



Abu bakr abbas al-khwarezmi and his work “rasa’il al-khwarezmi”

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Abstract: During the 9th–12th centuries, the region of Mawarannahr, particularly Khwarezm, emerged as a major hub of Arabic-language literary creativity and scholarship. This region contributed significantly to the golden age of classical Arabic literature. Among the most prominent figures of this period was Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Abbas al-Khwarezmi (935–993), a distinguished philologist, poet, and prose writer whose works are notable for their depth, diversity, and refined literary style. His key works — *Diwan ash-Shi’r* (The Book of Poetry), *Rasa’il al-Khwarezmi* (Khwarezmi’s Letters), and *Al-Amsal al-Muwallad* (Proverbs) — have survived to the present day and remain important both historically and literarily.

This article focuses primarily on the *Rasa’il al-Khwarezmi*, a unique collection of letters addressed to various individuals including rulers, ministers, friends, and scholars. These letters reflect the socio-political and cultural dynamics of the time, as well as Khwarezmi’s exceptional literary skill. The article consists of three interconnected parts:

1. A brief overview of Abu Bakr al-Khwarezmi’s life and literary heritage;
2. The significance of *Rasa’il al-Khwarezmi* in the development of Arabic epistolary literature;
3. An analysis of the work’s value as a historical and literary source.

Keywords: Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Abbas al-Khwarezmi, Arabic literature, literary heritage, epistolary genre, letters, manuscripts, Khwarezm, Abbasid era, adab, Arabic philology.

Introduction: The period in history referred to as the "Muslim Renaissance" (Adam Metz) or the "Eastern Renaissance" (N.I. Konrad), spanning the 9th to 12th centuries, witnessed the emergence of poets, writers,

and encyclopedic scholars from the lands of Mawarannahr, who created a history written in golden letters in the annals of Arab-Islamic science and culture. It would not be an exaggeration to say that they defined the main directions and criteria in various fields of science as well as in artistic creativity. Their invaluable scientific and literary legacy holds significant importance not only in the spiritual world of the Muslim East but also in the broader context of human civilization.

The Arabic-language literary heritage produced in Mawarannahr — particularly in Khwarazm — constitutes an inseparable and highly productive part of the classical Arabic literary treasury. For this reason, Arab scholars consider the in-depth study of Arabic-language literature produced in Mawarannahr to be an exceptionally urgent and important task. In particular, Arab scholars have always studied with great enthusiasm and diligence the legacy of the scholars who emerged from the land of Khwarazm, which gave the world such luminaries as al-Zamakhshari — the master of both Arabs and non-Arabs, al-Khwarizmi — the father of mathematics, and Abu Bakr al-Khwarizmi — the pride of Khwarazm.

Literature Review and Methods

The study of the scholarly and literary heritage of the renowned philologist, writer, and poet Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Abbas al-Khwarizmi (935–993) — who was recognized as a master of eloquent epistles and a prominent figure in various genres of classical Arabic literature — began among Arab scholars in the 1970s. The Palestinian scholar Hind Hussein Taha initiated Khwarizmi studies within the Arab academic community through her book “Al-Adab al-‘Arabi fi Iqlim Khwarazm” (“Arabic Literature in the Region of Khwarazm”). In particular, Chapter 1, Section 2, and Chapter 2, Section 3 of the work shed light on Abu Bakr al-Khwarizmi’s scholarly and literary legacy in both poetry and prose. The book presents insights into the poet’s life, his elegies, philosophical poems, and aphorisms, providing selected examples of his work.

Although Abu Bakr al-Khwarizmi is regarded as a highly respected figure in the history of Arabic literature, his works have not been the subject of focused research in Uzbek Oriental studies. While there have been some initial efforts in this direction, it is important to emphasize the necessity of conducting a comprehensive study of his literary legacy from the perspectives of source criticism, textual analysis, and literary scholarship. Moreover, it is essential to translate his works into Uzbek and make them accessible to the broader public.

