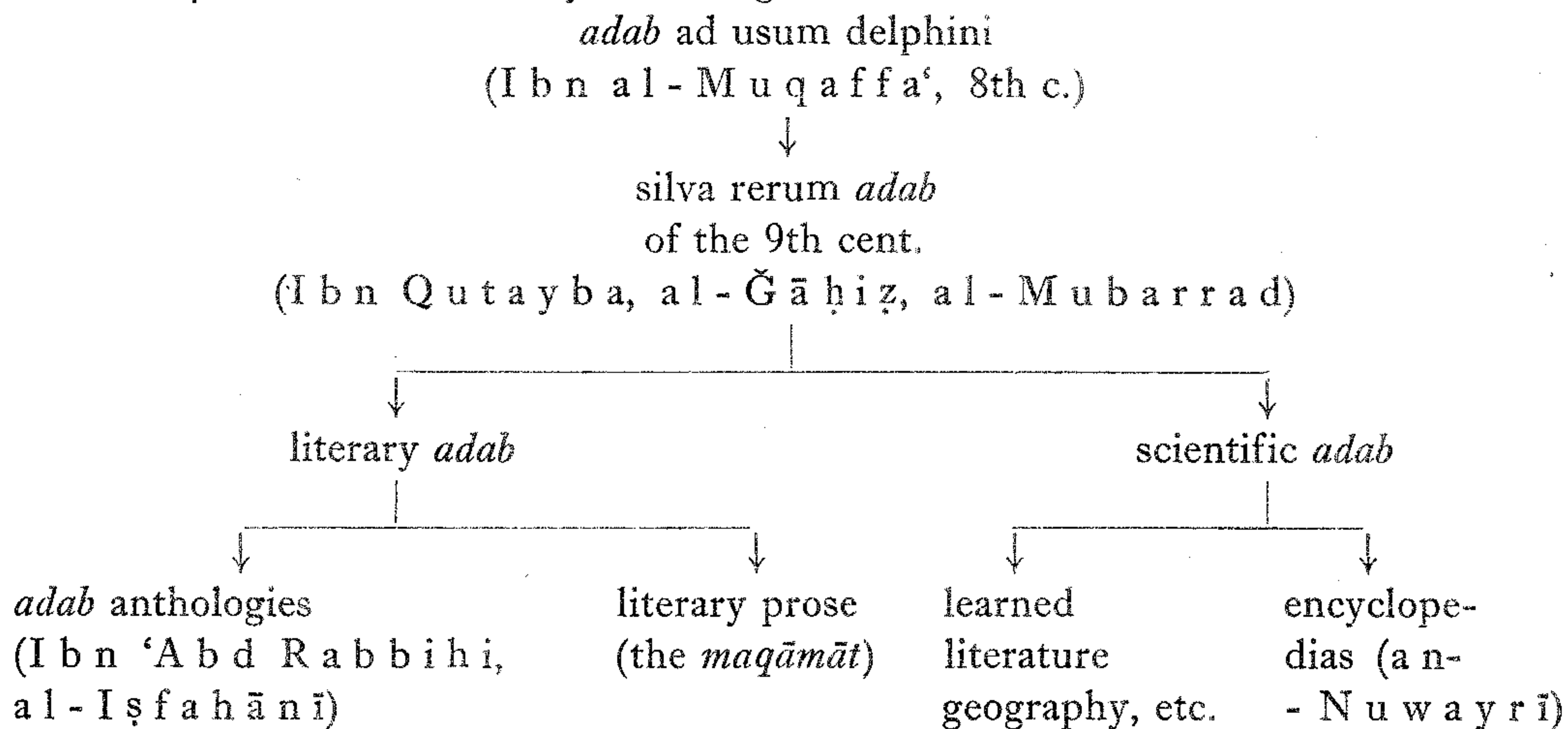
¹ Suffice it to mention: Ch. Pellat, *Le milieu basrien et la formation de ġāhiz*, Paris 1953; Ch. Pellat, *The Life and Works of ġāhiz*, London 1969; Ch. Pellat, *Variations sur le thème de l’adab*, “Correspondence d’Orient. Études”, Bruxelles 1964, 5–6, pp. 19–37.

² F. Gabrieli, *Adab*, Encyclopedia of Islam, 2nd ed., vol. I, p. 175.

³ A. Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu’au milieu du 11^e siècle*, Paris—La Haye 1973 (2^e éd.).

⁴ G. E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam. A Study in Cultural Orientation*, Chicago and London 1971, p. 251.

The reconstruction of his conception results in the following table which includes all the main periods in the history of adab genres:



It is easily discernible that the 9th century formed a breakthrough (or perhaps a starting point) in the development of Arabic adab literature. From there on, the conception of adab suddenly widened: it became an all-including literary genre covering belles-lettres as well as pure learning humanities generally. It was only the work of A. M i q u e l that pointed to the fact that almost all the later Islamic humanities derived its origin from adab. As much as this point seems exaggerated, it is nevertheless true in many instances. It was M i q u e l who proposed some preliminary classifications of the genre itself, not only within the scope of its historical development. In his classification he distinguishes three types of adab: *adab-éthique*, *adab-recherche* and *adab-répertoire*⁵. This is, of course, a classification of the immanent, textual characteristics of adab, its research programme as far as it is useful for the study of classical Islamic humanities. It does not, however, take into consideration the pertinent question of what the social, cultural, civilizational functions of adab were. It has to be remembered that the problem of adab differentiation is not only important for defining the intrinsic qualities of adab but also for the history of Islamic civilization as a whole.