Results and Discussion

A Brief Overview of Abu Bakr al-Khwarizmi and His Literary Heritage

Abu Bakr al-Khwarizmi was born in 935 CE (323 AH) in Khwarazm, where he received his education in Arabic language and literature, history, and other sciences. Around the age of 25, he embarked on a journey in pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment. Initially, he traveled through Iraq, the Levant (Sham), Aleppo, then Bukhara, and later Nishapur. During these travels, the writer experienced not only creative growth but also spiritual and moral development. Nearly 30 years of wandering brought a mix of joys and sorrows, respect and humiliation, friendships and enmities. He made many like-minded friends and caught the attention of rulers and governors, though at times he also faced hardship from them. Despite these ups and downs, Abu Bakr became a great scholar, thinker, and sage who left a lasting mark on history.

Contemporaries praised him as “the wisest of his time, a sea of literature, a source of both prose and poetry, and a realm of virtue and insight.” His works such as *Diwan al-Shi’r* (“Collection of Poems”), *Ar-Rasa’il* (“Letters”), and *Al-Amthal al-Muwallad* (“Aphorisms”) have been preserved to this day. Each of these works holds unique literary and historical value.

Abu Bakr al-Khwarizmi gained fame as a talented poet and was known for his sharp satire. Notably, he challenged the Bukhara poet Abu al-Hasan al-Lahham al-Harrani, who was unique among the poets of Mawarannahr for his satirical verse, proving that he was no less skilled in the genre of satire. Additionally, many sources note his creative rivalry with Badi’ al-Zaman al-Hamadani (969–1007), the founder of the *maqama* genre in Nishapur.

He compiled his poetry in various classical Arabic genres typical of medieval Arab poetry, including *nasib* (amatory prelude), *hijā’* (satire), *fakhr* (boast), *wasf* (description), *madih* (praise), and *hikma* (wisdom). Manuscripts of his *diwan* are preserved in libraries across different Arab countries and Europe.

The following verse demonstrates Abu Bakr al-Khwarizmi’s sharp wit as a poet:

بنيت الدار عالية كمثل بناك الشرفا

فلا زالت رؤوس عداك في حيطانها شرفا

You have built a lofty mansion,

Like your noble lineage.

The heads of your enemies still hang,

On the walls of its porch.

In sending this verse to a ruler, al-Khwarizmi intended to praise him and commend his honorable conduct befitting his noble lineage. The praise carries both a

literal and metaphorical meaning: literally, the ruler had indeed constructed grand buildings (i.e., undertaken construction projects); metaphorically, the “high mansion” symbolizes a firmly established and strong state. Furthermore, in this couplet, the poet employs the literary device of *tajnis* (paronomasia or pun) through the repeated sounds and meanings of words related to honor and architectural elements such as “*sharaf*” (honor), “*shurf*” (porch), and “*pishayvon*” (portico).

His work *Ar-Rasā'il* is a collection of letters addressed to various historical figures—such as amirs, deputies, viziers, scholars, or poet friends—often written in response to specific events (victories, appointments, misfortunes, defeats). This makes the work valuable not only from a philological standpoint but also for historical research. Overall, Abu Bakr al-Khwarizmi is credited with laying the foundation for artistic and stylistic renewal of the epistolary genre in classical Arabic literature and advancing its development.

His work *Al-Amthal al-Muwallad* contains 2,119 aphorisms and is divided into 21 chapters. It gathers wise sayings and proverbs from the Islamic period and later times. Through this book, al-Khwarizmi contributed significantly to popularizing the genre of *masal* (originally meaning “proverb” or “saying,” here referring to aphorisms) among classical Arabic literary circles.

The Work “*Rasā'il al-Khwarizmī*” and Its Role in the Development of Arabic Epistolary Literature

Before providing information about the work *Rasā'il al-Khwarizmī*, it is appropriate to briefly discuss the epistolary genres in Arabic literature. This is because the genre existed before Khwarizmī's time, but his creative work elevated it to a new stage.

Epistolary genres in Arabic literature have a long developmental history. However, here we focus on the gradual evolution in the post-Islamic period. Two important reasons support this focus. Firstly, the increasing social and political demands related to governance during the caliphate period led to a rapid growth in the exchange of *rasā'il* (letters). Secondly, the rise of science and culture within the caliphate and its regions meant that scholarly and intellectual innovations were disseminated widely through creative letters, or *rasā'il*, across the caliphate.