All our knowledge on adab derives from literary works which are generally called adab. I think that it is this phenomenon of literary production which is so far best known and analysed. It is the result of the philological work of many generations of Arabists, the result of classical Oriental research which mostly remained within the scope of text exegesis.

This literary genre has to be differentiated from adab as a definite kind of culture. It is this culture that was reflected in adab literary genre, and therefore it was much more important as a fact of real life, of certain social laws functioning in the Islamic society.

⁵ A. M i q u e l, op. cit., pp. 19, 44-45, 64.

And, thirdly, adab was an instrument of teaching this culture. It is even possible to treat the literary adab genre as an element of this instructional adab. The manuals of adab, the adab literary works served to convey ethical, social and cultural values to the Muslim élite.

So, in general, there are to be distinguished three different types of adab:

1. adab as culture (in the narrow sense of the word: culture as cultivation of human characters), 2. adab as a literary genre, 3. adab as a social institution (introducing adab culture).

Thus the so far homogeneous picture of adab shows a very deep stratification or, indeed, its elements may appear to some extent opposed or even incompatible.

1. Adab as culture

The cultural model of adab was moulded most probably during the 9th century when the Islamic civilization began to crystalize. It has to be borne in mind that this century was opened by the intermittent struggle between šu'ūbiyya and classicist trend finally ending with the victory of the latter. It meant that the society needed, and experienced, a considerable influx of traditional Arabic or Bedouin for that matter patterns of culture. These patterns had to be formed and only then introduced to the élite. As a result the Islamic model was greatly influenced by Bedouin tradition, to much greater extent than it has been so far described. A very complicated scale of values was created. All these values were subjected to the norms of Islam, only second came learning, but learning comprehended as knowledge of humanities. The humanities served best the purpose of religious norms of Islam (they derived directly from theology). Only next came the norms of Bedouin ethics, highly valued at the time of anti-šu'ūbite reaction. Ultimately came the non-Arabic norms: they were not disapproved of but they could not be wholly accepted as such. Why, then, were they accepted at all? I think the answer must be sought in the Indo-Iranian origin of adab. It is true that adab arose from the Iranian literature *ad usum delphini*, and this origin of adab should not be forgotten. Then, the traditions of the Persian culture were present in Islamic societies, since the Iranians formed quite a considerable part of the élite: Ibn Qutayba, one of the inventors of the 9th century adab was a scholar of Iranian origin.

Analysing the adab literature which is almost the only source of our knowledge of adab culture we are apt to see its internal differentiation and its lack of homogeneity. Each of the most prominent adībs of the 9th century presents a slightly different model of the Arabic culture. Al-Ġāḥiz is all for Bedouin tradition and ethics, his literary tastes are entirely anti-šu'ūbite. He does not, however, detest the Greek rationalism, being himself an outspoken mu'tazilite. Ibn Qutayba, on the other hand, is pro-Iranian though his Iranian tastes are ingeniously veiled by his theological, Islamic conceptions. Then comes al-Mubarrad, most careful of them all in his views. His adab culture links the different tastes and offers the most refined idea of culture for the élite.

2. Adab as a social institution

These ideals had naturally to be imposed on the society, they had to be accepted and to be taught. It is highly probable that they were taught in a very competent way. However very little is known of the method applied. Our knowledge about the system of official schools is hardly sufficient, we are nevertheless entitled to suppose that they were at that time sufficient for the purposes of teaching adab. Much more probable is the supposition that the traditional ḥalaqāt system was responsible for teaching adab in wide social circles: that is probably the way in which adab reached the Banū Sāsān who later were immortalized in the maqāmāt literature. And then there were the private educational institutions reserved for the élite: the system of the nudamā' who participated in a variety of discussions held in wealthy houses. A number of our adībs participated in such discussions, probably playing the role of nudamā'. Al-Mubarrad, for instance, was invited to al-Mutawakkil's court, also al-Ġāḥiz was a frequent guest there. However scarce our information about institutional adab (or rather ta'dīb) is, there is no doubt that it played an essential role in introducing adab to different groups of the Islamic society.

3. Adab as a literary genre

Much has been said about adab as a work of art and its literary values. I would like to stress a point which seems here particularly important: it is, first of all, the educational nature of adab which places it within the scope of adab as an educational institution. From this point of view a literary work of adab is a manual of culture. It is supplemented by the entertaining elements in adab works. This is true of all adab works excluding perhaps the very strict manuals of research character by Ibn Qutayba. This is namely where belles-lettres in Arabic prose began. I think that the entertaining character of adab came to expression in the tendency to shorten all information proposed, and then only to intertwine the subjects, themes, anecdotes (the essential compound of adab literary work), introducing digression, constantly changing the course of narration (if this be truly a form of narration!). Hence results the other function of adab: the presentation of choice poetry in anthology form. Almost all adab authors composed anthologies of poetry, and their works were brimming with quotations of highly entertaining verse.

At this instance another point has to be stressed. The literary adab reflects the culture of the Islamic world at a given period of time; it even reflects adab culture as a whole. Hence it performs two essential functions: it reflects the state of culture and it projects the culture onto the society⁶. Although it may seem a trivial remark, these functions are nevertheless specific for adab, and it was adab that was destined to function this way.

⁶ Cf. J. Danecki, *Social Functions of Adab Literature. The Example of al-Mubarrad's Al-Kāmil fī l-adab*, in: *Arabische Sprache und Literatur im Wandel*, Halle (Saale) 1979, pp. 84–91.