During the caliphate, the *diwān* secretaries—official clerks—developed formal, official correspondence (*sultaniyyāt*) in both content and style, while talented writers and poets perfected friendly and fraternal correspondence (*ikhwāniyyāt*). It should be noted that at the time there was no clear boundary between the role of a secretary (*kātib*) and that of a writer or

scholar. A person in the secretary position was expected to have literary taste and a broad worldview, sometimes surpassing those of poets or scholars. Many skilled secretaries, well-versed in political literacy and diplomacy, emerged as prominent figures; conversely, some famous secretaries honed their skills in creative activity and later succeeded in literary and scholarly fields.

One reason for this might be the expectation that letters of any content (official or friendly) include elements of literary art or rhetorical devices. Later, theorists developed both the practical and theoretical principles of letter writing.

It is important to emphasize that not only in Arabic literature but also in world literature as a whole, epistolary literature developed along two main lines: first, as an element within a specific literary or artistic work (such as letters, messages, etc.); and second, as literature focusing on the epistolary genre itself, including the compilation of collections of various letters. Distinguishing between these two directions and accurately interpreting the author's or writer's intention is crucial during research and analysis.

Many non-Arab (foreign) authors and poets, particularly those of Persian and Turkic origin, made significant contributions to the development of Arabic epistolary literature. Among such creators was the great native son Abu Bakr al-Khwarizmi.

His work *Rasā'il al-Khwarizmī* consists of letters addressed to various historical figures—amirs, deputies, viziers, scholars, or poet friends—and the letters were often written in response to historical events (victory, promotion, misfortune, defeat). Therefore, this work is significant not only from a philological perspective but also from a historical standpoint.

Rasā'il al-Khwarizmī contains 156 letters belonging to the fraternal (*ikhwāniyyāt*) category. In his letters, al-Khwarizmi did not only write conventional praises (*madḥ*) to rulers but also offered advice, and sometimes even openly criticized and rebuked them.

For example, in a letter written in response to Abu Abdullah Muhammad, the Khwarazmshah from the Afrighid dynasty, al-Khwarizmi states:

“The people of Khwarazm are the best merchants among men. But when they take up the pen, they write; when they draw the sword, they fight.”

According to him, a ruler is “the leader of the community, the one who takes responsibility, solves knots, the heart of power, and the first on the throne.”

On the other hand, in his poetic praise, he extols the ruler:

“If my gaze falls upon my amir,

I have no desire to look toward other amirs."

The author does not hesitate to offer advice and admonition to the ruler:

"If virtuous people serve under someone, it means virtue itself serves him. If wise people carry out his affairs, then intellect and wisdom are at his disposal. How can virtuous people serve an unworthy person? Or how can perfect people devote themselves to the imperfect?"

Through Abu Bakr al-Khwarizmi's letters, one can observe the literary and aesthetic values of his time, the forms and artistic features of the letter-writing genre, the real historical context and environment, as well as the relationships between the writer and the government, and between the writer and his contemporaries.

In these respects, *Rasā'il al-Khwarizmī* remains a unique work without parallel in its era and continues to be relevant to this day. Naturally, letters on various topics were also written by other authors, but the desire to collect them into a single compilation and pass them on to future generations was unique to Khwarizmi.

The Literary Value of "*Rasa'ilu-l-Khwarazmi*" as a Source

Determining the dynamics of Khwarazmi's creative style through his "*Rasa'il*" (Epistles) is challenging because countless letters were written by him. In many cases, the exact recipient is not clearly specified. Titles such as "To the Khwarazmshah," "To the Vizier of Jurjan," "To the Chief of Hira," and "To my Student" are given, and although these addressees may be identifiable historical figures, their precise identity and names remain unknown. Even most of those mentioned by name are unfamiliar to us, making it difficult to establish the exact period in which the work was written and to trace the gradual development of the author's creative workshop.

However, if we turn to the biography of the author, it is known that he was born and raised approximately between the ages of 20 and 25, after which he left his homeland, Khwarazm, in pursuit of knowledge and creative advancement, embarking on a long journey. He was active in the scientific and intellectual centers of his time such as Iraq, Sham, Aleppo, Bukhara, and Nishapur. During this period, he came to the attention of many rulers, finding refuge with some, while entering into sharp conflicts with others, even experiencing imprisonment. If we study "*Rasa'ilu-l-Khwarazmi*" carefully, it becomes evident that the letters contained therein were written during these years of travel. Consequently, if the author lived for 58

years, the work appears to be a compilation of letters written over approximately 30 years in various circumstances.

Moreover, the artistic and stylistic features of the letters are very similar to one another, indicating that Khwarazmi did not alter his writing style significantly under specific conditions. As noted above, Khwarazmi addressed various topics in his letters, encompassing different spheres of life. His active involvement in political, social, and religious life, combined with his constant travels, likely accounts for this diversity.

Khwarazmi strove to demonstrate his literary skill through his letters; his mastery of artistic prose (*saj'*) equaled, and at times complemented, his poetic talent. Importantly, Khwarazmi never served as a secretary to any ruler or minister, nor did he work in an administrative chancery. This fact contributed to the development of his unique creative style. Had he been involved in official service, his creativity might have been lost within state documents or confined within fixed stylistic frameworks.

Due to Khwarazmi's relations with rulers, governors, and military leaders, he sent congratulatory letters on occasions such as victories, celebrations, and appointments, occasionally praising their generosity. At the same time, when facing difficulties or financial pressure, he did not hesitate to complain about unjust tax collectors or officials. Frequently, he wrote reprimanding and sharply-worded letters to acquaintances who failed to respond, interestingly mixing admonitions with tones of praise and pride, reflecting the proverbial "biting the hand that feeds." When one of his acquaintances encountered misfortune, he expressed sympathy through letters, although in some cases, when individuals involved in political or social crimes were punished or dismissed, Khwarazmi mentioned the matter in a rather veiled manner.

Among his letters, some requested material assistance or aimed to strengthen friendly relations. Since Khwarazmi was a teacher in Nishapur until the end of his life, he maintained constant communication with his students, offering advice and encouraging them to uphold good morals and persist on the path of knowledge. Occasionally, he chastised or openly criticized them without leniency. Additionally, due to his travels, he entrusted some of his students with tasks.

He also maintained contacts with contemporary writers and scholars, praising some and criticizing others. Despite addressing a wide range of topics, letters to his family and relatives have not been preserved, likely because they were private and not intended for public disclosure. However, he compiled his letters reflecting

his social status, intending them to be preserved for future generations.

One of the most frequently used stylistic devices in Khwarazmi's letters is admonition (*tanbih*). He skillfully employed this device to achieve his goals and to expose the social values and customs of his time. He considered admonition as a dual-purpose tool: it could either strengthen friendship through polite dialogue or sever relations altogether. For instance, in a letter to the leader of Damghan, he writes:

"My loyalty to you is free from envy and hypocrisy. I express my admonitions openly; my responses are sharp because our relationship is built on sincerity and free from duplicity. It is precisely in such a context that admonition can either strengthen communication or lead to complete rupture..."

In his letters, Khwarazmi wrote admonitions in an open and sharp tone, thereby showcasing his distinctive writing style and literary skill.

The sharply pointed language of Abu Bakr Khwarazmi is combined with literary talent, and the letter included in the work "Rasa'ilu-l-Khwarazmi" under the title "Letter to the Khwarazmshah" may reveal facets of his life still unknown to us:

"A friend of mine from there (Khwarazm) wrote to me informing that my wealth has been scattered and my partners are disobedient. I never thought that in a land where the amir's seal is applied or his orders executed, injustice would be raised as a banner or tyranny would rule over justice."

This letter is quite lengthy and gives the impression of outlining the entire life path of Abu Bakr Khwarazmi. The content of the letter requires clarification of the situations mentioned by Khwarazmi, thereby demanding a revelation of historical truths. The literary analysis of the letter is a separate issue and reveals that not only this letter but the entire work requires thorough historical and philological research.

Conclusion

The literary heritage of Abu Bakr Khwarazmi and his work *Rasa'ilu-l-Khwarazmi* clearly deserve thorough study as valuable literary and historical sources that reflect the social, political, and cultural life of the era in which the author lived. Translating these works into the Uzbek language and making them accessible to the public, as well as conducting scholarly research, is a task of significant importance. Through this, Khwarazmi's contribution to the development of the written culture of communication in the medieval Eastern civilization will be revealed, alongside his unique individual creative style that artistically reflects social relations in literary genres. Consequently, the

literary heritage of Abu Bakr Khwarazmi undoubtedly represents an important contribution to the spiritual treasury of the Third Renaissance.

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